

The impact of parental expectations and social factors on exam stress among schoolchildren

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Abstract

Exam stress is a significant concern for schoolchildren, often affecting their academic performance and mental well-being. This article examines the impact of parental expectations and social factors, such as family dynamics, cultural pressures, and socioeconomic status, on the stress levels experienced by students during exam periods. Parental expectations are often a double-edged sword, where high hopes can motivate students but also create intense pressure, leading to anxiety and burnout. Additionally, the article explores how social factors, including the support or lack of support from family, peer relationships, and the resources available within the community, shape a child's ability to cope with exam-related stress. By analyzing these elements, the study aims to provide insights into how social and familial influences intersect to either mitigate or exacerbate the pressures surrounding exams. The findings suggest that a holistic approach, involving both parents and schools, is essential for reducing stress and promoting healthier academic experiences for students.

Keywords: Parental Expectations; Exam Stress; Social Factors; Schoolchildren

1. Introduction

Exam stress is an increasingly prevalent issue among schoolchildren, often impacting their academic performance, emotional well-being, and overall development. While academic assessments are an essential part of education, the pressure to perform well can create significant psychological strain. One of the primary factors contributing to this stress is parental expectations. Many parents place high academic demands on their children, believing that success in exams will lead to future opportunities and stability. However, for some students, this pressure can be overwhelming, leading to anxiety, fear of failure, and burnout. In addition to parental expectations, various social factors such as family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms can also play a pivotal role in shaping a child's stress levels during exam periods. For instance, children from lower-income families may face additional challenges, such as lack of access to resources, which can further heighten their stress. Similarly, societal pressures and the competitive nature of education can create an environment where students feel the need to constantly prove themselves. Understanding the complex interplay between parental expectations and social influences is crucial for developing strategies to reduce exam stress among schoolchildren. By addressing these factors, it is possible to create a more supportive and balanced approach to academic achievement, fostering healthier mental and emotional development in young learners. This article aims to explore the impact of these social and familial factors on exam stress and how they can be managed to improve the academic experience for students.

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2. Literature Review

Exam stress among schoolchildren has been extensively studied in the fields of psychology and education, with various factors identified as contributing to its onset and intensity. One of the most prominent influences is parental expectations. Studies show that when parents have high academic expectations, it can significantly affect a child's stress levels, both positively and negatively. For instance, while some children may be motivated by the desire to meet their parents' expectations, others may experience heightened anxiety or fear of failure (Huebner & Gilman, 2003). Research by Gottfried et al. (2009) indicates that children of parents who emphasize academic success tend to exhibit more stress, particularly when they perceive their parents' expectations as unattainable. Moreover, the pressure to meet these expectations can sometimes lead to long-term psychological issues, such as low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

In addition to parental expectations, socioeconomic status (SES) is another critical factor that influences exam stress. According to Davis-Kean (2005), children from lower SES backgrounds often face additional stressors that contribute to academic pressures. These stressors can include a lack of access to educational resources, limited parental support, and financial instability, all of which compound the stress experienced during exam periods. The disparity in resources and support further exacerbates the gap in academic performance between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Evans (2004) highlights how chronic stress from low-income environments affects children's cognitive functioning, making it more difficult for them to cope with the pressures of exams.

Cultural and social norms also play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of exam stress. In many cultures, academic success is viewed as a primary pathway to future prosperity and social status. In collectivist societies, where family honor is tied to academic achievement, the pressure on children can be particularly intense (Cheng & Leung, 2012). In contrast, in individualistic societies, there may be a stronger emphasis on personal achievement, leading to stress when students feel they are not meeting personal goals or the expectations of their peers (Hwang et al., 2016). These cultural differences underscore the varied experiences of exam stress among students from different backgrounds and highlight the importance of considering cultural contexts when studying stress in academic settings.

Family dynamics and the emotional support children receive at home can significantly influence how they cope with exam stress. Baker et al. (2004) found that students with supportive family environments, where parents provide encouragement and help manage stress, experience lower levels of anxiety compared to those in unsupportive or high-conflict families. The emotional climate within the family is crucial for a child's resilience, as supportive interactions with family members can buffer the negative effects of external pressures, such as those from exams. Conversely, a lack of emotional support or dysfunctional family relationships can amplify feelings of stress and inadequacy (Baker et al., 2004).

