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“OKAY KA LANG?”: SENTIMENTS OF MIDDLE CHILDREN TOWARDS FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the sentiments and behaviors of middle children in relation to their family relationships. Specifically, it examined the common behaviors middle children displayed toward their parents and siblings, how their sense of self-worth developed when their emotions were validated or invalidated, and the emotions they experienced when they perceived exclusion during family interactions. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to understand the lived experiences of Grade 11 students who identified themselves as middle children. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews using a researcher-made semi-interview protocol and analyzed through thematic analysis.

The findings revealed several recurring themes, including avoidant behavior, emotional withdrawal, emotional suppression, limited communication, emotional neglect, and feelings of being overlooked or undervalued. These behaviors often developed as coping mechanisms when participants perceived unequal parental attention or emotional invalidation. The study also found that middle children's self-worth was closely influenced by how their emotions were acknowledged within the family. Experiences of exclusion during family gatherings often resulted in feelings of invisibility and heightened emotional sensitivity.

KEYWORDS: Middle Children, Family Relationship, Emotional Validation, Birth Order, Emotional Experiences, Family Dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Middle children often developed unique emotional patterns within the family due to their position between the eldest and youngest siblings. These patterns included feelings of being overlooked, increased independence, and a tendency to suppress emotions—often expressed through the phrase “*Okay Ka Lang?*” which reflected unspoken struggles. As a result, middle children became adaptive in various circumstances, such as pleasing others, avoiding conflict, or forming stronger peer attachments to compensate for perceived gaps in attention and support. This study argued that these behaviors significantly shaped their relationship dynamics at home, influencing communication, emotional bonding, and overall family harmony. Furthermore, it asserted that understanding these behaviors was essential for promoting healthier family interactions. By examining middle children’s lived experiences, the study highlighted the importance of emotional validation and balanced parental attention in strengthening family relationships.

Middle children often had a less defined role in the family, which made them feel unnoticed or less important compared to their siblings. The eldest child was usually seen as responsible, while the youngest often received more attention and care. Because middle children were positioned between these two roles, they struggled to determine where they fit within the family (Orlin & Resurrection, 2024).

Although some researchers, such as Silvestre et al. (2023), studied similar topics, their work mainly described how middle children perceived their roles and daily experiences. However, there remained a clear research gap in understanding the specific behaviors of middle children toward their family relationships, particularly how these behaviors were shaped by the level of emotional support they received. Existing studies did not fully explore how middle children wanted to be seen and valued for who they were, beyond being viewed as independent or low-maintenance. There was also limited research on how emotional validation and balanced parental attention affected their sense of belonging and their desire to be noticed, supported, and connected to their family. Little was known about how practices such as celebrating their individuality, creating one-on-one time, listening attentively, and avoiding sibling comparisons influenced their self-esteem and overall relationship with their family. This gap demonstrated the need for deeper investigation into how families could better support middle children’s emotional and relational needs.

This research was conducted to address the gap in understanding the experiences of middle children within family dynamics. Traditionally, research emphasized the roles and behaviors of the eldest and

youngest siblings, often overlooking the unique challenges faced by the middle child. These challenges included feelings of being unnoticed, less prioritized, or pressured to become independent. By examining their behavior in the family context, this study uncovered how these experiences impacted their emotional expression, communication, and overall relationships at home. The findings provided valuable insights for parents, teachers, and counselors to better support middle children, fostering a more inclusive understanding of their needs. Ultimately, this research aspired to raise awareness about the subtle struggles middle children encountered, encouraging families to recognize and validate their feelings, and ensuring they felt seen, heard, and valued within their familial relationships.

