

The Moderating Effect of Community Support Systems on the Relationship Between Children's Experiences of Abuse and School Adaptation of Elementary School Students

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of children's experiences of abuse on school adaptation, as well as the moderating effect of community support systems on the impact of school adaptation. Our data analysis included 536 responses by fourth-grade elementary school students. Data were collected during the third session of the first year (2018) of "the Community Children's Center Children's Panel," conducted by the National Youth Policy Institute commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Central Office of Community Child Center. It was found that the experience had a negative effect on children's school adaptation; satisfaction with the services offered by the community center, which was a support system for the community, buffered the negative effects of the experiences on school adaptation. Based on the research analysis, this study emphasized the need to strengthen the role of the center to prevent child abuse and help the abused children adjust to school life.

Keywords: Children abuse, School adaptation, Community Child Center, Moderating effect

1. Introduction

While the Korean Child Welfare Act defines a "child" as any person younger than 18 years, a child's developmental trajectory can depend on their environment and age. Given that after the age of 10 children experience rapid changes in all areas—their bodies, cognition, emotions, and social sphere—we believe that it is especially important to examine this period of childhood [1].

Meanwhile, among the contexts related to the development of children at this age, schools play the most important role (after families) in the development of sociality. Therefore, previous studies show that effective school adaptation in children increases their confidence and sense of responsibility [2] and that it also has a positive effect on their development up to adulthood [3]. Thus, there are many pieces of research that have included school adaptation as an important dependent variable related to childhood development, and the factors that have been shown to predict effective school adaptation include psychological and emotional [4]–[6]; and family-related [7]–[9]; school-related [10], [11]; and community-related ones [12]–[15].

Family-related factors have the most prominent impact on the adaptation of children, and they have been reported to impact relationships with both peers and teachers [16]. However, abuse that occurs in a family causes various psychological effects, and it has a negative impact on relationships with both peers and teachers. This leads to difficulties regarding academic achievements, aggression, and delinquent behavior,

which ultimately lead to school in adaptation [17]. That is, we can see that if children are not cared for properly in the family, there is a higher possibility of in adaptation, not only within the family, but also within the school context.

From this perspective, the community support system surrounding a child can act as a substitute for the family regarding role models, and when there are difficulties, it can serve as a buffer against the effects of the risk factors stemming from the family environment by providing programs and services [18], [19]. Community children's centers can be considered a representative community support system that fosters the comprehensive development of children, not only by providing care, but also education, and by conducting child welfare projects. Therefore, when a child who is experiencing difficulties within their family utilizes community children's centers, these centers can act as a buffer against the difficulties faced by the child due to negative family-related factors [14]. At the same time, such services can improve children's self-esteem and aid in their recovery from internal conflicts and issues [20]. This assertion is supported by the preceding research, which shows that a high level of satisfaction with the services provided by community children's centers is a positive predictor of educational success [21]–[23]

Research on community satisfaction with the services offered by children's centers contains terminology such as "user satisfaction" [22], [23] and "service satisfaction" [21], and it focuses on examining the direct impact on school adaptation. However, examinations of how much of a buffer community children's centers provide against risk factors within the family in their role as community support systems are currently lacking. Despite the fact that these systems can play an important role as a protective factor for children who experience emotional or physical abuse or neglect within the family, there is a relative lack of research being conducted on these issues [22], [23].

Thus, this study examined the school adaptation of children who had experienced abuse within their families. Its aim was to verify the moderating effect of community support systems as a protective factor. Specifically, an effort was made to focus on the public's level of satisfaction with community children's centers that provide child welfare services on the front lines of community support systems. The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- (1) What effect does abuse have on school adaptation?
- (2) What is the impact of satisfaction with the service provided by the community children's center on school adaptation?
- (3) Does the satisfaction with the service provided by the community children's centers act as a buffer against the negative impact that experiences of abuse have on the school adaptation of children?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Experience of Abuse and School Adaptation

Adaptation within the educational context constitutes an important measure of childhood development, as school-aged children spend most of their time in school [24], [25]. In addition, school adaptation is considered important in childhood development, encouraging desirable adaptation processes both in school and adulthood [2]. However, if abused children do not receive sufficient protection within the family, there is a high likelihood that they will experience the compounded difficulty adjusting poorly in school.

