

A child's story behind early learning: Family trauma and its impact on behavior and development

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Received: 20 May 2026

Available Online: 2 June 2026

Revised: 31 May 2026

DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2026.26243

Accepted: 1 June 2026

ISSN: 2243-7703

Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS



Abstract

This case study explores the impact of family trauma and caregiving transitions on a child's behavior and development, particularly in the classroom and early learning environments. The study focuses on a young child who lived with the extended family members for almost seven years before being returned to his biological father. Using a qualitative research design, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews with the child's teacher, biological father, and extended family members, supplemented by direct observations of the child's behavior at home and in school. Findings indicate that the child's emotional well-being, and, academic performance are strongly affected by family disruptions and changes in caregiving. Behavioral challenges observed in the classroom and at home were linked to feelings of insecurity, adjustment difficulties, and emotional distress stemming from past trauma and sudden transitions. The study also highlights the importance of parental involvement, consistent caregiving, and emotional support in promoting positive development and learning outcomes for children facing family instability. This research highlights the need for teachers, parents, and caregivers to recognize the effects of family trauma on early learning, and to provide stable and supportive environments that foster emotional security, social and development and academic growth.

Keywords: communication breakdown, caregiving transitions, emotional support, cathartic outlet, academic performance

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1. Introduction

This case study explores how family trauma and changing home environments influence a child's behavior and development, particularly in a classroom setting. Early childhood is a critical stage in emotional, social, and cognitive growth, and disruptions within the family can significantly affect how a child thinks, feels, and behaves. Home-school relationships have always been a cornerstone of children's success and well-being. But cultivating positive, supportive partnerships between educators and families is an ongoing process, one that requires reciprocal respect and communication to grow. (National Association for the Education of Young Children. 2019). Many pupils struggle to behave appropriately in school due to unresolved emotions, instability at home, or lack of consistent parental support. These internal struggles often manifest as behavioral issues, difficulty focusing, or challenges in forming relationships with peers and teachers. Understanding the connection between family experiences and classroom behavior is essential for providing proper guidance and intervention.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.) Children who suffer from child traumatic stress are those reinforced been exposed to one or more traumas over the course of their lives and develop reactions that persist and affect their daily lives after the events have ended. (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). Naomee (2013) stated that the child's early childhood development and education largely depends on the family. So, the role of all the family members in all these learning is very important. The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of parental involvement and the impact of family situations on a child's academic performance and behavior. It aims to highlight how sudden changes in caregiving and exposure to family conflict or separation can affect a child's emotional well-being and development.

This study focuses on a child who lived with extended family members for six years and was later returned to his biological father. This significant transition created emotional and behavioral changes that became noticeable in his daily interactions and school performance. Through this case, the study seeks to provide deeper insight into how family trauma shapes early learning experiences and to emphasize the importance of stable, supportive environments for children.

Statement of the Problem - David (2009) found that the role of family on children is very influential. He described that changed roles of the family has a great impact on children's development and education. Family pattern has a lot to do with child's moral development as well. This case study aims to understand how family transition, particularly the transfer of a child from a previous guardian to a biological parent, affects a child's behavior and early learning development. The subject of this study has shown noticeable changes in behavior and academic performance following the transition, as observed and reported by the child's teacher and caregivers. Specifically, this study seeks to examine the possible emotional and psychological factors contributing to these changes, as well as how the child adapts to a new family environment. It also aims to identify the impact of such transitions on the child's social interactions, classroom behavior, and overall learning progress. Through this case study, the researcher hopes to gain deeper insight into the relationship between family dynamics and child development and to provide recommendations that may help support the child's well-being and academic adjustment.

To address gaps in existing research and better understand how family-related traumatic experiences influence young children's learning and development, this study aims to explore the effects of family trauma on children's behavior and developmental outcomes during early childhood.

- How does family trauma influence the behavior and developmental outcomes of young children in early

learning environments?