To prevent middle children from feeling left out during family gatherings, parents and family members should intentionally include them in activities and conversations. Assigning them specific roles or tasks, such as helping with decorations or serving food, made them feel valued. Encouraging the middle child to share their interests or ideas during gatherings boosted their confidence and sense of belonging. Additionally, spending one-on-one time with the middle child before or after the event reinforced their importance in the family. Creating a welcoming environment where everyone's contributions were recognized fostered inclusivity and ensured that the middle child felt involved and appreciated.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative methodology, specifically a phenomenological design, to examine the sentiments of middle children toward their family relationships. The qualitative approach was appropriate because the research problem required capturing emotions, perspectives, and lived experiences that could not be adequately explained through numerical data. Phenomenology allowed the researchers to focus on the essence of being a middle child by analyzing personal narratives, reflections, and shared meanings across participants' accounts.

The participants were Grade 11 students who identified themselves as middle children. Inclusion criteria required that participants be Grade 11, a middle child in their family, and willing to participate voluntarily. Ethical safeguards were observed, including anonymity through assigned codes and strict adherence to informed consent. Sampling employed opportunity sampling and convenience sampling, which were practical and suitable for phenomenological research since the goal was depth of understanding rather than generalization.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions aligned with the study objectives. This instrument ensured consistency while allowing flexibility in responses. It was validated by expert reviewers using the Content Validity

Index, which confirmed its suitability for capturing rich, descriptive data. Interviews were conducted one-on-one in private areas, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

For analysis, the study employed thematic analysis, a method that identified and interpreted recurring themes within textual data. This approach was well-suited to phenomenological research as it highlighted shared meanings and emotional patterns among participants. The process involved coding meaningful statements from transcripts and organizing them into broader themes that reflected the lived experiences of middle children.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and sensitivity was observed in handling emotional topics. The study complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ensuring secure handling of personal data and protection of participants' rights. These measures upheld respect, dignity, and accountability in the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the feelings and experiences of a middle child in relation to her family. The analysis revealed many interconnected themes, including avoidant behavior, emotional withdrawal, emotional suppression, internalized emotional suppression, keeping emotions to oneself, limited emotional closeness, limited communication, emotional neglect, exposure to parental conflict, emotional aggression, feeling left out, emotional sensitivity to exclusion, feelings of rejection or neglect, feeling undervalued, feeling overlooked, emotions feeling unseen and withholding, and low self-worth rooted in emotional neglect.

While each theme stands on its own, together they show a clear pattern of emotional invalidation, perceived favoritism, and coping strategies that middle children may internalize to manage their feelings.

Table 1. Common Behaviors of Middle Children Towards Their Parents and Their Siblings.

INFORMANTS	RESPONSES	SUB THEMES	THEMES
3	I'm not very affectionate. I don't speak up because I've chosen to remain silent. Even if I were to get involved, no one would listen to what I have to say – I feel what I want to say isn't valid	Feeling invalidated Avoidance	Avoidant Behavior
7	I talk to them in a normal way, but it's different from how my siblings talk to	Selective Closeness	Emotional Withdrawal

	each other. My way of communicating is different from theirs. I'm close to my older brother, who is 22 years old, but I'm distant from my younger brother, who is 13.	Habit of Holding Back feelings	
10	I keep things casual. It's okay because I'm not used to being any other way, and I worry what I say might come across as rude since my feelings are always invalidated.	Lack of Emotional Expression	Emotional suppression
5	I'm not really that close with my siblings, and it's kind of the same with my parents. Things are okay between us, but I'm not very open with them. With my younger sibling, it's more comfortable. I can show my childish side, and I'm not shy around them. But with my older sister, I'm not that close either. maybe because we didn't grow up in the same house. Most of the time, I just keep things to myself. I don't really open up.	Feeling unheard or dismissed Emotional Distance in the Family Unexpressed Emotional Needs	Limited Emotional Closeness within the Family
2	It feels casual around him, but he's not really a friend. I also can't joke or talk freely because I worry it will be reported to my stepfather. It's hard to talk to the older family members too. Sometimes, when I went to my mom's house, she and my stepfather were fighting, and it felt like it was because of me. My stepfather used to be close to me, but after he and my mom had children, he seemed distant, which caused more arguments.	Emotional Invalidation Avoidance of Conflict	Exposure to Parental Conflict
1	Usually, I'm harsh when I talk to them. I ignore them. I rebel. I act rebellious	Avoidance expressing frustration	Emotional Aggression