With this regard, according to a previous study examining school adaptation of abused children, there was a higher tendency of inadaptation when they perceived the conflicts between their family members or their parents as emotional abuse [7]. Lee and Kim [26] examined difficulties within the family and their effect on the school adaptation of children, finding that communication between parents and children impacted school adaptation through empathy and ego-resilience; furthermore, other research showed that parental

neglect and abuse had a negative impact on children's ability to adjust to school life [27]. In addition, there is also research that shows that parental abuse has an impact on school adaptation through the mechanisms of ego-resilience [9], parent/teacher/peer attachment [28], and self-perception [8] of a child. Through this lens, we can see that abuse not only has a negative impact on the individual emotions of a child, but also on their ability to adjust to school life.

The family ideally acts as the primary safety net of a child, and related factors are also important to the developmental process [29]. However, the number of children who do not receive sufficient care from their parents is growing due to the recent increase of dual-income and nuclear families; furthermore, the number of children who suffer from abuse and neglect is also continuously increasing [30]. In the 2017 *National Report on Child Abuse* published by the National Child Protection Agency, there were a total of 22,367 cases of child abuse; 17,989 cases occurred at home (80.4%). There were 17,177 cases of parental abuse, which accounted for 76.8%, with the highest percentage of perpetrators. This suggests that children were rather frequently abused at home, where they should feel the safest.

The number of studies examining child abuse with regard to this issue has been increasing, and in addition to examining the direct effects that experiences of abuse have on school adaptation, they also include an examination of the indirect effects, such as the moderating or mediating effects of ego-resilience [9], [31]; self-perception [8]; and self-identity and satisfaction with life [32].

However, most of the existing studies covering this problem focus on individual characteristics as protective factors, leading to a lack of examination of community support systems. Therefore, our research focused on investigating community support systems as a buffer against the negative impact that experiences of abuse within the family have on the school adaptation of children. We especially aim to examine community children's centers, which play the greatest role by acting as a substitute for the family in their capacity as a community support system, and we verify their buffer effect by analyzing the level of satisfaction of children with community children's centers.

2.2. Community Children's Centers and School Adaptation

Community children's centers are spaces where children are provided with afterschool care, and they can be considered a representative type of a community support system. As children in vulnerable groups are the main targets of such services, the services provided by community children's centers can be effective for promoting child welfare, improved learning abilities, and maintenance of and adaptation to everyday home and school life [14], [33].

Research examining the effect of community children's centers on the school adaptation of children is being conducted for these reasons. Seo [34] reports that the greater a child's level of satisfaction with the programs offered by community children's centers, the higher the likelihood that that child will create positive relationships with peers. The research of Bang and Kim [13] also included a meaningful result that showed that the relationship between the child using a community children's center, the center's teacher, and the child's level of satisfaction with the center had a direct impact on school adaptation. In addition, there have been studies showing that service use satisfaction had a positive effect on school adaptation through children's learning habits and peer attachment [35]. These research results imply that community children's centers, which provide care and opportunities for children, are a representative type of community support system that allows children to cultivate their abilities to overcome hardships.

However, we cannot examine the efficacy of community children's centers in detail merely by examining their use. As for the common limitations shown in previous studies, the centers should provide children with high-quality services, but they are not yet sufficient to actively reflect the actual needs of children during the process. It is important to develop useful programs to increase the satisfaction with and quality of the

services. We can say that the level of satisfaction that a child feels, from a qualitative perspective, is closely related with the level of school adaptation of the child [21]. In longitudinal research regarding this subject, Jung and Ah [36] examined the level of satisfaction with community children's centers among the children who used them, and they showed that children who reported a high level of satisfaction with the centers whose services they used adjusted well to school life afterwards. Lee and colleagues [37] examined the effect that the service domain of community children's centers had on school adaptation and revealed that, the higher a child's level of satisfaction was with the learning support, counseling, and peer-relationship services offered by a center, the greater the initial impact on school adaptation. Here, we can see the positive effect of community centers' service on school adaptation.

In summary, this study aimed to examine whether the moderating effect of satisfaction with the services offered by community children's centers buffered the negative effects of experiences of abuse on school adaptation based on the preceding research; through this analysis, we aim to present social welfare implications that can improve the school adaptation of abused children.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Data

Our research was based on 536 responses by fourth-grade students, taken from 659 responses, excluding missing values. Data were collected during the third session of the first year(2018) of the Community Children's Center Children's Panel, conducted by the Central Office of Community Child Center commissioned by the National Youth Policy Institute. The Institutional Review Board approval number for this panel is 201904-HR-수탁-001-01.

The items regarding "school adaptation" included eight questions, with two questions in each of the four categories of "learning," "rules," "peers," and "teachers." The results were modified for our use so that, the higher a child's score was, the higher the level of school adaptation was. The reliability of this scale was shown to be .830 using Cronbach's alpha.