- What specific behavioral changes occur in a child as a result of family trauma?
- How does family trauma affect a child's academic performance?
- What coping mechanisms does a child use to respond to family trauma?
- What interventions by teachers and family members are effective in supporting positive behavioral and academic outcomes in a child affected by family trauma?

2. Methodology

This section will show the research design and the process of conducting the research. The following are included here:

Research Design - This study employed a case study research design to explore a child's learning experiences in relation to family trauma (Yin, 2018). This study used a qualitative research design, specifically a case study approach, to explore how family trauma affects a child's behavior and development. The study focused on one participant, which is common in case study research when the goal is to gain a deep, detailed understanding of a particular situation or individual. By concentrating on a single child, the study can explore the complex interactions between family environment, emotional well-being, and classroom behavior.

Research Participant - The participant in this study was selected purposively, meaning the researcher chose the individual intentionally because they possess the specific experiences relevant to the study. Purposive sampling procedures are used in most research papers because they are found in any research paradigm and help in ensuring that quality samples are located without biases so as to increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings. (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, n.d.). This study was conducted at Caibiran Central School SPED Center, where the child is enrolled. The participant is a young child who lived with extended family members for almost seven years before being transitioned to the care of his biological father. This significant change in caregiving provides a unique opportunity to examine the effects of family trauma and transitions on early learning, behavior, and development. The selected participant was chosen because of observable changes in behavior, social interactions, and academic performance, which are directly related to the focus of the study. By selecting this child purposively, the researcher ensured that the data collected would be rich, relevant, and meaningful for understanding the impact of family trauma on early learning.

Research Instrument - Data were gathered through semi-structured interview questions administered via Messenger chat, handwritten responses, and audio recordings, allowing flexibility in capturing the participant's responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with three key participants: the child's biological parent (father), the classroom teacher, and the family members who cared for the child for almost seven years. Kallio et al. (2016) explained that a qualitative semi-structured interview guide contributes to the objectivity and trustworthiness of studies and makes the results more plausible. The researcher prepared 10 open-ended questions for each participant. These questions focused on the child's behavior, emotional well-being, family background, and academic performance in order to explore the impact of family trauma and caregiving transitions on early learning and development. The recorded interview from the previous guardians were transcribed and, translated into English, maintaining the accuracy and meaning of the participants' responses. Key responses were highlighted to support analysis and findings in the study.

Data Gathering Procedure and Analysis - The data-gathering process was conducted over a period of two weeks. Due to the timing of data collection at the end of the school term and under undisturbed conditions, the teacher was unable to accommodate a personal interview. Instead, consent was obtained through online communication, and the teacher provided her responses to the interview questions via Messenger. The father of the child was also unavailable for a face-to-face interview due to holiday commitments. As an alternative, the

researcher provided a printed copy of the interview questions, which the father completed and returned the following day with detailed responses. Only the grandparent was available for a face-to-face interview. The interview was conducted personally by the researcher, and the responses were audio-recorded with permission. The recorded data were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Ethical Consideration - Consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The child's identity and personal details were kept confidential, and all information was used solely for educational purposes. The researcher ensured that all interactions were respectful and non-intrusive, particularly considering the sensitive nature of family trauma.

3. Results and discussion

The results and discussion based on the information gathered in the conducted study will be discussed in this section.

3.1 Behavioral Pattern: Affection to Aggression

There is a stark contrast between the subject's past and present behavioral patterns. Previously described as "gentle" and "very loving," the child has shifted toward externalizing behaviors characterized by defiance and physical reactivity. This shift is consistent with research suggesting that children often utilize externalizing behaviors as a "protest" against the loss of a primary secure attachment figure (Bowlby, 1988).

Previous Status - The grandmother and teacher both describe the child's past self as "affectionate," "gentle," and "very loving." He used to express emotions through words and gestures (hugs/kisses).

Teacher's POV:

"Before, he could easily make friends and get along well with others. He was more calm and approachable."