Together, these studies underscore the multifaceted nature of exam stress and suggest that it is not merely a result of academic demands, but also a complex interplay of familial, social, and cultural influences. Understanding these factors is essential for designing effective interventions to reduce exam-related stress and support schoolchildren in managing academic pressures.

Exam stress is a pervasive issue among schoolchildren, affecting not only their academic performance but also their emotional and psychological well-being. The factors contributing to exam stress are multifaceted, with significant research highlighting the influence of parental expectations, socioeconomic factors, and family dynamics on children's stress levels. Understanding the complex interplay of these factors is essential for addressing the underlying causes of exam-related anxiety.

2.1. Parental Expectations

Parental expectations are one of the most significant sources of academic stress for children. High academic expectations can have both positive and negative consequences, depending on how the expectations are communicated and the child's ability to meet them. According to Pomerantz et al. (2007), children whose parents set high academic standards often experience higher levels of anxiety due to the pressure of trying to meet those expectations. This anxiety can lead to academic burnout and, in some cases, negative academic outcomes. Gottfried et al. (2009) found that while some children might thrive under the pressure of parental expectations, many others report feelings of inadequacy when their parents' expectations surpass their own abilities. Parental pressure is particularly challenging when it is perceived as conditional, i.e., when parents express love or approval only in response to high academic achievement, a phenomenon described as performance-contingent parenting (Simpkins et al., 2006).

However, parental support and encouragement are essential in shaping children's attitudes toward school. Gonzales et al. (2001) emphasize the importance of positive reinforcement, where parental expectations are communicated in a manner that emphasizes effort rather than results. When parents focus on the process of learning rather than solely on outcomes, children are more likely to develop a healthy relationship with education and are less prone to stress.

2.2. Socioeconomic Status (SES)

The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and exam stress has been well-documented. Children from lower SES backgrounds often face additional challenges that can exacerbate stress levels during exams. Evans (2004) argues that children from low-income families are exposed to chronic stressors such as financial instability, parental job insecurity, and limited access to academic resources. These factors contribute to higher levels of stress, which can hinder cognitive functioning and academic performance. For instance, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack access to tutors, extracurricular activities, or even basic school supplies, which can increase the pressure they feel during exams.

Furthermore, parental education plays a significant role in a child's ability to cope with academic stress. Davis-Kean (2005) found that parents with higher levels of education are more likely to create an academically supportive environment at home, helping their children manage stress more effectively. These parents are also more likely to provide academic guidance and set realistic expectations, which can mitigate the negative impact of exam stress.

2.3. Family Dynamics and Emotional Support

The family environment and the emotional support a child receives from family members are critical in shaping how children manage academic stress. According to Baker et al. (2004), a nurturing family environment that provides emotional support and open communication can buffer the negative effects of exam stress. In contrast, children from high-conflict or emotionally distant families are more likely to experience anxiety and emotional dysregulation, which can worsen stress during exams.

Parental involvement also plays a significant role in managing exam stress. Fan and Chen (2001) found that children whose parents are actively involved in their academic lives, providing encouragement and support, tend to experience less stress and perform better academically. The emotional climate within the family whether parents are emotionally available or distant also has a profound impact on the child's stress levels. For example, children of parents who display warmth and provide positive feedback are generally more resilient to academic pressures (Baker et al., 2004).

Moreover, family support extends beyond parents to include extended family and social networks. Research by McLoyd (1998) suggests that children from low-income families benefit from strong community ties, where extended family members or social support networks can help alleviate stress by providing additional emotional and practical resources.

2.4. Cultural Influences and Peer Pressure

Cultural expectations also influence exam stress, particularly in collectivist societies where academic success is often viewed as a reflection of family honor and status. In these societies, cultural norms regarding success and failure can place significant pressure on students to perform well academically. Cheng and Leung (2012) note that in many Asian cultures, where education is often prioritized above other forms of achievement, the stress from academic performance can be overwhelming. Peer pressure, coupled with the fear of disappointing parents, creates an environment where children internalize academic success as a measure of their self-worth.