The items regarding "experience of abuse" included four questions asking about physical and emotional abuse. A higher score represented a more severe level of abuse. The reliability of the "experience of abuse" scale was shown to be .863 using Cronbach's alpha.

The items regarding "service satisfaction" with the services provided by community children's centers included nine questions asking how much help such services had provided to the respondents. A higher score represented a higher level of satisfaction. The reliability of the "service satisfaction" scale was shown to be .903 using Cronbach's alpha.

3.2. Data Analysis

This study analyzed data using the SPSS and AMOS 22.0 programs. The structural equation model reflecting the measurement error was used to verify the impact of the children's experiences of abuse on school adaptation and the moderating effect of satisfaction with community children's centers on the impact on adaptation. In addition, the research questions were verified using the moderating effect analysis method by Marsh et al., which is frequently used when predictor and moderating variables are all continuous variables.

To verify the goodness-of-fit of the model, the goodness-of-fit indexes CFI (Comparative fit index), TLI (Tucker-Lewis index), and RMSEA (Root mean square error of approximation) were used. Before using the structural equation model to analyse main research inquiries, the normality and multicollinearity of measurement variables were reviewed. The normality was examined through skewness and Kurtosis, while multicollinearity was examined through a correlation analysis. The current study included 536 children:

272(50.7%) boys and 264(49.3%) girls. All study participants were in the fourth grade and of the same age.

4. Research Results

4.1 Technical and Correlation Analyses of the Main Variables

The normality of the data was confirmed through technical analysis of the main variables, and the results of the analysis are shown in Table I. Generally, the distribution of the variables can be said not to have deviated from normality if the absolute value is <3 for skewness and <7 for kurtosis [38]. The analysis results showed that the absolute values of both skewness and kurtosis did not exceed 2, so we can assume that the data take the form of a normal distribution.

In addition, a correlation analysis was conducted to examine the direction and strength of the relationships between each of the main variables. The results of the analysis are shown in Table II. The experience of abuse had a negative (-) correlation with school adaptation, and community children's center service satisfaction and that community children's center service satisfaction had a positive (+) correlation with school adaptation. The correlation coefficient between these main variables had a maximum value of $r=.579$ (service satisfaction–school adaptation), which did not exceed the absolute value of .6. Thus, it did not show any multicollinearity issues between variables. Through this analysis, we predicted that the possibility of multicollinearity issues occurring in this research was low; thus, further analysis was conducted.

Table II. Technical Analysis of Main Variables (N=536)

Variable	Average	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Experience of Abuse	1.81	.75	1	4	1.377	1.537
School Adaptation	3.21	.52	1.25	4	-.179	-.575
Service Satisfaction	4.15	.71	1	5	-.887	1.133

Table III. Correlation Analysis between Main Variables (N=536)

	Experience of Abuse	School Adaptation	Service Satisfaction
Experience of Abuse	1		
School Adaptation	-.210***	1	
Service Satisfaction	-.166***	.579***	1
p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***			

4.2. Analysis of the Measurement Model

An analysis of the measurement model was conducted first to determine whether satisfaction with the services provided by community children's centers had a moderating effect on the impact that experience of abuse had on school adaptation. A confirmatory factor analysis was performed in the first step and a two-step approach was conducted to determine whether observed variables effectively measured latent variables. As the reliability as well as convergent and discriminant validity of the research model were verified through a measurement model analysis, the reliability and validity of the model were proven.

Factor grouping was preceded to establish the measurement model. The factor loadings of all variables such as abuse experience, service satisfaction with centers, and school adaptation exceeded the value of .5; after it was confirmed that they were composed of a single dimension, all variables were used for analysis. However, when

an excessive number of observed variables is set, there might be identification problems; as for the variables of center service satisfaction and school adaptation measured by nine items, factor grouping was performed. In the case of service satisfaction, the “item-to-construct balance method” was employed; when there are more than three observed variables for the latent variables, various problems do not occur; it was divided into three items to meet minimum satisfactory conditions. As for school adaptation, as there is an existing criterion dividing it into learning, rules, peers, and teachers while measuring them, it was classified into four areas through an area representation method. The results of the analysis are shown in Table III.