Grandmother POV:

"My apo is very affectionate and expressive. He used to freely say "I love you," give sweet and kind words, and show his love through gestures like hugging and kissing me and his titas. He has always been a very loving child, and he is not afraid to show his emotions openly."

The transition from an "expressive" emotional state to one of "shouting and pushing" suggests a breakdown in emotional regulation. The child's comment regarding the teacher's size indicates a new, defensive worldview where physical dominance is perceived as a primary means of conflict resolution. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), when a child's previous prosocial methods (affection) no longer yield the same sense of security, they may experiment with power-based behaviors to regain control over their environment. Recent studies on Emotional Leakage and Displaced Aggression indicate that children in restrictive environments often inhibit emotional responses at home to avoid parental conflict, only to exhibit those same emotions as externalizing behaviors (aggression and talking back) in lower-stakes environments like the classroom.

Current Status - The teacher reports a significant shift toward aggression, physical reactions, and talking back. He now struggles with "strong-willed behavior" and reacts to frustration by shouting or pushing.

Teacher's POV:

"There was even a time when he talked back to me in a concerning way, he said he could fight back because I wasn't that big. That was very unusual for him, especially since he used to be more respectful and would express himself calmly before."

In his previous environment, he was “spoiled” and likely felt powerful through affection and attention. In his current environment, where he feels restricted and corrected, he may perceive authority as a threat. Challenging the teacher’s physical stature is a defensive attempt to regain a sense of safety and dominance in a world that currently feels unpredictable to him. Research by Wright et al. (2015) on Social Dominance Theory suggests that children who experience a sudden loss of autonomy in their home environment (transitioning from a permissive to a restrictive setting) often attempt to re-establish a sense of agency by challenging the perceived “physical or social hierarchy” in the classroom. This “talking back” and physical reactivity are not merely defiance, but a compensatory dominance mechanism used to manage the anxiety of an unpredictable environment (Casper et al., 2017).

3.2 The Impact of Caregiving Transitions

The Disruption - The child spent his first seven years with his grandparents/relatives, where he was “spoiled” and given “much attention.”

The Adjustment - In December 2025, he moved back to his biological father. The father noted the child was “confused and overwhelmed” by the change in discipline styles, moving from a permissive environment to a more structured, rule-based one.

Father’s POV:

“At first, he would feel frustrated, when he could not immediately get what he wanted since he used to get a lot of attention before. There were also moments when he shows sadness, particularly when he missed his grandparents because he grew up with them. There were times when he would become frustrated when corrected or when he could not get what he wanted, sometimes affected how he followed instructions.”

The father’s intent to establish authority through restricted access may be backfiring. Instead of fostering discipline, the isolation appears to be increasing the child’s emotional instability, as he has lost the “gentle” influence that previously defined his behavior. Research by Tang et al. (2018) indicates that “re-migrated” or “re-unified” children, those who move from grandparental care back to biological parents, frequently experience Attachment Rupture. Because the child spent his formative years (the first seven years) with his grandparents, they became his “psychological parents.” A sudden shift to a new authority figure can lead to “emotional disorientation,” explaining the father’s observation of the child being “confused and overwhelmed.”

Communication Breakdown - The grandmother noted that the child no longer talks to them as much, as the father has restricted communication to focus on his own disciplining methods.

Grandmother’s POV:

“He no longer talks to us as much as before. He mentioned that his father has restricted his communication and visits with us. Because of this, our contact with him has become limited.”

The “communication breakdown” with the grandparents likely exacerbates the child’s sense of loss. By restricting access to his previous support system, the child may feel isolated, leading to the “confused and overwhelmed” state described by the father. When a child is cut off from familiar caregivers, they often feel isolated and misunderstood. This breakdown in communication likely fuels the aggression and frustration seen in school; without the ability to “talk it out” with his grandparents, the child’s unresolved sadness is being “acted out” through defiance and shouting. The ‘communication breakdown’ initiated by the father represents a significant relational rupture. As noted by Teicher and Samson (2016), when children lose access to the caregivers who previously helped them regulate their emotions, they often lose the ability to verbalize their distress. This ‘unresolved sadness’ is then displaced into the classroom as aggression, as the child lacks the co-regulatory support needed to handle his new environment.

