

## Children Growing Up In Small Families And Social Adaptation

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### Abstract

This study investigates the social adaptation of children raised in small families, with a focus on their social skills, emotional development, and peer relationships. As family sizes continue to decrease worldwide, understanding how this shift affects child development has become increasingly important. Using survey data collected from 300 students aged 10–15, this research compares children from small families (one or two children) with those from larger families (three or more children). A standardized social adaptation scale was employed to measure peer interaction, emotional regulation, school adjustment, and self-confidence.

Quantitative analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups. Children from small families demonstrated stronger school adjustment and higher levels of emotional regulation, suggesting that increased parental attention and academic support may positively influence their development. However, they scored slightly lower in peer interaction compared to children from larger families, possibly due to fewer opportunities for daily social learning within the home environment. No significant differences were found in overall self-confidence.

These findings indicate that while small-family environments may enhance academic engagement and emotional stability, they may also limit certain aspects of socialization related to peer interaction. The results highlight the importance of providing structured social opportunities for children from small families through schools and community programs. The study offers practical implications for educators, parents, and policymakers seeking to support balanced social and emotional development in children across diverse family structures.

**Keywords:** small families, social adaptation, children, peer interaction, family structure

### Introduction

Family structure is widely recognized as a fundamental factor influencing children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The family provides the earliest and most enduring context in which children acquire communication skills, emotional regulation strategies, and social values. In recent decades, many societies have experienced a demographic transition toward smaller family sizes, driven by urbanization, economic constraints, increased educational attainment, and changing cultural attitudes toward marriage and parenthood. As a result, an increasing proportion of children are growing up as only children or with a single sibling, which has prompted renewed scholarly interest in how such family environments shape developmental outcomes.

Social adaptation refers to a child's ability to engage effectively in social interactions, comply with social norms, regulate emotions, and adjust successfully to school and community settings. These competencies are critical for academic achievement, psychological well-being, and long-term social functioning. Theoretical perspectives, including social learning theory and ecological systems theory, emphasize the role of close interpersonal relationships—particularly within the family—in shaping social behavior. Siblings, for example, often serve as early partners in negotiation, cooperation, conflict resolution, and emotional exchange.

Empirical research on the developmental consequences of small family size, however, has produced mixed findings. Some studies suggest that children from

small families benefit from greater parental investment, more individualized academic support, and stronger emotional bonds with caregivers. These advantages are often associated with higher academic achievement, better emotional regulation, and increased self-confidence. Conversely, other studies indicate that limited exposure to sibling interaction may restrict opportunities for everyday social learning, potentially affecting peer relationships, communication skills, and conflict management abilities. These contrasting findings highlight the complexity of the relationship between family structure and social development and underscore the need for further empirical investigation.

The present study seeks to contribute to this body of research by examining the association between small family size and children's social adaptation using quantitative methods. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Do children from small families differ significantly in social adaptation compared to children from larger families?
2. Which dimensions of social adaptation—such as peer interaction, emotional regulation, and school adjustment—are most influenced by family size?

### Literature Review

Previous research has extensively examined the role of family structure in shaping children's social, emotional, and academic development. One of the most influential frameworks in this field is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the family as a central microsystem influencing child development through daily interactions and

emotional support (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)<sup>1</sup>. According to this perspective, variations in family size create distinct developmental environments that shape children's social adaptation in meaningful ways.

Research on children from small families, particularly only children, has produced mixed findings. Falbo and Polit (1986)<sup>2</sup>, in their comprehensive quantitative review, found that only children often perform as well as or better than children with siblings in academic achievement and self-esteem. Their analysis challenged earlier stereotypes that portrayed only children as socially disadvantaged and suggested that increased parental investment and access to resources may foster positive developmental outcomes.

Similarly, Chen, Rubin, and Li (1997)<sup>3</sup> reported strong associations between academic achievement and social adjustment, particularly in school contexts. Their findings indicate that emotional regulation and school adaptation are closely linked and that family support plays a critical role in promoting both academic and social competence. These results support the view that children from small families may benefit from more individualized parental attention and emotional responsiveness.