Table 1 presented the common behaviors of middle children toward their parents and siblings based on the responses of the participants. The findings highlighted patterns such as avoidant behavior, emotional withdrawal, emotional suppression, limited emotional closeness within the family, exposure to parental conflict, and emotional aggression, which reflected how middle children coped with feelings of invalidation, distance, and family tension.

The theme of Avoidant Behavior emerged when participants described choosing silence because they felt their voices would not be heard or taken seriously. Instead of expressing disagreement or sharing emotional concerns, they avoided conflict to prevent further dismissal. Research supported this pattern: Segrin and Flora (2020) explained that individuals who perceived low relational support often turned to avoidance as a way to cope with stress, and Skinner et al. (2021) found that adolescents in emotionally invalidating environments relied on avoidance-based strategies. This suggested that avoidance acted as a form of emotional self-protection. For middle children, staying silent felt safer than risking rejection. Families that created emotionally safe spaces and actively validated children's perspectives helped reduce these avoidant tendencies and strengthened communication.

Emotional Withdrawal was evident when participants described stepping back emotionally during conflicts or tense situations. Rather than engaging, they disengaged both emotionally and physically. Research by Yap et al. (2020) indicated that adolescents who repeatedly experienced emotional invalidation were more likely to withdraw during family conflict. Similarly, Rote and Smetana (2021) found that withdrawal often developed in households where open emotional expression was not consistently encouraged. This pattern reflected a passive coping strategy aimed at regulating emotions. From an Attachment Theory perspective (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2022), inconsistent emotional responsiveness from caregivers fostered these distancing behaviors. Families who strengthened emotional responsiveness and taught constructive conflict resolution helped reduce withdrawal patterns. The theme of Emotional Suppression appeared when participants described intentionally hiding or controlling their feelings to avoid misunderstandings or conflict. Ford et al. (2020) found that suppressing emotions might reduce outward conflict but increased internal stress, and Young et al. (2022) reported that adolescents who frequently suppressed emotions experienced higher stress and lower relational satisfaction. This showed that suppression was an internal coping mechanism shaped by the family environment. Encouraging healthy emotional expression within families prevented internalized stress and built emotional resilience.

Limited Emotional Closeness within the family was evident when participants spoke of emotional distance and a lack of warmth. They described relationships that felt functional rather than connected. Padilla-Walker et al. (2020) found that emotional closeness between parents and adolescents predicted stronger psychological well-being, and Bülow et al. (2021) emphasized that perceived emotional availability strengthened family cohesion. Emotional distance made middle children feel invisible. Family Systems Theory highlighted that

relational warmth and responsiveness affected overall family functioning. Intentional engagement and supportive interactions strengthened closeness and reduced feelings of emotional detachment.

The theme of Exposure to Parental Conflict arose when participants described witnessing arguments or tension between parents. Such experiences shaped their emotional reactions and coping strategies. Cummings and Schatz (2021) found that ongoing parental conflict was linked to increased emotional insecurity in adolescents.

Finally, Emotional Aggression referred to experiences of yelling, blaming, criticism, or dismissing feelings. Participants described fear and discomfort during these interactions. Wang et al. (2020) found that emotional aggression within families predicted anxiety and difficulties in emotional regulation, and Camisasca et al. (2021) showed that hostile communication harmed parent-child relational quality. Emotional aggression reinforced avoidance, suppression, and insecurity. Contemporary attachment research suggested that consistent emotional hostility weakened relational trust. Families reduced emotional harm by promoting respectful communication and teaching emotional awareness, fostering healthier relational dynamics.

Table 2. Child's Sense of Self-Worth that Evolve When Their Emotions are Consistently Validated or Invalidated by Their Parents.