3.3 Regression in Academic Focus and Social Skills

Focus - Despite being able to read and do math, the teacher observes he is “easily distracted” and needs constant reminders. He seeks “constant stimulation.”

Teacher’s POV

“Even though he knows how to read, he gets distracted very easily and struggles to stay on one activity for a long time. His attention shifts quickly, and he often needs to be reminded to go back to what he’s supposed to do. Because of his difficulty in focusing, his performance is also affected.”

“Because of his difficulty in focusing, his performance is also affected. He struggles to stay on task long enough to complete it properly, and he often gets distracted in the middle of activities. As a result, he cannot always answer questions well or show what he really knows, even if he actually understands the lesson. It seems like his current emotional state and difficulty with attention are interfering with his learning and overall classroom performance.”

The need for “constant stimulation” is a common coping mechanism for children experiencing high levels of stress. The inability to “show what he really knows” academically is not a lack of intelligence, but a lack of emotional bandwidth to focus on tasks. Blair and McKinnon (2016) demonstrate that chronic emotional stress and “confused” states of mind over-occupy the child's Executive Functioning. This leaves little “mental bandwidth” for academic tasks, explaining why he “understands the lesson” but cannot “stay on task” or “complete it properly.” Research by Perry and Hambrick (2018) suggests that children experiencing attachment disruptions often seek “external stimulation” to ground themselves or to avoid the intrusive thoughts associated with their “confused and overwhelmed” state. This sensory seeking behavior directly competes with the sustained attention required for classroom tasks, leading to the “performance gap” noted by the teacher.

3.4 Social Coping Mechanisms

Social Interaction - He previously made friends easily. Now, his interactions often escalate into conflict, misunderstandings, and crying. The teacher suspects he is “*suppressing emotions at home*” which then “*show up in school.*”

3.5 Previous Social Interaction

Grandparent’s POV:

He is a very sociable child and can easily make friends with others. When he sees someone he knows or considers a friend, he will naturally greet them and say “hi” without hesitation. He is friendly and approachable, especially with people he is comfortable with.

Teacher’s POV:

“His father said that he used to be in a setting where he was very cared for and got most of what he wanted, so he may not have developed strong skills in dealing with limits or frustration yet. Now, in his current situation, it seems like emotional expression is more controlled or restricted, especially when it comes to showing sadness or frustration.”

“I’ve noticed a big change in his behavior. He has started talking back, which he didn’t usually do before. He also gets into fights with his classmates more often. Even when he tries to play with them, it doesn’t always end well. They might start off playing nicely, but it often turns into a misunderstanding or conflict, and he ends up crying. It seems like he’s having a hard time handling his emotions and social interactions now.”

Research by Heberle et al. (2020) suggests that children in highly controlled or restrictive home environments often exhibit “displaced aggression” in secondary settings like school. Because the child cannot safely express frustration or sadness toward the father, he utilizes the classroom as a “cathartic outlet.” This Displacement Effect results in fights with classmates, as the child is unable to differentiate between the discipline he receives at home and his interactions with peers (Marcus & Kramer, 2017).

3.6 Family/Caregiver Interventions

Teacher's POV

“Close collaboration between the teacher, parents, and caregivers is important so that expectations and approaches are consistent. Positive behavior support, patience, and encouragement can help him gradually build better self-control, improve focus, and develop healthier ways of interacting with others.”

Parent's POV

“I use consistent guidance, clear rules and patient communication. I make sure he understands the expectations at home and reinforce positive behavior with praise and encouragement. I also, dedicate time to support his studies especially reading and make learning part of our daily routine. For behavior, I calmly correct him when he does something wrong and explain why it is important to follow rules. Additionally, I spend quality time with him, listen to his feelings and provide a safe and supportive environment. These approaches have helped him gradually adjust, manage his emotions better and develop new skills.”

