

Society



Yin Wenqiong, 5, a left-behind child, does farm work in Guang'an, Sichuan province. QIU HAIYING / FOR CHINA DAILY



Left-behind children receive gifts from the NGO Shangxuelushang in Liping, Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Left-behind children fly kites with volunteers from a local college in Bozhou, Anhui province. LIU QINLI / XINHUA

THE CHILDREN LEFT TO FEND FOR THEMSELVES

About 61 million children in China are classified as 'left-behind' because their parents have moved away for work. Although most live with relatives and have adequate provisions, the psychological toll can be enormous and can result in anti-social behavior, poor academic performance and even suicide. **Xu Wei** and **Wang Xiaodong** report.

More than 15 percent of "left-behind" children have no physical contact with their parents during the course of a calendar year, and 4 percent receive just one phone call a year, according to a survey released on Thursday.

The survey, conducted by an NGO called Shangxuelushang, or "On the Way to School", found that a large number of children are left at home, and their parents have failed to assume their roles as legal guardians. Many parents either lose all contact with their children or fail to communicate with them effectively.

"The results defy imagination. Many parents do not even know that it's necessary to communicate with their children on a regular basis," said Liu Xinyu, who led the survey team.

Between October and December last year, more than 2,130 left-behind children were surveyed in rural areas in six provinces. The survey found that the company of parents, especially the mother, can significantly reduce a child's psychological distress and confusion.

"That's because the mother can generally provide much better life support for the children. More important, the absence of the mother from their children usually occurs if the parents divorce," Liu said.

The conclusion supported the findings of a 2013 report by the All-China Women's Federation, which found that children with absent mothers, and those who live solely with their father, are far more likely to drop out of school.

Heightened risk

China has 61 million left-behind children, or children who have been left without care after one or both parents moved away in search of work, according to the federation. It estimates that 46.74 percent of left-behind children have seen both parents move away — 32.67 percent of them live with their grandparents, while a further 3.37 percent live on their own. The federation said these children are most at risk.

The plight of these children was highlighted on June 9, when four siblings in Bijie, Guizhou province, com-

“The biggest problem they face is that they lack love ... Many isolate themselves and suppress their feelings.”

Guan Jun, writer who spent three months with left-behind children in Gansu

mitted suicide by drinking pesticide at home.

The children had not seen their father since March, when he left home to work in Guangdong province. Their mother left the family home in March last year after a fight with her husband that left her hospitalized. The eldest child, a primary school student, had been tasked by his father with taking care of his three sisters and two pigs who live in the family's livestock pen.