First, the goodness-of-fit of the model showed good levels, indicating the fit indices of $\chi^2=81.552(df=41, p<.001)$, and $GFI=.973$, $CFI=.986$, and $RMSEA=.043$. As a result of calculating construct validity (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) to verify the convergent validity, all values were found to be reliable as CR was >0.7 , and AVE was > 0.5 . To verify the discriminant validity, the square value of the correlation coefficient was calculated; it was checked whether AVE exceeded the square value. As a result, the maximum value of the square value was 0.335, and the minimum AVE value was 0.642, which indicated the satisfaction of all requirements.

Table III. Measurement Model Analysis

Latent Variable	Factor	Estimate		SE	C.R.	CR	AVE
		B	B				
Experience of Abuse	1	.632	.526	.051	12.493***	.604	.642
	2	1	.873				
	3	.932	.838	.041	22.794***		
	4	.921	.821	.041	22.282***		
School Adaptation	1	1	.679			.510	.703
	2	.944	.778	0.065	14.449***		
	3	.913	.725	0.066	13.818***		
	4	.896	.669	0.069	12.973***		
Service Satisfaction	1	.968	.907	0.033	29.001***	.784	.948
	2	1	.887				
	3	.945	.861	0.035	26.823***		
χ2=81.552 (df=41, p<.001), GFI=.973, CFI=.986, RMSEA=.043 p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***							

4.3. The Moderating Effect of Satisfaction with the Services Offered by Community Children’s Centers

The moderating effect in this research was verified using the first moderating effect analysis method by Marsh. As a procedure to verify the moderating effect, the independent and moderating variables were mean-centered using SPSS. Next, according to the principle of matched-pairs strategy, a path diagram was created to show interactions between the mean-centered independent and moderating variables. In the absence of a corresponding pair, one of the independent variables was used repeatedly to create the diagram. In this case, it was found that there was no difference from the value of the diagram between all variables. The model for this research is shown in Figure 1.

The fit indices of the structural model were shown to be $X^2=207.675$ ($df=84$), $CFI=.970$, $GFI=.953$, and $RMSEA=.052$. We can say that the research model fit the sample data adequately, as the indices were

satisfactory. The analysis results of the structural model showed that experience of abuse had a negative (-) impact on school adaptation and that the greater the amount of such experience, the lower a child's level of school adaptation became ($B=-.062$, $p<.05$). This result is supported by [8] and [9]. The moderating variable of community children's center service satisfaction had a positive (+) impact on school adaptation, and the higher the level of service satisfaction, the higher a child's level of school adaptation ($B=-.345$, $p<.001$). In addition, the moderating variable of the interaction term of experience of abuse and community children's center service satisfaction had a negative (-) impact on school adaptation, and it was shown to be statistically significant ($B=-.068$, $p<.01$).

That is, the findings show that the moderating effect of satisfaction with the services provided by community children's centers was meaningful (refer to Table IV), and this result was backed by [13] and [14].

Table IV. Structural Equation Model Analysis

Path			Estimate		SE	C.R.
			B	β		
Experience of Abuse (A)	-->	School Adaptation	-.062	-.103	.027	-2.285*
Service Satisfaction (B)	-->	School Adaptation	.345	.597	.033	10.625***
(A)×(B)	-->	School Adaptation	-.068	-.132	.068	-2.810**

$\chi^2=207.675$ (df=84, $p<.001$), CFI=.970, GFI=.953, RMSEA=.052
 $p<.05$ *, $p<.01$ **, $p<.001$ ***