In contrast, sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction in development. Vygotsky (1978)<sup>4</sup> argued that learning and social competence emerge through collaborative activities, dialogue, and shared problem-solving. Within this framework, siblings serve as key social partners who provide daily opportunities for negotiation, cooperation, and emotional exchange. Empirical studies have shown that children

<sup>1</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Falbo, T., & Polit, D. F. (1986). Quantitative review of the only child literature: Research evidence and theory development. *Psychological Bulletin*, 100(2), 176–189. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.100.2.176>

<sup>3</sup> Chen, X., Rubin, K. H., & Li, D. (1997). Relations between academic achievement and social adjustment: Evidence from Chinese children. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(3), 518–525. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.33.3.518>

<sup>4</sup> Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

from larger families often demonstrate stronger peer interaction skills, likely due to frequent engagement in such social processes within the home.

Recent research increasingly highlights the complexity and contextual nature of the relationship between family size and child development. Parenting style, socioeconomic status, cultural expectations, and school environments may moderate the effects of family structure on social adaptation. Supportive parenting practices and access to educational resources may compensate for limited sibling interaction in small families, while economic strain and limited parental time may reduce the social advantages of larger families.

Overall, the literature suggests that neither small nor large family size is inherently advantageous or disadvantageous. Instead, each family structure appears to promote distinct developmental strengths. While small families may foster academic engagement and emotional stability, larger families may enhance interpersonal skills and peer competence. However, many existing studies rely on cross-sectional designs and limited outcome measures, underscoring the need for further empirical research.

The present study extends this literature by systematically examining multiple dimensions of social adaptation—peer interaction, emotional regulation, school adjustment, and self-confidence—within a single quantitative framework. By comparing children from small and large families using standardized measures, this research seeks to clarify how family size is associated with specific aspects of social adaptation and to contribute empirical evidence to an ongoing scholarly discussion.

### Methods

**Participants.** The study sample consisted of 300 students (150 boys and 150 girls)

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between the ages of 10 and 15, drawn from five urban public schools. The schools were selected to represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds within the urban population. Participants were categorized into two groups based on family size: the small-family group included 160 students from families with one or two children, while the large-family group included 140 students from families with three or more children. This grouping allowed for a comparative analysis of social adaptation across differing family structures while maintaining relatively balanced group sizes for statistical analysis.

**Instruments.** Data were collected using a standardized Social Adaptation Scale (SAS), a widely used instrument designed to assess children's adjustment across multiple social and emotional domains. The scale measures four key dimensions: peer interaction, emotional regulation, school adjustment, and self-confidence. Each dimension is assessed through a series of statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). The instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency in the present study, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89, indicating a high level of reliability.

**Procedure.** Data collection took place during regular school hours with the approval of school administrators and informed consent obtained from parents or legal guardians. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. The questionnaires were administered in classroom settings under the supervision of trained researchers, who provided standardized instructions to ensure consistency across schools. Students completed the surveys individually and were encouraged to respond honestly to all items.

**Data Analysis.** The collected data were analyzed using quantitative statistical

methods. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for each group to summarize overall patterns of social adaptation. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences between children from small and large families across the four measured dimensions. Effect size calculations were also performed to assess the practical significance of the observed differences. Statistical significance was determined at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics.** Descriptive analyses were conducted to examine patterns of social adaptation among children from small and large families. Mean scores and standard deviations for each dimension are presented in Table 1. Overall, children from both family groups demonstrated moderate to high levels of social adaptation across all measured domains.

**Table 1. Mean Social Adaptation Scores by Family Size**

DIMENSION	SMALL FAMILIES (N=160)	LARGE FAMILIES (N=140)
<b>PEER INTERACTION</b>	3.42 (SD = 0.61)	3.68 (SD = 0.57)
<b>EMOTIONAL REGULATION</b>	3.85 (SD = 0.54)	3.71 (SD = 0.59)
<b>SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT</b>	4.01 (SD = 0.50)	3.76 (SD = 0.56)
<b>SELF-CONFIDENCE</b>	3.90 (SD = 0.55)	3.82 (SD = 0.58)

As shown in Table 1, children from small families reported higher mean scores in emotional regulation, school adjustment, and self-confidence, while children from larger families reported higher peer interaction scores. The highest mean score among all dimensions was observed in school adjustment for children from small families ( $M = 4.01$ ), whereas the lowest

mean score was observed in peer interaction for the same group ( $M = 3.42$ ).

