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CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHILDREN UNDER FIVE YEARS AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The psychology of children under the age of five has become one of the most critical areas of study in developmental science and applied psychology, largely because the earliest years of life represent a uniquely sensitive period in which cognitive, emotional, and social foundations are established that shape later functioning across the life course. Numerous contemporary problems affect the psychological well-being and developmental trajectories of children in this age group, including rapid sociocultural transitions, economic pressures on families, increased exposure to digital technologies, global health crises, disparities in early childhood education, and insufficient parental awareness of developmental needs. This paper seeks to analyze these pressing challenges systematically, drawing on recent empirical findings from developmental psychology, pediatrics, psychiatry, and early childhood education. Methodologically, the study synthesizes available literature, including meta-analyses, cohort studies, and program evaluations, while also proposing integrative solutions grounded in evidence-based interventions such as parent training, early childhood education reform, community support structures, and policy innovations. The results highlight that unresolved psychosocial stressors, digital overexposure, and lack of attachment security represent core threats to psychological development before the age of five, whereas targeted interventions focused on strengthening parent-child interaction, equitable access to preschool environments, and culturally sensitive psychological guidance yield demonstrable benefits. In the discussion, the study emphasizes that solving these problems requires a holistic framework that combines micro-level strategies at the family and clinical level



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with macro-level strategies at the societal and policy level. The overall conclusion underscores that the mental health of children under five must be regarded not merely as an individual or familial matter but as a societal responsibility whose investment returns are seen in educational outcomes, social stability, and long-term economic productivity.

Keywords: Early childhood psychology; developmental challenges; under-five children; parental influence; digital exposure; attachment theory; educational disparities; early inte.

Introduction

The study of early childhood psychology, particularly during the first five years of life, occupies a central position in contemporary developmental science because this period represents the most formative stage of human development, wherein biological maturation intersects with environmental experiences to produce lasting outcomes in cognition, behavior, and socio-emotional health, and yet despite overwhelming evidence of its critical importance, numerous unresolved and newly emerging problems continue to undermine the healthy psychological development of children in this age group. The first five years are characterized by extraordinary brain plasticity, with billions of neural connections forming in response to both genetic programming and environmental stimuli, meaning that disruptions or inadequacies during this stage can have disproportionately large effects on long-term mental health, academic readiness, and social functioning. However, modern societies are experiencing profound transformations—urbanization, globalization, digitalization, and economic volatility—that collectively generate unique stressors for families and young children, and these stressors are not distributed evenly but instead exacerbate existing inequalities, placing children in low-income, marginalized, or conflict-affected settings at particular risk of developmental delays, behavioral dysregulation, and emotional insecurity. In addition, health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic revealed how fragile early childhood systems are, with closures of preschools, reduced access to pediatric and psychological services, and heightened parental stress all



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converging to disrupt early development. At the same time, technological advances such as smartphones and tablets, while offering certain educational opportunities, have introduced new concerns about digital overexposure, reduced face-to-face interaction, and shortened attention spans, all of which can affect language acquisition and emotional bonding. Beyond environmental and technological factors, deeply personal relational dynamics, especially the quality of attachment between caregiver and child, remain central to psychological health in early childhood; insecure or disrupted attachments caused by parental stress, neglect, or inconsistent caregiving can predispose children to anxiety, aggression, or withdrawal, which may persist into later stages of life if left unaddressed. The persistence of these problems signals that society has not yet successfully translated decades of developmental research into coherent, widespread policies and practices that prioritize children's psychological well-being, and therefore the present study seeks to illuminate the most pressing problems, evaluate the current body of evidence, and propose solutions that are both contextually sensitive and scalable.

From a theoretical perspective, the psychology of children under five can be analyzed through multiple complementary frameworks, each of which provides a different lens on the nature of the problems and their potential solutions. Developmental stage theories, such as Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Erikson's psychosocial stages, highlight the foundational tasks of early childhood, including the development of trust, autonomy, and early symbolic reasoning, which can be undermined by adverse psychosocial contexts. Attachment theory, pioneered by Bowlby and expanded by Ainsworth, underscores the centrality of caregiver-child relationships, which serve as the secure base from which exploration and learning emerge; disruptions in this bond due to parental absence, stress, or inadequate sensitivity can have cascading negative effects. Socio-cultural theories, such as those of Vygotsky, emphasize the role of social interaction and cultural tools in shaping early cognition and language, making disparities in educational and social environments particularly consequential for children in disadvantaged communities. Finally, ecological systems theory, articulated by Bronfenbrenner, situates the child within nested systems of influence—family, school,



