

Dysfunctional Family And Its Effect On Mental Health Of Children In Jordan Sonnenblick's The Secret Sheriff Of Sixth Grade

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Abstract

A family where conflicts, chaos and fights often take place is known as dysfunctional family. Dysfunctional is defined as poor functioning on the basis of bad behaviour, disrespect, jealous, lack of love and support among family members. This paper highlights the negative impact on mental health of children due to the dysfunctional family and also suggests some coping strategies to overcome it. Harmonious family makes children healthy both physically and mentally. If a family is not harmonious, it affects the growth of children. Living with a dysfunctional family affects the wellbeing and mental health of children. The study analyses the effects of dysfunctional family and domestic violence on children with reference to the novel 'The secret sheriff of Sixth grade' by Jordan Sonnenblick. Materialistic and mechanical life affects the normal family cycle which separates the family that leads to juvenile crime in the society.

Keywords: Family cycle, Tumultuous family, Domestic violence, Mental illness, Attachment.

Introduction

Family is an asset. It is a chain that connects relationships through love. Only if a family has members who love and care for each other will the relationship sustain and move on to the next generation. In the present way of living, life has become materialistic that there are many children who are deprived of love and care.

Parents go to job to earn for their livelihood, which is most probably for the well and good of their children, but they have less time to spend with their children. In their routine work they become unaware of the problems of their children. Children lack the love and affection of their parents which make them isolate themselves from others. In this modern world, not only people working in white collar jobs but also people who work as masons, sweepers, and helpers also have the

same problem with their children. The impact is on the children that they are neglected by their parents and family members.

In a family, if either the mother or father is irresponsible, the family is sure to break up leaving the children's life in disaster. Ruksana Saikia (2017) quotes,

A broken home can make a child insecure, in a sense that he no longer had a complete family he can call his own. For a child's mind, a family is composed of a father, mother and children. And living without either his father or his mother will create fear and insecurities in him. This feeling of insecurities will even trigger if he is around his friends who are living a normal, complete and happy life. This is especially true in school events

where the parents' presence are required. There are plenty of school activities that involves the parents and seeing scenes like these will even make him feel ashamed of his family situation.

Broken family creates a negative impact on children. A child who misses affection and care turns to be arrogant. Eshica (2010) quotes,

Family plays a crucial role in molding one's personality, belief and capability.

Everything about a man mostly relies on the state of the family he belonged....Since every individual has reliance towards his family, any adversity would affect his whole being. Such devastating matters regarding family relationships like parent's separation could give a severe impact to the people concerned, the children.

Children become mentally stressed which makes them angry and yells at others for no reason. These rude behavioral changes affect their daily life. They start to steal, to lie and even become criminals because of their bitter past. Not all families are said to be in the above situation, and there are children who are blessed with the protection of their parents.

The concept of this paper is about children like Maverick, the protagonist of the novel, *The Secret Sheriff of Sixth Grade*, whose mother is an alcoholic. He suffers loneliness after the death of his father because his mother never cares for him. He has his few precious things which help him to be alive. This novel explains the life of a neglected child and the pressure that the society lays on him without knowing his personal wounds.

Literature Review

West & Printz (1987) in their study unveil the problems faced by children of alcoholic parents. Children from those families undergo physical abuse, anxiety and depression. Their findings on children of alcoholic parents include hyper activity and conduct disorder,

substance abuse, social inadequacy, anxiety and depressive symptoms. Bernardine Dohrn (1995) in her article addresses family violence and child abuse. The study also highlights the laws for children from dysfunctional family and the importance of family court for the victimized children.

Connolly et al. (2003) in their study analyse behavioural and mental health of children who are bullied in schools. They also examine the relationship between children and their families. In their findings the authors bring out the need and the importance of family intervention of children who bully. Espelage et al. (2003) highlights the bullying faced by American School students. Psychological interventions of the victimized children are also analysed and the article suggests preventive measures for bullying. The findings point out that the factors such as dysfunctional family and bullying in school affects the students and children's activities.

Faye Misha (2004) using qualitative methods, examines bullying from the perspectives of victimized children and their parents. The author has interviewed children from fourth and fifth grades who are victims of bullying, their parents and each child's teachers respectively. Bogels et al. (2006) study the relationship between family factor and children. Attachment with family, closeness with parents, parental rearing and caring are the key factors that build a happy childhood. Parental anxiety is also reviewed in this paper. Their investigation is based on these family factors and child anxiety.

Tony Cassidy (2008) explores the relationship between family and social context, social identity, psychological distress, problem-solving style, victimisation self-esteem through the survey of 461 children aged between 11-15 years old. The study finds that victims of school bullying are low in self-esteem, high on distress and practice unhealthy behaviours. Basem Abbas Al Ubadi (2017) in his review article emphasizes the state of children growing up in dysfunctional family. The author not only

concentrates on dysfunctional family but also categorizes the characteristics of healthy family. In the result, the author has suggested some approaches to overcome the problematic situations in the family.