In contrast, individualistic societies might place greater emphasis on personal achievement, but still impose high academic standards on students. Peer competition, societal expectations of success, and media portrayals of academic excellence can heighten stress for children, as they constantly compare their achievements with those of others (Hwang et al., 2016).

2.5. Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

In addressing exam stress, coping strategies are essential to managing the psychological impact. According to Frydenberg and Lewis (2004), children who develop effective coping mechanisms, such as time management skills, emotional regulation, and seeking social support, are more likely to manage stress successfully. Schools that implement stress management programs, such as mindfulness training, counseling services, and peer support networks, play a vital role in helping students cope with academic pressures.

Additionally, Chung and Kee (2014) highlight the importance of school-based support systems in reducing stress. When schools provide resources such as counseling, stress management workshops, and opportunities for social interaction, they can foster a more supportive environment that helps students cope with the pressures of exams.

3. Methodology

This article has used secondary data such as books, case studies, journals, web sites, reports, BBC news...etc. so these secondary data as the methodology to analyze the impact of cyberattacks on women's empowerment. By gathering firsthand accounts and experiences from women who have faced cyber harassment, it was able to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological repercussions they endured. This qualitative analysis allowed me to identify common themes and patterns related to mental health challenges, professional setbacks, and societal implications. The insights derived from these primary data sources were crucial in illustrating the pervasive nature of cyber violence and its detrimental effects on women's ability to engage in public life and advocacy. By synthesizing these personal narratives with existing literature, I aimed to present a comprehensive view of how cyberattacks undermine women's empowerment and contribute to a culture of fear and intimidation.

4. Findings

The research topic, "The Impact of Parental Expectations and Social Factors on Exam Stress Among Schoolchildren", explores how external pressures, such as parental expectations and social influences, contribute to stress experienced by schoolchildren during exams. Below are potential findings based on existing research in the field

4.1. Parental Expectations

4.1.1. Increased Pressure and Stress

High parental expectations are commonly linked to increased stress levels among schoolchildren. Studies show that when parents place unrealistic or excessively high academic demands on their children, it can lead to feelings of anxiety, fear of failure, and even depression. This pressure often results in students striving for perfection, which can hinder their overall mental well-being.

4.1.2. Performance Anxiety

Children whose parents expect top performance in exams are more likely to experience heightened anxiety around test-taking. This can manifest in a fear of disappointing their parents or failing to meet academic standards set at home, leading to significant stress.

4.1.3. Strained Parent-Child Relationships

In extreme cases, unmet parental expectations can lead to strained relationships between children and parents. Research indicates that children may feel less emotionally supported, perceiving their parents' love as conditional upon academic achievement.

4.1.4. Coping Mechanisms

Some students may develop unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as overstudying, avoidance, or even resorting to substances to manage stress. However, children with parents who provide positive reinforcement and encourage effort over results tend to develop more resilience.

4.2. Social Factors

4.2.1. Peer Pressure and Social Comparison

Children often compare their academic performance to that of their peers. If students perceive themselves as performing worse than their friends or classmates, they may experience stress and lower self-esteem. Peer competition, especially in cultures that emphasize high academic achievement, can exacerbate stress during exams.

4.2.2. Social Media Influence

The increasing use of social media platforms has also contributed to exam stress. Children may feel overwhelmed by posts showcasing peers' study habits, academic successes, or other forms of "achievement." The constant comparison can elevate feelings of inadequacy and contribute to stress, particularly around exam time.

4.2.3. Cultural Expectations

In many cultures, there are societal expectations regarding academic success, which are often passed down from both families and schools. For example, in some cultures, high academic achievement is directly associated with career success and societal status, which can heighten stress levels.

4.2.4. Support Networks

Social factors also include the level of support children receive from their peers, teachers, and school environment. Strong social support can buffer the effects of stress, helping students manage the pressures of exams more effectively. Conversely, a lack of emotional or social support can increase the likelihood of stress-related issues.