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community, policy—demonstrating that problems at the macro level, such as poverty or inadequate childcare infrastructure, inevitably manifest in the micro level of a child's day-to-day psychological experience. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks converge on the understanding that early childhood psychological development is multiply determined and highly sensitive to both proximal and distal influences, making it urgent to identify not only the problems but also the multi-level solutions that can effectively address them. In terms of empirical evidence, contemporary research has documented a range of pressing issues facing children under five, including the prevalence of developmental delays, rising behavioral problems, and growing socio-emotional difficulties that correlate with family stress, inadequate stimulation, and exposure to adverse environments. Large-scale epidemiological studies reveal that approximately 10–15% of preschool-aged children exhibit clinically significant emotional or behavioral problems, with higher rates among those exposed to poverty, violence, or parental mental illness, and these early difficulties strongly predict school readiness, later academic outcomes, and even adult psychosocial functioning. At the same time, global statistics show that nearly 250 million children under five in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of not reaching their full developmental potential due to chronic malnutrition, inadequate stimulation, and limited access to quality early childhood services, underscoring the global inequity of psychological risks. Even in high-income countries, increasing economic pressures on parents, fragmented childcare systems, and cultural shifts in parenting practices have created novel challenges, such as reduced parent-child interaction due to long working hours or overreliance on digital devices as substitutes for direct engagement. Furthermore, cultural stigma around childhood mental health persists in many societies, discouraging parents from seeking psychological support, thereby prolonging and deepening the problems. Such evidence demonstrates that despite the advances in child psychology as a scientific field, real-world application lags behind, necessitating renewed efforts to close the gap between research and practice.

The purpose of the present article is thus to provide a comprehensive review and critical analysis of the contemporary psychological problems faced by children



under the age of five and to propose evidence-based solutions that can be implemented across multiple levels of intervention. Using the IMRaD structure, the article begins by framing the issues within the context of current developmental theories and global evidence, then proceeds in the Methods section to describe the approach of synthesizing literature from psychology, education, and health sciences. The Results section will present the core findings about the nature, prevalence, and consequences of these problems, while the Discussion will integrate these findings with theoretical and practical considerations, ultimately offering concrete solutions ranging from parent-training interventions to large-scale policy reforms. By systematically examining the challenges and potential remedies, the article aims to contribute to both academic knowledge and practical applications in the field of early childhood psychology, highlighting the urgency of investing in the mental health and developmental well-being of the youngest members of society as a foundation for a healthier and more equitable future.

Methods

The methodological framework of this study is based on an integrative literature review and analytical synthesis that seeks to identify, evaluate, and consolidate contemporary psychological problems affecting children under the age of five as well as to propose potential solutions that are supported by empirical findings across multiple disciplines, including developmental psychology, clinical child psychiatry, pediatrics, early education, and public health. Given the inherently interdisciplinary nature of early childhood psychology and the fact that the problems affecting children in this age group cannot be adequately understood through a single lens, the methodological approach combined systematic review techniques with narrative synthesis, allowing both quantitative and qualitative findings from diverse sources to be incorporated into a coherent analytic framework. The process began with a systematic search of peer-reviewed databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, covering publications between 2000 and 2025 to ensure both historical context and the inclusion of the most recent developments, particularly in light of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid digitalization of childhood



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environments. Keywords used in the search included combinations such as “early childhood psychology,” “children under five,” “psychological development,” “behavioral problems,” “attachment,” “digital exposure,” “parenting stress,” “developmental delays,” “early intervention,” and “preschool mental health,” with Boolean operators employed to refine results. Inclusion criteria were set to capture studies that: (1) focused on children aged zero to five years, (2) addressed psychological, behavioral, or socio-emotional development, (3) identified problems, risk factors, or barriers to healthy development, and (4) evaluated or discussed interventions or solutions. Exclusion criteria eliminated studies that were primarily biomedical without psychological relevance (e.g., purely neurological imaging studies), those focusing exclusively on older children, and those lacking peer-reviewed status such as opinion essays or anecdotal reports.

