

# Understanding Middle Childhood in Urban Locales: Some Illustrations from Popular Bollywood Cinema

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**ABSTRACT** *Childhood is viewed as a unique period of life that lays the foundation for adult life. During middle childhood, there is a steady rate of growth of children and a continuous increase in their competency in various domains, including physical, linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional. There are multiple agencies that socialise the child. They increase in number and shift in importance as children grow older. The present paper focuses on presenting a description of the psychosocial world of children, during middle childhood in urban locales and uses illustrations from films to substantiate them. An important objective of the paper is to draw implications from their lived realities, for fostering their mental health*

## Introduction

Children go through various stages of childhood as they grow up, namely infancy, early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence. My focus in this paper is on the middle childhood stage which in terms of schooling, covers the elementary school years. Conventionally, this stage is considered a period of 'calm years', where primarily, refinement of achieved milestones occurs (Richardson, R.A., 2005). During this stage, there is a steady rate of growth and a continuous increase in their competencies in various domains. Children are also expected to make many transitions such as, a new school environment; difference in expectations from parents; increased interaction with peers and teachers and a wider range of activities and exposure. There are multiple agencies involved in their socialisation. These increase in number and shift in importance as a function of the child's age, locale, gender and class. Academic pressures, cut throat competition, and comparison with peers are some important pressures that emerge. This period also demands adapting to the demands made by the school. These include: adjustment to a tightly packed time table, uniform, following rules and multiple teachers. Adjustment to peers and making friends with one's own and the other gender, are some further

challenges that they face. There is also a strengthening of beliefs about what it means to be a boy and a girl, and concomitantly, exploration of sexuality which takes place during this stage.

The important point of emphasis here is that this stage of life must be perceived as the foundational base for nurturing sound mental health for the adult years, as well. Attitudes, beliefs, ways of coping, all begin to get shaped and formed. There is thus tremendous potential to guide children and develop in them positive life orientations and skills that will enable them to lead more self-directed and relatively stress free lives., The World Health Organisation(2005) conceptualises mental health as the capacity to achieve and maintain optimal psychological functioning and well-being. Mentally healthy children have a positive orientation and outlook to life and can function well at home, school and in their communities. In real terms, when the psychological needs of children are satiated, when they experience freedom and fulfilment of what makes them happy, when they can be natural and spontaneous, when they can experiment with the world, when they have the assurance of being safe and protected, they begin to feel good about themselves and the world in which they live. All these experiences contribute to the development of positive mental health in them.



When these needs and experiences are thwarted, children's well-being gets threatened and what emerge are mental health problems and concerns.

The paper tries to examine all the above mentioned issues, as they unfold in the lived realities of children's lives both explicitly and implicitly. Some illustrations have been drawn from popular films to fortify points and ideas. The underlying assumption is that films provide a visible platform for expression of different cultures and societal concerns. Also, the relationship between popular media and society is reciprocal as movies represent reality, and at the same time, in the real world, people portray what is depicted in movies. To make the analysis more focussed, some important films pertaining to children at the stage of middle childhood were identified and analysed. The themes which came up through this process and which pertain to children's development during middle childhood, were then used to build up the framework through which the description and analysis are presented. The sections that follow focus on these.

### Parental Expectations

The parent-child relationship is a very crucial factor that influences a child's sense of wellness. Parents' attitudes, values and beliefs majorly define the context of parent-child attachment, as they are the primary caregivers and the first socialisers in a child's life. Parents act from different conceptions of how to raise children. Their perceptions about their child's development and socialisation are important to know since they form the basis of their parenting style and expectations from their children. They also determine the dreams that they hold for their children's future, particularly their aspirations for them.

Many movies, such as *Gippi*, *Paa*, etc., have presented the myriad aspirations voiced by children ranging from becoming an astronaut, a tennis player, a businessman, a police officer, Miss India, a jockey, a veterinarian, spider man, a lawyer or a dancer etc. In the movie *Paa*, one child tells another "I want to be a dancer as everyone learns algebra and geometry. There should be a difference between you and me." Another movie, *Bombay*

*Talkies*, tells the story of a boy who did not want to join a football coaching class, much to the chagrin of his father. The father tells his son disapprovingly: "What you do not like is not important. What is good, for you is what is important. If you play football, you will become tough." This reflects that parents propagate various stereotypes and the established notions of society and also feel they know best about what is good for their child. A child's preferences and choices are either not expressed or are not given any importance. Parents push their children towards aspirations and goals that are usually set by them. These can often be a reflection of their own unfulfilled desires or their ways of earning social respect through their children's achievements. So, the child's academic achievement is seen as the achievement of the family and a matter for societal engagement. This phenomenon is especially visible in urban middle class families where education is considered important for upward mobility.