INFORMANTS	RESPONSES	SUB THEMES	THEMES
3	I'm hurt because there's nothing I can do. I can't force myself on them. They said what I was saying was useless; they prioritize the two of them over me.	Experience of Invalidation Deprioritization	Feeling Left Out
7	I feel invisible. I want my parents to feel what I feel, but they don't, and that hurts because I'm their child. I feel it's unfair that they give more attention to the youngest. Because they don't value my feelings, I end up feeling like I don't value myself anymore.	Decreased Self-Value Feeling Invisible	Low Self-Worth from Emotional Neglect
10	It's just that I'm not really used to being like that. At home, we don't really talk much, but when we're outside, we're close. I treat it the same either way. we usually only talk if someone needs something or	Emotional distance Minimal interaction	Limited communication

	if there's something specific to discuss.		
5	I want to feel like I'm important... like I matter. Sometimes I feel left out, even when I'm there with my own family. And even though it's hard to say, my voice gets shaky just thinking about it. I think what I really want is to feel that I'm enough. That I'm lovable. That I have a place where I truly belong.	Feelings of Exclusion Emotional Vulnerability	Emotional Sensitivity to Exclusion
2	With them, when something is wrong, they just brush it off and act like it never happened. My mom ignores things, so I end up ignoring them too. I don't take her seriously when she says "okay," because it doesn't really solve anything. When I try to share my feelings, they pretend it'll go away, and later act like everything is fine. After a while, I decide it's easier not to say anything and just let it go, even if it still bothers me.	Emotional Invalidation Avoidance of Conflict	Feelings of Rejection or Neglect
1	I lock myself in my room. I don't listen to them because they never really listened to me. Whatever I say to them it's like they don't care. They don't care about my mental health. My mental health doesn't matter to them.	Feeling Unheard Invalidating	Emotional Neglect

Table 2 presented the participants' responses regarding how children's sense of self-worth evolved when their emotions were consistently invalidated or overlooked by their parents. The table highlighted emerging subthemes and themes such as feeling left out, low self-worth from emotional neglect, limited communication, emotional sensitivity to exclusion, feelings of rejection, and emotional neglect.

Feeling Left Out emerged as participants described experiencing exclusion from conversations, family decisions, and emotional exchanges. They reported feeling overlooked compared to their siblings. Research supported these findings. For example, Rudolph et al. (2021) found that perceived social exclusion within close relationships significantly predicted emotional distress among adolescents. Similarly, Baumeister and Leary's (2020)

belongingness framework, revisited in contemporary adolescent studies such as Allen and Kern (2020), emphasized that belonging within the family was a core psychological need. This suggested that feeling left out was not merely situational but deeply connected to one's sense of identity and security. When middle children perceived unequal inclusion, they internalized feelings of invisibility. Families that intentionally practiced inclusive decision-making and shared activities strengthened belongingness and reduced emotional isolation.

The theme of Neglect Leading to Low Self-Worth from emotional invalidation reflected how ignored or minimized emotions affected self-perception. Participants expressed questioning their value when their feelings were not acknowledged. Scharf and Shulman (2022) indicated that parental emotional validation played a critical role in adolescent self-esteem development. Furthermore, Neufeld et al. (2020) found that emotional invalidation was associated with increased self-doubt and internalized negative beliefs among youth. These findings suggested that emotional neglect gradually became internalized as low self-worth.

The theme of Limited Communication appeared in descriptions of minimal and surface-level interactions within the family. Participants shared that emotional conversations were rare. Family communication research by Koerner and Schrodtt (2020) emphasized that open communication patterns were strongly associated with emotional closeness and psychological well-being. Additionally, Van Lissa et al. (2021) found that limited parent-adolescent communication predicted relational dissatisfaction and emotional distancing. This indicated that restricted communication unintentionally reinforced silence and emotional disengagement, especially among middle children who already felt less prioritized. Encouraging open and emotionally supportive dialogue improved mutual understanding and relational security.