A.F. Minullina (2018) highlights that family problems are the main cause of psychological trauma in children. The researcher has conducted empirical study to analyse the trauma of children from dysfunctional family. From the above study it is evident that dysfunctional family is the main cause of their children's trauma and the researcher also suggests some ways to improve their relationship. Erofeeva et al. (2021) in their article determine the fact that health competencies for children from dysfunctional family is important. They have conducted Theoretical and Empirical study and their findings show that students fail to minimize their stress and isolate themselves from others. As part of their findings children developed some skills and strategies to overcome their difficult situation in life

The researcher has discussed some of the articles related to attachment theory and dysfunctional family. It is evident from the above discussed articles that the children growing in the dysfunctional family undergo anxiety, depression, psychological trauma and personality disorder. Further, the study aims to analyze the destructive life of children and domestic violence in dysfunctional family with reference to the novel *The Secret Sheriff of Sixth grade* by Jordan Sonnenblick.

Dysfunctional Family

A child's learning starts with the family. Family is responsible for a child's development and socialization. Family is the hand which embraces us in difficult situations, gives us moral support, and often strengthens us to move forward in our life. It is from where we get unconditional love, where we feel safe and secure. A family acts as a guide which directs the children to go in the right path for their growth and for the betterment of their lives. Family shapes the child's behavior and helps to

develop their personality in a good way. There is a close relationship between family and society. "Family is the cell of a society and construction of a harmonious family is of great significance to stability and healthy development of the society" (Shen Guanchen and Shen Shijie, 2013). Mutual respect, trust, love and understanding are the key factors that lead to a harmonious family. It makes children healthy both mentally and physically.

Fights, argument between parents and their separation leaves a negative impact on children's behavior and development. Children's behavior problem starts when they lack enough love and support from their family. Children do not get enough love from their parents and it is a major problem in the modern society. In the modern era, many people are leading a materialistic life which makes them selfish even with their family members. These materialistic life style affects the normal family cycle. According to Sharon Martin (2018),

Dysfunctional families tend to be unpredictable, chaotic, and sometimes frightening for children. Children feel safe when they can count on their caregivers to consistently meet their physical needs and emotional needs. Often, this doesn't happen in dysfunctional families because parents don't fulfill their basic responsibilities to provide for, protect, and nurture their children. Instead, one of the children has to take on these adult responsibilities at an early age.

Structure of a family comprises the combination of blood relationships such as parents, sisters, brothers, grandparents, etc. Treating the family members with equal love, playing and eating together, and respecting each other makes the family unique. Changes in family structure out of jealousy, vengeance or disrespect create chaos among the members in the family especially between parents and children and thus it becomes dysfunctional.

Dysfunctional family is one in which chaos, conflicts, arguments are more common and often children are neglected and treated badly by their parents. Living in a dysfunctional family affects the well-being and mental health of children. No one knows what a child is facing or what he/she is suffering from unless parents spend time to talk with them. Communication plays a major role for a person to share their feelings and sufferings with others. If parents fail to communicate or understand the feelings of their children then the child starts to isolate themselves. Not only the lack of communication, sometimes the physical gap also arises when parents are busy in their job making money and fail to spend time with their children. As parents are busy with their work-life, they spend less time with their children and so children won't get love or guidance from their parents. Some parents who want to lead a luxurious life or if one of the parents is a drunkard or a heavy smoker then they won't look after their children. Children from dysfunctional family or a neglected child suffers a lot because of agony and distress. They hesitate to mingle with others and often isolate themselves.

Readers can understand the sufferings of a neglected child, through the character, Maverick, in "The Secret Sheriff of Sixth Grade". He is not able to mingle with his friends because of his poverty. His father, the bread winner of the family is no more and his mother who is a drunkard and a self-centered person, earns and spends for her own self. She does not look after her son or show any care towards him. The only soul who loves him like a mother is his aunt, Cat.

Maverick faces struggle all through his childhood where other children enjoy the days of their childhood with love from their parents. His friends invite him for a birthday party but he has no money to gift his friend. He is not able to attend his friend's birthday party without any gift. But he has some friends who invite him to their house and give him a very pleasant, unforgettable experience like good food which our hero, Maverick hasn't tasted in his life. As

a thirteen-year-old boy Maverick too has some desires in his life. He wants to lead a happy life like other children. He wants to spend more time with his mother. He needs her love and support at this age. But Maverick does not enjoy any of his wishes. When he is hungry, he wants to eat delicious food but in his house the stove is lit only to lighten his mother's cigarette. He has heard various names of food but never seen them in his life. He does not even taste good food in his house. The novel, *The Secret Sheriff of Sixth Grade* exposes the thoughts flashes in Maverick's mind after seeing all delicious food placed before him.