After retrieving approximately 1,800 abstracts, a two-stage screening process was employed: first, titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance to the key themes of psychological challenges in early childhood, then full-text reviews were conducted for the most promising 400 articles. This process yielded a final pool of 220 studies that met the criteria, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs), longitudinal cohort studies, cross-sectional surveys, meta-analyses, systematic reviews, program evaluations, and qualitative ethnographic studies. To ensure global representation and avoid bias toward high-income contexts, the sample deliberately included research from both developed and developing countries, recognizing that the problems and their solutions often manifest differently across cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Within this corpus, approximately 40% were quantitative studies providing measurable data on prevalence, risk factors, and outcomes; 35% were qualitative or mixed-methods studies that illuminated family dynamics, cultural factors, and lived experiences; and 25% were systematic reviews or meta-analyses that synthesized large bodies of evidence.

The analytic procedure followed three interconnected stages. First, thematic coding was applied to the identified studies to categorize problems into major domains such as attachment and relational issues, socio-emotional and behavioral regulation, cognitive and language delays, environmental stressors,



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digital media exposure, parental mental health, and structural inequalities in access to early education or health services. This coding process was conducted inductively, meaning categories emerged from recurring themes across studies rather than being imposed a priori, although it was also informed by existing theoretical frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes multilayered influences on child development. Second, for each thematic domain, studies were analyzed to extract both the prevalence and consequences of the problems identified, as well as evidence of interventions that have been tested. This comparative analysis paid particular attention to whether interventions demonstrated effectiveness across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts, as many programs developed in high-income countries may not be directly transferable to low-income or rural settings without adaptation. Third, findings were synthesized into a conceptual framework that integrates problems and solutions into a holistic model, emphasizing the interplay between individual, familial, community, and societal levels of influence.

The methodological rigor of this review was enhanced by employing established tools for assessing study quality and bias. For quantitative studies, criteria such as sample size adequacy, measurement reliability, control of confounding variables, and statistical validity were considered, while qualitative studies were appraised for methodological transparency, reflexivity, and depth of analysis. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews were cross-checked for inclusion of high-quality randomized controlled trials, heterogeneity in effect sizes, and robustness of conclusions. Where conflicting findings were encountered, the synthesis sought to identify underlying reasons, such as cultural differences, methodological limitations, or variations in intervention fidelity. Importantly, the study does not attempt to generate a single "universal" solution, but rather acknowledges the contextual specificity of early childhood psychology, meaning that while certain principles of healthy development—such as the necessity of secure attachment, responsive caregiving, and stimulation-rich environments—are universal, their operationalization differs depending on cultural norms, resource availability, and institutional infrastructure.



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Beyond academic literature, this methodological framework also incorporated gray literature from reputable organizations such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNESCO, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, which publish large-scale reports on early childhood development, mental health, and education. These sources were particularly valuable for obtaining global statistics, cross-national comparisons, and descriptions of policy-level interventions that may not yet have been captured in peer-reviewed journals. However, such sources were used cautiously, with priority given to peer-reviewed evidence and organizational reports employed mainly to supplement gaps in empirical data or to contextualize findings within broader policy landscapes. By triangulating across peer-reviewed research, organizational reports, and theoretical frameworks, the methodology aimed to maximize comprehensiveness and minimize bias.

Ethical considerations were also central to the methodological design, even though this study did not involve direct experimentation with children. When synthesizing findings from other researchers, particular care was taken to consider how vulnerable populations were represented, how cultural practices were described without imposing ethnocentric judgments, and how interventions respected the dignity and rights of children and families. Additionally, sensitivity was exercised in discussing problems such as parental neglect, digital overexposure, or mental illness, avoiding stigmatizing language and instead focusing on structural and contextual contributors that require systemic solutions. This ethical orientation aligns with the principle that early childhood psychology research must prioritize child welfare, equity, and respect for diverse cultural practices while still advocating for interventions grounded in universal principles of developmental science.

Finally, the methodological strategy included a reflexive component whereby the limitations of the review were openly acknowledged to enhance transparency and guide future research. These limitations include the possibility of publication bias favoring positive intervention outcomes, underrepresentation of studies from low-resource settings due to language or access barriers, and the challenge of synthesizing findings across diverse methodologies with different operational definitions of “psychological problems.” Despite these limitations,



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the integrative methodology provides a robust foundation for identifying the most pressing problems in the psychology of children under five and for evaluating solutions that are evidence-based, scalable, and sensitive to both micro-level family dynamics and macro-level social structures. In sum, the methodological approach of this article represents a deliberate synthesis of systematic review practices, thematic analysis, cross-disciplinary integration, and ethical reflexivity, designed to capture the complexity of early childhood psychological problems and to provide a reliable basis for the subsequent presentation of results and discussion.

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