The theme of Emotional Sensitivity to Exclusion reflected heightened emotional reactions when participants felt ignored or left out. Small incidents often triggered strong emotional responses. Research on rejection sensitivity by London et al. (2020) showed that repeated experiences of exclusion increased emotional reactivity and anxiety in interpersonal contexts. Similarly, Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2021) found that adolescents who perceived inconsistent inclusion developed stronger emotional responses to minor social cues. These findings suggested that repeated feelings of exclusion amplified sensitivity over time. Middle children who frequently felt overlooked became more alert to signs of rejection. Consistent reassurance and visible inclusion within families reduced emotional sensitivity and promoted stability.

The theme of Feelings of Rejection or Neglect referred to emotional experiences of being deprioritized or receiving unequal attention. Participants described loneliness and insecurity when comparing themselves to siblings. Jensen and McHale (2021) indicated that perceived parental favoritism was linked to lower emotional well-being among adolescents. Additionally, Suitor et al. (2020) found that unequal parental treatment significantly predicted long-term relational strain and feelings of rejection. This suggested that even subtle differences in parental attention shaped emotional security within the family. Balanced recognition and fair treatment reduced perceived rejection and promoted stronger sibling and parent-child relationships.

Finally, the theme of Emotional Neglect referred to the absence of emotional responsiveness and support from caregivers. Participants described feeling unseen or emotionally unsupported. Spinazzola et al. (2021) highlighted that emotional neglect was associated with increased anxiety, withdrawal, and self-esteem difficulties in adolescents. Moreover, Crouch et al. (2020) emphasized that emotional neglect often occurred through lack of responsiveness rather than overt hostility. These findings suggested that emotional neglect significantly shaped emotional development and coping behaviors.

Table 3. Emotions that Arise for Them During Family Gatherings when They Perceive Themselves as Being Excluded or Less Acknowledge.

INFORMANTS	RESPONSES	SUB THEMES	THEMES
3	I'm sad and disappointed. sad because they don't know how I feel. I'm disappointed because they don't even try to listen to me. I don't speak up anymore; I just choose to stay quiet.	Emotional Pain from Lack of Understanding Silence as a Coping Response	Feeling Unheard
7	During family gatherings, I feel jealousy because it seems like my siblings are the ones being seen and acknowledged. Even when I try my best to impress them or make them happy, I feel like my efforts are not enough and not noticed. I've felt this way since I was eight years old. When I feel unseen, I usually keep it to myself because I think there's no use in telling others if they won't listen. I don't open up to my family about it. I only tell my aunt secretly because if my mom finds out, she	Jealousy and Lack of Recognition Keeping Feelings to Oneself	Feeling Unseen and Withholding Emotions

	might get mad.		
10	When it comes to talking about education and grades, whenever I tell them my grades, it feels like it's nothing. I normalize what I feel is normal and keep it to myself. I feel like I'm just seeking attention	Lack of attention Invalidating feelings	Feeling overlooked
5	I do interact with them, but not really with the ones I don't feel close to. With people I'm comfortable with, I'm confident enough to show the real me. But when I feel left out, of course I feel sad. I just don't really show it. I keep it to myself.	Emotional Suppression Internalization of Feelings	Internalized Emotional Suppression
6	During family gatherings on my father's side, I feel left out. I keep it to myself because I don't want them to know my feelings.	Feeling excluded in family settings Fear of emotional exposure	Keeping Emotions to Themselves

Table 3 presented the emotions experienced by participants during family gatherings when they perceived themselves as excluded or less acknowledged. It highlighted feelings such as sadness, jealousy, and being overlooked, along with coping responses like silence, emotional withdrawal, and suppressing their feelings.