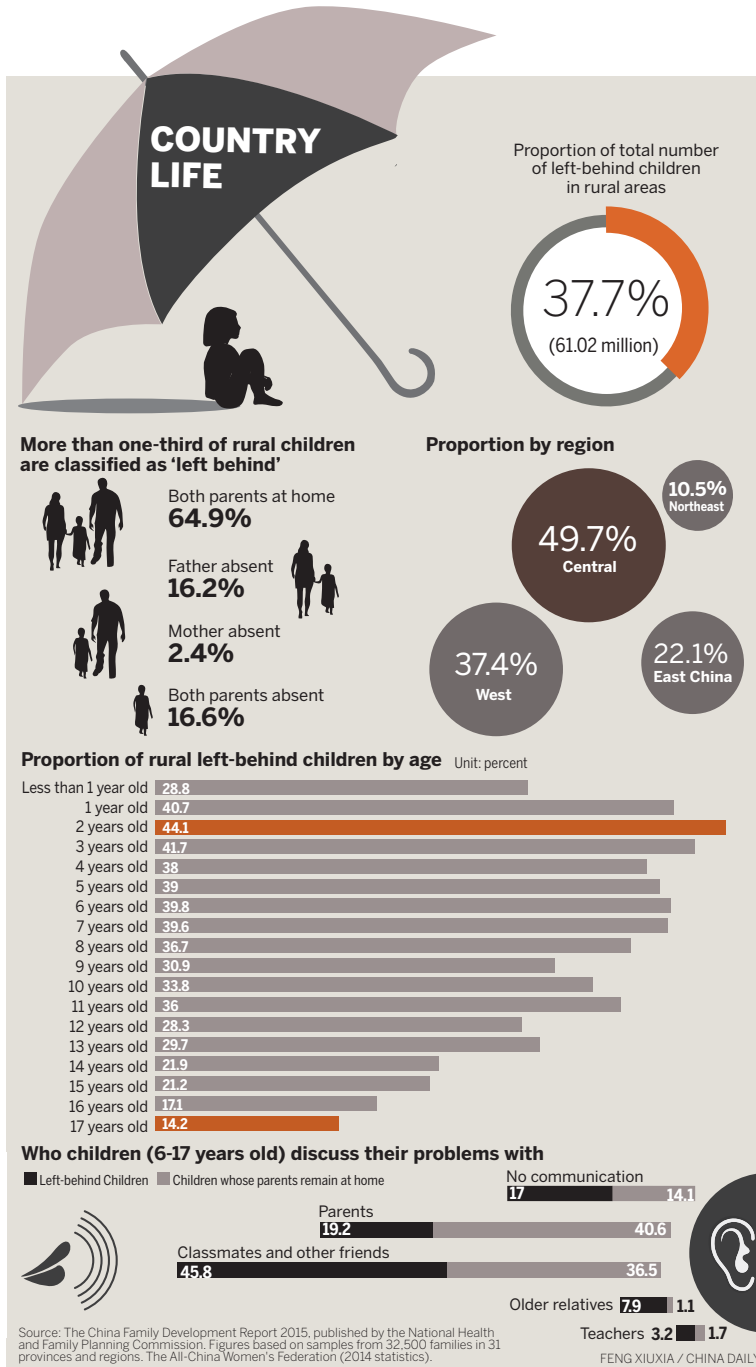
Guan Jun, a writer at the news portal NetEase, spent more than three months with left-behind children in a mountainous county in Gansu province between December and March. He said the children develop psychological problems much more easily than those in more-settled families.

"The biggest problem they face is that they lack love and the company of their parents," he said. "Many isolate themselves and suppress their feelings."

Many children live with their mothers, while their fathers migrate to other cities to work. That has resulted in a higher level of disputes and divorces among "split couples" than among those who live together in the same place, and can exert extra psychological pressures on the children, he said.

"I conducted a survey at a school in the county I visited, and about 50 percent of the students said they wished their parents would stop quarreling," he added.

One of the main reasons parents leave their children behind is that as migrant workers they have no access to social security



in the cities where they work.

"Additionally, many of them are temporary workers, and may change their job several times a year, so it's impossible for them to bring their children with them," Guan said.

Communication is key

Li Yifei, deputy director of the Scientific Communication and Education Research Center at Beijing Normal University who is also senior researcher in psychology, said that even trained psychology professionals find it difficult to identify and understand the psychological problems faced by left-behind children.

"Children faced with such problems don't behave differently or give different answers to questions in polls. That's why we need to communicate with them more thoroughly and learn about their concerns," he said.

According to Li, the large number of left-behind children means it would be impossible to attempt large-scale psychological intervention.

"Most left-behind children don't have severe psychological problems, and so professional psychotherapists might not be able to help them," he said.

Li said it's important for parents to learn to how to commu-

nicate effectively with their children. "We found that many children are unwilling to talk with their parents on the phone because they know they will always be quizzed about their performance at school.

"They need what most children need — a story told by their father before bed, a few words of encouragement, and constant reminders that they are loved and missed," he said.

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First person

'I felt as though my favorite things had been taken away'

Between December and March, Guan Jun, a writer at the news portal NetEase, lived among and interviewed left-behind children in a mountainous area in Gansu province. He has turned the experience into a book called *Yipianhuang*, (A Wide Expanse of Gray-Yellow), referring to the area's grey-yellow terrain. Here is the story of one of the children, in her own words.