Children at this stage also begin to look outside the family for new ideas, associations, activities and various belief systems that exist in the community. This may lead to a conflict between the beliefs and values at home and those of the child's peers, school and community. Contact with a wide variety of peers probably contributes to children's awareness of different viewpoints. They become a part of the child's significant others and share almost equal importance in the child's life, as do parents. In fact, their growing influence may present a challenge to the family. There is for instance, usually a change in the parent-child relationship in the context of duration and frequency of interaction, content and sharing of school experiences, etc. Children also become conscious about what their parents can and cannot do and begin to evaluate them in the context of societal standards. This is depicted in the movie *English Vinglish*, where the central character's daughter admires her friend's mother for speaking English and rues over the inability of her own mother to do the same. The girl is embarrassed in taking her mother to school for a parents' meet or in letting her mother socialise with her friends' mothers, since she fears being ridiculed by her peers. Thus the desire for peer acceptance may at times, threaten the nature of the parent-child



relationship

### Interactions in School

Children's interactions in school on a voluntary basis, are mainly with peers of usually the same gender. What needs to be highlighted is that the experiences that a peer group provides become a unique context for social learning- one in which children practice cooperation, leadership and develop a sense of loyalty. Peers also form a distinct reference group for comparison and for competition. It is observed that children in urban settings increasingly spend time away from family, in school and in other academic or physical activities, that parents themselves have enrolled them in. This leads to further expansion of their peer group. Cues about what to play, what to study, how to spend time, hanging out together, etc. are all drawn from their peer group. Children thus tend to engage in activities or actions that will help them to retain their peer group membership. Failure to conform to the rules of the peer group may make the child susceptible to ridicule and bullying within and outside the school, which he/she understands and thus avoids.

In today's fast paced and competitive world, the child is involved in many after school activities, leaving very little time for engaging in his/her own preferences. This is shown in the movie *Chillar Party*, where a child's parents are sending him to all kinds of classes after school. The child goes to a karate class, skating class, cricket class, scouts and tennis class all without any interest or motivation on his part. Such coercion by parents may lead to unhappiness in the child who may remain passively obedient or else become a rebel. The child may also find no space to engage in activities with peers that he would like to take up and lament about this

Another point of significance is that when a child joins school, there is a change in routine and he/she learns to manage the biological clock accordingly. What needs to also be encashed upon is the fact that schools are miniature societies which become a platform for socialization and also thus carry the potential to build life skills in children. School is the place where friendships are forged and broken and the child learns the rules governing

relationships with peers and elders. Supporting and enhancing the child's self- esteem and self- confidence are critical during this period and teachers can play a very important role here. Constant criticism on their poor academic performance and comparison with high achieving students leads to demotivation and loss of self confidence in the child which may have far reaching repercussions like feelings of self- doubt, loss of self- esteem. It is thus important to see middle childhood as deeply significant in building the base for a happy and meaningful adulthood ahead. As stated by Kapur (1997), "Schools play a crucial and formative role in the spheres of cognitive, language, emotional, social and moral development of children."

### Sexuality

Sexuality encompasses feelings such as masculinity, femininity, desire, satisfaction, loss, love, hurt, joy, intimacy, loneliness, caring, sharing, rejection, self-esteem and joy. The later years of middle childhood are marked by the onset of puberty. Children start exploring relationships that go beyond friendships. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviour, practices, roles and relationships. An instance in *Bombay Talkies* depicts a boy dressing up like a girl, dancing on a song that has been filmed on a female actor. His father slaps him and tells the siblings that gender roles should not be taken lightly and that they need to think more seriously about what they wish to be, when they grow up. The movie *Rockford* carries depictions of school children, their struggles and childhood romances. Family, school and media, are important agents in transmitting behaviour patterns and values expected of the children by the society. One can find instances in films where a boy wants to grow up to be a female actor, his idol being Katrina Kaif, or a boy not being interested in joining a football team, wanting to be trained in ballet instead, or a girl wanting to join a football team and later playing it professionally, and the disapproval shown by the parents since these are contrary to societal expectations and normative beliefs. These instances highlight that sexuality and gender roles are issues of importance during middle childhood and so should be examined from