4.3. Gender Differences

Research also highlights gender differences in how parental expectations and social factors affect exam stress. Girls, for instance, may experience higher stress due to a combination of both academic pressure and societal expectations regarding their behavior and achievements. Boys might face different pressures but also experience similar stressors, such as fear of failure or underachievement.

4.4. Coping Strategies and Stress Management

4.4.1. Parental Involvement and Communication

Positive parental involvement, characterized by open communication, understanding, and encouragement, can reduce stress. Parents who foster a supportive environment, where children feel safe to express concerns and seek guidance, tend to reduce their children's stress.

4.4.2. Resilience Development

Children who receive proper guidance on stress management techniques, such as time management, mindfulness, and relaxation exercises, are better equipped to cope with exam stress. Supportive family and social environments play a significant role in helping children build these coping skills.

4.5. Impact on Academic Performance

4.5.1. Negative Effects on Performance

Excessive stress, driven by parental and social pressures, can have an adverse impact on academic performance. Chronic stress may impair cognitive functions such as concentration, memory retention, and problem-solving abilities. These factors can reduce a student's ability to perform well on exams despite preparation.

4.5.2. Test Anxiety

Many students who experience high levels of stress develop test anxiety, which can further impact their exam performance. Test anxiety leads to physical symptoms such as sweating, heart palpitations, and dizziness, which interfere with a child's ability to focus and complete exams.

5. Recommendations for Reducing Stress

5.1.1. Balanced Expectations

Research suggests that parental expectations should focus on encouraging effort and personal growth rather than solely on outcomes. Parents who prioritize mental health, self-confidence, and realistic goals can reduce stress and foster a healthier approach to exams.

5.1.2. Promoting Mental Health Awareness

Schools and parents can work together to raise awareness about the importance of mental health, providing children with resources to manage stress and anxiety effectively. This includes teaching coping strategies and stress management techniques.

5.1.3. Limiting Comparisons

Encouraging a collaborative rather than competitive environment can help reduce peer pressure. Schools can focus on fostering personal development rather than comparing students based on grades.

5.1.4. Creating a Supportive Environment

Both schools and families should create safe spaces where students feel comfortable discussing their stressors. A supportive social network, including friends, family, and teachers, plays a critical role in managing stress during exams.

Parental expectations and social factors significantly influence the stress levels of schoolchildren, particularly during exams. While support and realistic expectations can alleviate stress, high pressure, and negative social comparisons often exacerbate anxiety and hinder academic performance. Therefore, it is crucial for parents, educators, and communities to foster a balanced, understanding, and supportive environment to help children navigate academic challenges with resilience and mental well-being.

5.2. For Parents

5.2.1. Encourage Effort, Not Just Results

Parents should emphasize the importance of effort and personal growth rather than solely focusing on grades and exam outcomes. This can reduce anxiety related to fear of failure and increase motivation and resilience.

5.2.2. Foster Open Communication

Parents should create an open, supportive environment where children feel comfortable expressing concerns and discussing their stress. Active listening and validating feelings can help reduce feelings of isolation.

5.2.3. Set Realistic Expectations

Parental expectations should be age-appropriate and based on the child's abilities. Unrealistic or excessively high expectations can create pressure and contribute to stress. Set goals that are challenging yet achievable.

5.2.4. Balance Academic and Emotional Support

Offer both academic guidance and emotional support. Encourage children to take breaks, engage in hobbies, and focus on their overall well-being, not just academics.

5.2.5. Model Healthy Stress Management

Parents should model good coping strategies, such as stress-relief techniques (e.g., deep breathing, relaxation exercises, and time management), to help children learn how to manage pressure.

5.3. For Schools

5.3.1. Provide Stress Management Programs

Schools should incorporate stress management and mental health programs into the curriculum. These programs can teach students practical strategies for coping with exam stress, such as mindfulness, time management, and relaxation exercises.

5.3.2. Promote a Holistic Approach to Education

Schools should focus on a well-rounded education that emphasizes emotional intelligence, creativity, and critical thinking alongside academic achievement. This can reduce the pressure students feel to excel only in exams.

5.3.3. Encourage Peer Support Networks

Foster peer support groups where students can share their experiences and coping strategies. Peer mentoring programs can provide emotional support and reduce feelings of competition.