Grandparent's POV

“Yes, we use simple and consistent strategies to help him manage his behavior, emotions, and learning. We always talk to him calmly and explain that it is okay to feel sad, frustrated, or angry, but it is not okay to talk back, shout, or hurt others when he is upset. We help him understand that all feelings are valid, but they must be expressed in a respectful way.”

While the father is providing the necessary structure, the child may still be grieving the loss of his “spoiled” status. The successful integration of these two worlds, the father's structure and the grandparents' emotional warmth, is essential for the child's behavioral recovery. Interestingly, all three parties; teacher, parent, and guardian, agree that the child responds well to structure and patience. The father's efforts to provide “clear rules” and the teacher's “calm-down strategies” are the correct interventions. However, the grandmother's observation about the “limited contact” suggests that the child may also be grieving the loss of his previous support system, which complicates his ability to “behave” as expected.

Research by Pinquart (2017) suggests that the most effective intervention for a child undergoing transition is the Authoritative Parenting Model. This model combines high demandingness (the father's “clear rules”) with high responsiveness (the grandparents' “affection”). If the child perceives the new environment as only demanding (restrictive) without the previous level of responsiveness, his “behavioral recovery” will likely remain stalled by grief and resistance. As noted by Gottman et al. (2014), acknowledging a child's feelings while setting firm boundaries on their behavior, particularly when they are “grieving” a previous lifestyle, is essential for developing emotional intelligence. The successful integration of the father's structure and the grandparents' emotional validation is necessary to prevent the child from feeling isolated in his new “rule-based” world.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates that the child's behavioral challenges are not acts of defiance, but symptoms of emotional displacement and unresolved grief. The drastic shift from a permissive, affectionate home

to a rigid, disciplined environment has left him in a state of chronic “survival mode.” This internal conflict consumes the cognitive energy necessary for academic success, leading to significant difficulties in concentration and learning. His aggression in the classroom is not a choice, but an outlet for the frustration he cannot safely express elsewhere. Ultimately, his progress depends on a shift from punitive discipline to trauma-informed support, recognizing that his behavior is a plea for emotional stability rather than a lack of ability or character.

Recommendations - Based on the findings of this case study, the following interventions are recommended to support the child’s emotional regulation and academic recovery:

- **Implement a Trauma-Informed Classroom Lens:** Educators should shift from a compliance-based approach to one that prioritizes relational safety and co-regulation. This involves moving away from punitive discipline, which can exacerbate trauma symptoms, and instead proactively de-escalating disruptive behaviors by recognizing them as stress responses (Maynard et al., 2019; Jennings, 2019).
- **Establish Predictability and Routine:** To counter the child's internal sense of displacement, the school environment must be high in structure and predictability. Providing a safe, calm, and consistent learning environment helps unmoored children feel a sense of mastery over their surroundings, which is a prerequisite for academic engagement (Jennings, 2019; American Bar Association, 2015).
- **Targeted Emotional Literacy Support:** The child requires interventions designed to improve self-regulation skills and cognitive functions like problem-solving. By teaching him the vocabulary for his “silent grief,” the school can help him process the transition from his grandparents’ care without relying on externalizing aggression as an outlet (Connell et al., 2008; Frieze, 2019).
- **Bridge the Home-School Gap:** It is recommended to establish a consistent communication protocol with the biological father to align caregiving strategies. Intervening in family processes during early childhood is critical to disrupting the development of long-term behavioral problems and ensuring the child feels supported across both environments (Maynard et al., 2019; Connell et al., 2008).

Acknowledgement - The author utilized ChatGPT by OpenAI as a supplementary tool for grammar checking, sentence refinement, and rephrasing of selected parts of the manuscript to improve clarity and readability. All concepts, interpretations, data analysis, findings, and conclusions presented in this study were independently developed and reviewed by the author. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the content of this research.

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