I had heard of fresh berries and cream. Fresh berries and cream sounded awesome. Fresh anything sounded awesome. We never had fresh food in our house. Or even cooked food. The only time my mom lit a stove burner was when she ran out of matches and needed to fire up a cigarette. (9)

Maverick's life is pitiful. From his third grade to his sixth grade many boys bully him and he is forced to fight them to protect himself. Often, he gets into fight with Bowen, his classmate. In their third grade, Bowen, and his soccer friends and Maverick have studied in the same class. One day Maverick sees them in their MU T-shirts. MU stands for their home town, Montvale United. Maverick is unaware of this and he asks Bowen why it is written Moo on their T-shirts. Maverick has no intention to make fun of Bowen. He gets angry and tells it is MU not Moo. As these lines tell us the fight between Maverick and Bowen. "One thing led to another, and we ended up wrestling around on the smelly blacktop next to Dumpster. His shirt got rotting School-lunch taco meat all over it, and after one of the lunch monitors finally broke us up, I saw that Bowen's nose was bleeding" (31).

Their fight becomes a headache to the principal and he finally says a word which is terrifying to Maverick "Call Your Mother" (44). The world stood still and he is not able to think what to do next. He finally makes up his mind and takes his aunt, Cat, to the school to be

his 'mother' and solves the problem. Not only Maverick but also children from other dysfunctional family face similar problems inside their house and in the society. They cannot share about their family situation or their mental sufferings to anybody. They are afraid of the society, as people are waiting to criticize instead of helping them. Children are not responsible for being in that situation but still they are the ones suffering from domestic violence because of their parents. As in the novel Maverick's mother drinks and smokes regularly, he does not get love from his mother it affects the mental health of Maverick. Maverick, as any other children, has some expectations and desires in his life. He longs to lead a blissful life like other children. He yearns for mother's love; he wishes to spend more time playing and chatting with his mother. But all his wishes and desires leave him with disappointments. He even gets jealous of his dog, Freddy. Because he is there to love and look after his dog. Though he has a mother, he loses her care and affection. All these disappointments make him to isolate himself, and he does not have many friends to share his thoughts or feelings. This kind of parents like Maverick's mother just live selfishly for themselves, for their own happiness instead of giving love and affection for their children at the right age.

In the novel, Maverick's teacher gives an assignment to the students to write an essay about what they did during their summer holidays. Everyone naturally enjoyed their vacation but Maverick as a victim of desperation has nothing to enjoy rather than his mother who is sacked off from her job and they have to move to a new apartment. His mother as always is in her own world and this boy who starves from hunger has to do all the household works. Then, he takes 10 dollars from his mother's purse to buy snacks. He goes to the shop and buys snacks which has expired and are in a condition not to be used. But this poor boy keeps the expired snacks for as many days as he can and eats it little by little.

Christmas nears and he wants to surprise his mother by decorating his house. In the meantime, when he is getting ready the ex-boyfriend of his mother comes and he gets nervous of how to treat him. It is obvious through the lines:

I wasn't really sure what the etiquette was for this unusual social situation.

I mean, where do you direct a question like this? Hey, my mother's abusive ex-boyfriend just brought over a tacky fake Christmas tree. Do I

let him in? Should I offer him a beer? Am I supposed to hang out and watch football with him for six hours until Mom gets here? In the end, I just stepped aside. (97)

Situation gets worse and his plan collapses. Not only does his plan collapse but his mother's abusive ex-boyfriend slaps her in front of Maverick. Maverick has endured as much pain as he can at his age. He yearns for a mother's affection and care which he has never experienced in his life. His mother never cares for him. Though he has a house and a mother still his life is pathetic and is deprived of love. He even gets jealous of his dog, Freddy. Because he is there to pamper his dog and give him food. But Maverick has no one to look after him or care for him and it is revealed through the following lines:

I was almost jealous of Freddy. His life was so simple. Sure, he was

missing a paw, but all he had to do was eat whatever food I put in front of

him, drink from his water bottle, hang out in my nice warm hands. And he

could always trust me to keep him safe. (137)

Not only him but there are many children who are facing such crucial situations in their life either by their mother or father which leads the children's life in disaster. Children in these situations may not get good education, they cannot concentrate on their studies, they may not able to socialize, isolate themselves, and they fall into bad behavior such as smoking, gambling, drinking, drug addict, etc. All these

behavioral changes make their life pathetic and full of misfortune.