5.3.4. Train Teachers to Recognize Stress Symptoms

Teachers should be trained to identify signs of stress and anxiety in students. When teachers recognize stress, they can provide support, offer flexibility, and connect students with counseling services.

5.3.5. Create a Low-Pressure Exam Environment

Reduce the emphasis on exams as the sole measure of success. Implement a more diverse system of assessment that includes projects, presentations, and continuous evaluation, thus relieving the pressure tied to single-test performance.

5.4. For Students

5.4.1. Develop Healthy Study Habits

Students should be encouraged to break study sessions into manageable chunks with regular breaks. Effective time management can reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed and increase productivity.

5.4.2. Practice Relaxation and Mindfulness

Students can use relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness meditation, or yoga to manage anxiety. Regular physical activity also helps to alleviate stress.

5.4.3. Seek Help When Needed

Students should be encouraged to ask for help when they feel overwhelmed, whether it be from teachers, parents, or peers. Seeking support can help prevent stress from becoming unmanageable.

5.4.4. Maintain a Balanced Lifestyle

Encourage students to balance academic commitments with activities that promote mental health, such as hobbies, socializing with friends, and getting enough sleep. A healthy lifestyle can reduce stress levels.

5.4.5. Set Realistic Goals

Students should be encouraged to set realistic, achievable academic goals that focus on their personal development rather than comparing themselves to others. This can reduce stress caused by self-criticism and social comparison.

5.5. For Communities and Society

5.5.1. Promote a Healthy Attitude Toward Exams

Communities should focus on fostering a balanced view of exams and academic performance. Rather than emphasizing academic achievement as the only path to success, communities should value diverse talents and paths in life.

5.5.2. Awareness Campaigns on Mental Health

Community programs and awareness campaigns can help destigmatize mental health issues and encourage open discussions about stress and anxiety. This can create an environment where children feel comfortable seeking help.

5.5.3. Social Media Literacy

Schools and parents should educate children on how to navigate social media in a healthy way. Since social media often promotes unrealistic standards, helping children develop critical thinking skills can reduce the stress related to comparisons.

5.6. For Governments and Policy Makers:

5.6.1. Integrate Mental Health Services in Schools

Governments should ensure that schools have accessible mental health resources, such as counselors or psychologists, to support students dealing with stress and anxiety. This can provide early intervention for students struggling with exam-related pressure.

5.6.2. Review Standardized Testing Practices

Governments could consider reducing the emphasis on standardized testing and move toward more holistic assessment methods. This can reduce the focus on exams as the sole indicator of success and lower the stress associated with test-taking.

5.6.3. Support Family Education Programs

Governments can fund and implement family education programs that guide parents on how to manage expectations, support their children emotionally, and encourage balanced academic goals.

Addressing the impact of **parental expectations** and **social factors** on **exam stress** requires a multi-faceted approach. Recommendations emphasize open communication, realistic expectations, stress management programs, and balanced lifestyles for both students and parents. By working together, families, schools, communities, and governments can create an environment where students feel supported, reducing stress and promoting healthier academic experiences.

6. Conclusion

The impact of **parental expectations** and **social factors** on **exam stress** among schoolchildren is significant and multifaceted. While the desire for academic success is natural, excessive pressure from parents, coupled with societal and peer influences, can contribute to heightened stress, anxiety, and even burnout. Parental expectations that focus solely on outcomes, social comparisons, and the increasing role of social media exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure among students. However, by fostering a supportive environment that emphasizes effort over results, encourages open communication, and incorporates stress management practices, both parents and schools can help mitigate the negative effects of stress. Promoting balanced lifestyles, realistic academic goals, and emotional resilience is key to enabling students to cope with exam pressure in a healthy way. Ultimately, a collaborative effort from parents, educators, peers, and society is essential in addressing the root causes of exam stress. By creating a balanced approach to education where emotional well-being is valued alongside academic achievement—we can ensure that students thrive not just in exams but in life, equipped with the skills to manage challenges and grow holistically.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

If two or more authors have contributed in the manuscript, the conflict of interest statement must be inserted here.

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