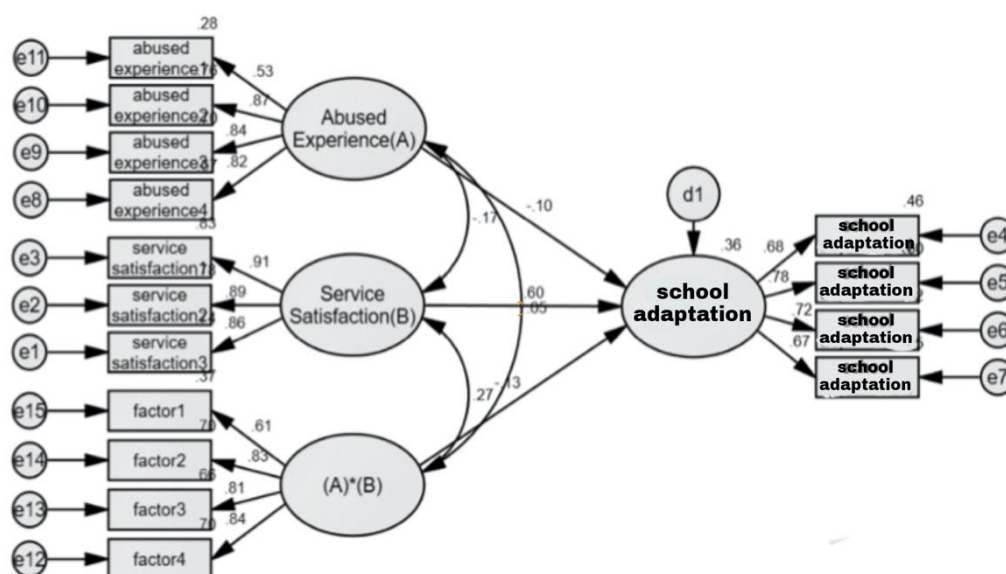


Fig. 1 Final structural equation model

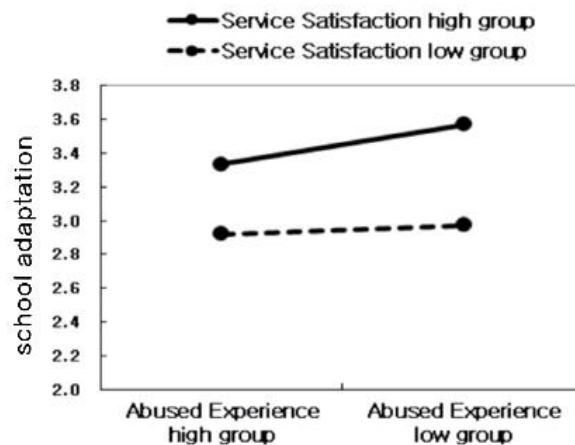


Fig. 2 Interaction plot for service satisfaction

In addition, to verify the moderating effects more accurately, the effect of service satisfaction with centers is shown in Figure 2. Even in situations with a high level of abuse experience, or even its low level, the group with a high service satisfaction with centers showed a higher level of school adaptation than the one with low satisfaction. In other words, it showed that service satisfaction influenced the relationship between stress and school adaptation.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to encourage a discussion on the need for improving the quality of services at community children's centers and suggest measures for social welfare intervention to support the school adaptation of children who have experienced abuse by examining whether a high level of satisfaction with the services offered by community children's centers acts as a buffer against the negative impact that experience of abuse has on school adaptation. To achieve the research objectives, a total of 536 responses by fourth-grade students were analyzed using the data from the third session of the first year (2018) of "the Community Children's Center Children's Panel Research," targeting the children who used community children's centers. This research used the structural equation model to show the impact of their abuse experience on school adaptation and the moderating effects of service satisfaction with centers. The summary of outcomes is as follows:

- (1) It was found that children's abuse experience negatively affected their school adaptation. This in compliance with prior studies, such as those by Kim and Jo [8] and Kim [9], which means this research also supports their studies.
- (2) It was found that service satisfaction with community children's centers had a positive effect on school adaptation, which is in line with research results [13], [32], [39], from previous studies. This proved that service satisfaction had a positive effect on school adaptation, a developmental task of children.
- (3) The results of the analysis showed that a high level of satisfaction with the services offered by community children's centers moderates the relationship between experience of abuse and the school adaptation of children. The outcome supports the research hypothesis of this study. In addition, it shows that even in situations with a high level of abuse experience, or even its low level, the group with a high service satisfaction showed a higher level of school adaptation than that with low satisfaction.

Based on these research results, we would like to present suggestions for strategies and intervention measures to improve the services offered by community children's centers, which are a representative type of community support system, with the aim of improving the school adaptation of abused children.

First, the protective role of community children's centers must be strengthened. As satisfaction with community children's centers was confirmed to be a protective factor and a moderating variable, in-depth discussions on methods of improving abused children's level of school adaptation are needed. When creating community children's center programs, it is important that such programs allow for the acquisition of skills related to school adaptation, and it is vital to identify the level of school adaptation of children in cooperation with their schools.

Second, intervention to prevent abuse in the family is required. Even if community support systems are strengthened, their function as a protective factor is limited if the level of abuse is severe. Therefore, interventions to prevent such abuse must be prioritized. To this end, organizations related to child welfare, including community children's centers, must conduct regular parental-education classes, and when difficulties are identified, integrated case management must be conducted.

Third, there is a need to expand the operational support for community children's centers. The quality of the services offered to children must be enhanced to improve the level of satisfaction with the services offered by community children's centers. To achieve this end, support must be expanded for the employees who provide the services and for operations. Specifically, policy improvements regarding increased operating budgets, expanded numbers of legal workers, and so on can be expected to directly contribute to improving the quality of the services provided to children.

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