**Inferential Statistics.** Independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether the observed differences between groups were statistically significant. The analysis revealed significant differences in two dimensions:

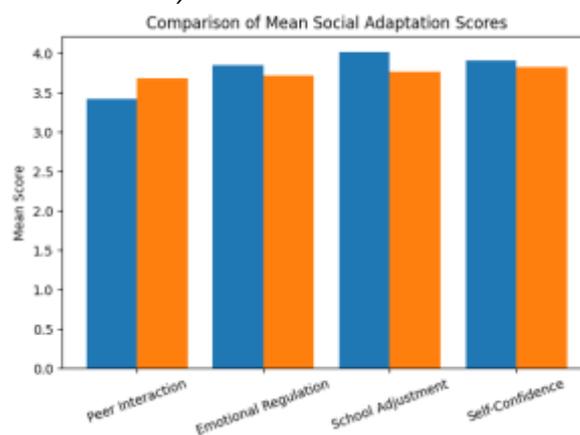
- **Peer Interaction:**  $t(298) = -3.12, p = 0.002$
- **School Adjustment:**  $t(298) = 3.45, p = 0.001$

These results indicate that children from larger families demonstrated significantly stronger peer interaction skills, whereas children from small families exhibited significantly better school adjustment. The magnitude of these differences suggests meaningful group-level variation in specific aspects of social adaptation.

No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups in emotional regulation or self-confidence ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating that family size may not substantially influence these dimensions.

**Diagram 1. Comparison of Mean Social Adaptation Scores**

(Insert bar chart comparing mean scores for small and large family groups across four dimensions.)



The bar chart visually illustrates the contrasting patterns between groups, particularly the higher peer interaction scores among children from larger families

and the higher school adjustment scores among children from small families.

### Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that children raised in small families demonstrate stronger school adjustment and slightly higher levels of emotional regulation compared to their peers from larger families. These outcomes may be attributed to increased parental attention, more individualized academic support, and greater emotional responsiveness within smaller family environments. Such conditions are likely to foster structured learning habits, emotional stability, and a secure attachment to caregivers, all of which contribute to successful adaptation in school settings.

In contrast, children from larger families exhibited significantly higher peer interaction scores, suggesting that regular engagement with siblings may facilitate the development of interpersonal skills. Consistent with social learning theory, frequent exposure to shared activities, conflict, cooperation, and negotiation within sibling relationships provides children with natural opportunities to practice social problem-solving and perspective-taking. These experiences may enhance their ability to navigate peer relationships outside the home, contributing to stronger social competence in group settings.

The coexistence of academic and emotional advantages in small-family children alongside stronger peer interaction skills in large-family children highlights the multifaceted nature of social adaptation. Rather than framing family size as uniformly advantageous or disadvantageous, the findings suggest that different family structures may promote distinct developmental strengths. This underscores the importance of adopting a balanced and context-sensitive perspective when evaluating child development outcomes.

Moreover, the substantial overlap in social adaptation scores between the two groups indicates that individual differences, parenting styles, school environments, and broader socio-cultural contexts likely play a significant role in shaping children's social functioning. Family size alone does not fully account for variation in social adaptation, and its effects may be moderated by factors such as parental education, socioeconomic status, and access to social resources.

These findings carry important implications for educational practice and family support policies. Educators may consider providing additional peer interaction opportunities for children from small families through collaborative learning activities, while also offering academic and emotional support structures for children from larger families. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and mixed-method approaches to further explore the dynamic and contextual nature of family influences on social adaptation.

### Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that family size is meaningfully associated with specific dimensions of children's social adaptation. The findings indicate that children raised in small families tend to demonstrate stronger school adjustment and emotional stability, likely reflecting greater parental involvement and individualized support. In contrast, children from larger families exhibit stronger peer interaction skills, which may stem from increased opportunities for social learning through sibling relationships.

These results suggest that family structure contributes to distinct developmental strengths rather than uniform advantages or disadvantages. Consequently, educators, parents, and policymakers should consider family size as an important contextual factor when designing educational interventions, social skills programs, and family support services. Tailored strategies that address

the unique needs of children from different family environments may promote more balanced social, emotional, and academic development.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how the influence of family size on social adaptation evolves over time. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews and observational studies would provide deeper insight into children's lived experiences and the mechanisms through which family dynamics shape social development. Such approaches would strengthen the evidence base and inform more effective, context-sensitive educational and family policies.

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