the lens of facilitating mental health instead of being dealt with punishment. The reluctance of parents and schools to provide relevant information is a matter of concern. They are not comfortable in initiating or participating in discussions about these issues. Providing children with education about sexuality will impact all aspects of a growing child. On the other hand, dealing with what is termed as 'deviant behaviour' of the child in a heavy handed manner can be detrimental to the mental health of the child.

### **Bullying**

Bullying is characterised by deliberate intention to inflict hurt repeatedly. This may be done by taking advantage of being superior in strength, either physically or psychologically. Bullying can be direct such as teasing, threatening, name calling or manifested in physical behaviours such as hitting, pushing, cornering or by intentional exclusion as is depicted in the films, *Get educated: Paatshaala, Gippi* etc. School children may engage in bullying for no particular reason and may simply indulge in it for fun or they may be motivated by the desire of asserting supremacy and establishing their status over peers and maintaining control over their peers. Children who bully do not lack social skills, instead they deliberately select strategies to maintain dominance and power in social relations and purposely choose to bully the weak. Other factors that can be associated with bullying are school factors, like unhappiness in school and being disliked at school; and family factors, such as punitive parenting, lack of warmth, insecure and ambivalent parent-child relationship, and parental restrictiveness or over protectiveness. One cannot deny the role of aggressive models in perpetuating bullying. There is exposure to violence through mass media which the child gets. Families do not feel the need to discuss instances of bullying with their children unless their children are getting bullied. There is a need to increase awareness among parents and need to work together to handle the issue of bullying.

### **Media technologies and Internet**

Media, technology, and internet have become an integral part of the lives of children all over the

world. These include computers, laptops, mobile phones, gaming consoles such as X-box, Vii, play station, Nintendo etc. In order to survive, there is a need to be familiar with internet and technology. The various activities that children engage in on the internet are for social networking, playing video games, and fulfilling educational needs.

The prolonged use of computers has replaced children's playtime and diminished their interactions with neighbourhood friends. Computer activities have also substituted children's interests and hobbies such as artwork, sports, reading etc. New media have permeated young lives and culture so much that they are constantly and always in contact with their friends, peers and teachers. This may impact their sense of identity and autonomy (cited in U. Nayar, 2012). Social networking sites make it easy for children to project an image that may be or may not be their real self. This may bring about a distorted sense of self, leading to difficulties in the child adjusting to the real world (cited in U. Nayar, 2012). In cases where both parents are working, children's presence on the internet is both unrestricted and unmonitored. Sometimes parents do install software on computers that monitor their child's internet usage, however, it is nearly impossible to monitor such usage effectively and completely. Another side to internet usage is that parents are also apprehensive and undecided about restricting internet usage as it is considered essential for learning and is supported by schools. This increases the chances of interactions with strangers, in turn increasing their vulnerability.

Another form of bullying that children can be exposed to is cyber bullying. "Cyber bullying is a typical type of online harassment, which can be defined as hurling harsh, rude, insulting, teasing remarks through the message box, or in open forums targeting one's body shape and structure, educational qualifications, professional habits and outlook." (Deccan Herald, 2015) The best and safest strategy would be to provide younger children with a safe, secure and private experience that allows them to interact with verified friends and family members without having to lie about their age.



In a country like India, the experiences of childhood may vary depending on various factors, such as socio-economic status, caste, class, gender, languages spoken at home, and the like. Children's capacities are growing and their competencies and perceptions differ from adults even when the context and situations are same. The manner in which children are perceived by society and by child rights experts, emphasise on the importance of listening to children's voices. This paper presented a description of the lived developmental realities of children during middle childhood in urban locales. It also highlighted the complexities of a child's world and his/her engagement in society. Some film depictions were used to also illustrate this. The main objective for such an approach was to highlight the potential that this holds for nurturing a child's mental health and the important role that the different socialisation agencies can play, particularly home, school and peers.

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