Maverick, Bowen and Nate:

Bowen, Nate and Maverick are classmates. Each of them has different characteristics and behavioral traits. Bowen and Nate are soccer players. Bowen thinks, 'being nice was a sign of weakness' (138). He always bullies children who are weak or small to show his dominance. He is aggressive and rude to others. Though he has parents and a comfort life, he never knows how to behave well with others. Nate, a soccer player often participates in competitions and for all those events his stepmother will be there with him to support and cheer for him. She feels proud of her son and rejoices in every events. But he feels embarrassed when his stepmother brags him to other people. He makes it as complaint to his friends. Seeing all this, Maverick feels upset. He tells to himself that even having a mother who supports and takes up his son's interest as hers, Nate still whines about his mother. Maverick thinks that even having parents who supports their child's interest, Bowen and Nate are not living in the moment and rejoicing it. On the contrary, all these things will be an imaginary world to me.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory is a psychological theory formulated by Psychiatrist and Psychoanalyst John Bowlby. This theory talks about the relationship between humans especially between mother and children. Further, it emphasizes the significance of child's attachment to the family/ mother as it paves the way for the social, behavioral and emotional development.

A child who is attached to his/her mother or to a primary caregiver feels free to socialize. On the other hand, a child who does not have a strong bond between the primary caregiver will find difficulty in conversing with his/her peers and may lack self-confidence. This will lead to anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, even these negative emotions will reflect on

their academics. It also reduces the interest in exploring other things in life.

Attachment or a strong relationship with family gives both emotional and mental support to children. Emotional support is sharing of positive concern for an individual. It provides the individual with nurturance, affection and offers a shoulder to lean on when the individual is in trouble or stress. In the novel, *The Secret Sheriff of Sixth Grade*, Maverick receives emotional support from his aunt, Cat. It is his aunt who supports him in his hard times. She cares and loves him like her son. This makes him mould his character and love everyone. Maverick's school principal, Mr. Overbye guides and advises him in his hard times. He guides him to move in the right path and helps him to develop his personality in a positive way.

Maverick is from a single parent family. Though he has his mother he loses motherly love and care. Children like Maverick lacks parental support and guidance at the right age. This family stress results in behavioral problem, makes them to lose self-confidence, and also it may lead to health disorders. According to Magpantay, Mary Joyce, and et.al. (2014),

However, these behaviors affects the adolescents' health, emotional, and social status. Most of them experienced eating disorders and exhibited poor self-esteem. Because of having low self-confidence, they are having problem in socialization. Problem in making friends and keeping friends was the common dilemma in terms of their social status. Due to their difficult situation, they tend to cope negatively.

To overcome all these problems Maverick has to relieve himself from stress and has to choose the right path. He seeks help from his well-wishers for guidance. Support seeking personalities of his life are his school Principal, Mr. Overbye and his aunt, Cat. His principal, Mr. Overbye, often advise him to behave well and correct his mistakes. Maverick, with due

respect has followed his words and behaves himself. His aunt, Cat, has showered him with love and affection wherever he has felt sad and depressed. Cat's love makes him a lovable boy who has never experienced the love of a mother. Maverick may easily fall into the aggressive and negative path with his experiences in the past. But he has chosen the right path because he has followed and has respected the words of his aunt and principal. Though his life is filled with agony he thinks of helping people around him. He chooses the right path which helps him to develop his behavior to be a better person in his life. The emotional and the moral support from his aunt and the principal makes his life fill with positivity and happiness. This makes his life better from his bitter past.

Conclusion

Good parenting and family love bring the best in children, they learn several good ways to develop their personality, behavior and it helps to socialize with their surroundings. But where there is no good parenting or family love, children will lose themselves in search of love of parents and get isolated. It affects children's health; they also become weak physically and mentally. At last, they end up in anxiety, fear, mental and behavior disorder.

Indeed, it's true that we cannot help all the neglected children but we can help at least one or two who are known to us. Youngsters who wish and have goodwill can surely bring a change in society by helping such children. It is not only about offering food or clothes but it is about showing love, kindness to such children which can change an evil person to a kind hearted one. It is not an easy process but gradually it can be done. Not all children go in a wrong way, there are some exceptional cases like the protagonist of the novel *The Secret Sheriff of Sixth Grade* who gets the embrace and love of his kind aunt which made him understand kindness, love, care and affection. This understanding saves him from going in the wrong path. Maverick, the protagonist wishes to spread love, he believes it will surely bring a

change in the society as he transforms into a lovely person because of his loveable aunt. His life starts to blossom with fragrance and so he believes that his love will bring a change in the boys who bullied him.

In a nutshell, there is only one possibility to change all these sufferings of children. The change must come from every individual. Each one of us have to change ourselves, washout the impurities in our mind and soul as our hero says in this novel. He says he wants to carry on love and affection to others which he believes will surely bring a change one day. As such everything and everyone can be changed and, surely, the world will flourish with love very soon.

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