HAN XIAOLI

The 15-year old is an eighth-grade student from Suihe village, Gansu.

Basically, I've grown up in the care of my grandmother, who is very lenient toward me. My grandfather loves me too, but he rarely speaks.

When I was a small child, my parents were always busy working on the farm, so they spent very little time taking care of me. They usually stayed in the mountains during the mushroom season and didn't return home for about one or two months.

Although my grandmother took good care of me, I still missed my parents.

Sometimes I couldn't sleep at night and I would insist on seeing my parents. I stopped doing that when I turned 8 or 9 years old.

Even now I speak to my grandmother more than to my parents.

My father is a quiet man, but he's very nice to me. My mother is more talkative and sometimes she makes jokes with me.

When I left home to study in the third-grade in a town 30 kilometers from our village, it was hard to get used to things. I was scared to call home, and when I heard the voices of my grandmother and my mother I really wanted to cry. Sometimes I cried in front of my roommates when we shared our secrets, but I never cried in class.

When I first arrived I said very little because I think students at the school know much more than rural children like me, and they have even been to other places. I didn't want to be laughed at.

But gradually, my confidence improved as I grew up and learned to take care of myself.

Despite that, I missed my mother almost every night and even dreamed of farming with my parents.

My parents went to work in the big city when I was about 12, and I felt as though my favorite things had been taken away.

I used to stick to my father and acted like a spoiled child with him, but I felt distant from him on his first visit back home, and I didn't

know why. At the time, my brother was very small. He didn't dare speak to my father, and looked at him as if he was a stranger.

My father usually leaves home just a few days after the Spring Festival. He and my mother get to spend less than two months a year with me.

I don't speak for the first few days after their departure, I just watch the sky and think random thoughts.

When I saw other children who lived with their parents, I used to resent my parents. Now, though, I understand that they have to work to earn more money for me and my little brother. Their lives are not easy.

My father said he works at a construction site and has to get up before daylight. Sometimes he works through the night. He said the meals are not good.

I make telephone calls to them once a month, but I wish I could call them more often. Sometimes I prefer not to call them because I will feel sad after hanging up the phone.

The most sensitive topic for me when I talk with my friends and classmates is family and my parents. The most difficult time for me is the Mid-Autumn Festival, when families are supposed to get together.

I really want to go outside my village and Gansu and see what the outside world is like. Although my parents work in a big city they spend most of their time at the construction site, so they are unable to tell me the interesting things I want to know.

My parents bring gifts for me and my brother whenever they come back home — new clothes and plastic bracelets, that sort of thing.

When they came back for Chinese New Year this year, they stayed a few days longer than usual, and I realized that my father's hair has turned white and many wrinkles have appeared on my mother's face, even though neither of them is even 40 years old yet. I hadn't noticed those changes before.

CHINA DAILY

TALKING BOOKS HELP TO LIGHTEN THE LOAD

By LIN SHUJUAN
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Liu Xinyu was shocked when he read the results of a

survey into the psychological condition of left-behind children a few years ago.

As a seasoned journalist and editor focusing on Chi-

na's social progress and the resultant challenges, Liu was fully aware of the scale of the problem, and as a father, he also knew the possible challenges the children might encounter, but he was still shaken.

"I didn't expect so many of them would be in the pits of

despair," said Liu, who founded the NGO Shangxuelushang, or "On the Way to School", which aims to brighten the lives of left-behind children through reading. He was referring to a report published by the Psychology Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in

late 2012 that estimated China had 60 million left-behind children, and 34 percent of them were suicidal.

Liu recalled his first reaction and how he quickly did the math, "What? That means 20 million." At the time, he had quit his 20-year career as a journalist and started his own business,

but his inner journalist wouldn't let the matter go.

He brought it up at a dinner with friends, most of them in the media. After a heated discussion, they came up with a project, which later led to the establishment of the NGO.

"We agreed that the lack of

parental company was the major reason (for the suicidal tendencies) and discussed how we might help fill the void it created," the 42-year-old said.

He offered a solution his son had suggested in 2011.

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