The theme of Feeling Undervalued emerged as participants described experiences of being ignored or receiving less attention than their siblings during family interactions. They reported that their contributions or efforts were often minimized. Research by Jensen and McHale (2021) supported this, showing that perceived parental favoritism lowered adolescents' emotional well-being and self-perception. According to Belongingness Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 2020), humans have a fundamental need to feel recognized and valued within social groups, particularly within the family. When middle children perceived unequal attention, feelings of inadequacy or invisibility developed. Families who actively acknowledged children's efforts and contributions strengthened self-esteem and relational satisfaction.

Feeling Unseen and Withholding was reflected in participants noticing favoritism or lack of recognition, particularly during family gatherings or achievements. They described keeping their emotions private to avoid further hurt or disappointment. Research by London et al.

(2020) indicated that repeated experiences of exclusion heightened emotional sensitivity and led adolescents to withhold emotional expression. This behavior aligned with Emotional Regulation Theory (Gross, 2021), which suggested that withholding emotions was a strategy to manage stress and prevent conflict. Families that validated emotions and openly recognized children's efforts reduced emotional withdrawal and encouraged healthy expression.

The theme of Feeling Overlooked captured the emotional experience of believing one was not being noticed or acknowledged. Participants shared that their presence or contributions were often ignored compared to others in the family. Studies by Spinazzola et al. (2021) highlighted that adolescents who felt overlooked within their families experienced higher anxiety and lower relational satisfaction. This suggested that overlooking middle children, even unintentionally, reinforced feelings of exclusion and reduced emotional security. Encouraging inclusive interactions improved feelings of visibility and connectedness.

Internalized Emotional Suppression appeared when participants described restraining emotions, especially negative ones, and sharing them only with trusted individuals. They often maintained a composed exterior despite inner feelings of sadness or frustration. Ford et al. (2020) found that internalizing emotions in adolescence increased stress and reduced well-being. Attachment Theory (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2022) explained that when emotional needs were not consistently validated, adolescents learned to suppress feelings to cope with relational uncertainty. Promoting safe spaces for emotional expression within families reduced internalized stress and supported resilience.

The theme of Keeping Emotions to Themselves captured the habitual withholding of emotional expression, often driven by fear of judgment or exclusion. Participants described consistently concealing emotions across various family contexts. Research by Young et al. (2022) showed that habitual emotional suppression limited relational intimacy and increased psychological distress.

Overall, the study showed that middle children often coped with family dynamics through silence, emotional withdrawal, and suppression. They frequently felt left out, overlooked, or undervalued, especially when parental attention seemed unequal. These experiences led to low self-worth and heightened emotional sensitivity. The findings highlighted the importance of emotional validation, open communication, and fair attention in families. When middle children's feelings were recognized and supported, they were more likely to develop self-esteem, reduce emotional withdrawal, and build stronger family connections.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the behaviors and emotional experiences of middle children in relation to their family relationships. It aimed to understand the common behaviors they displayed toward their parents and siblings, how their sense of self-worth developed when their emotions were validated or invalidated, and what emotions they experienced when they perceived exclusion during family interactions. The findings revealed that middle children often engaged in behaviors such as avoiding conflict, remaining silent during disagreements, and suppressing their emotions. These behaviors developed as coping strategies when they felt that their thoughts or feelings were not fully acknowledged within the family. Instead of openly expressing their concerns, many middle children chose to maintain harmony by withdrawing emotionally or keeping their feelings to themselves.

The study also found that the sense of self-worth of middle children was strongly influenced by the way their parents responded to their emotions. When their feelings were acknowledged and validated, they were more likely to feel valued, supported, and emotionally connected to their family. However, when their emotions were dismissed or ignored, they began to question their worth and developed feelings of insecurity or emotional distance. In addition, middle children frequently experienced emotions such as feeling overlooked, undervalued, or excluded during family gatherings or interactions where they perceived unequal attention among siblings. These experiences heightened emotional sensitivity and encouraged them to hide their feelings rather than openly communicate them.

Overall, the findings showed that while middle children often appeared independent and resilient, their behaviors reflected a deeper desire to feel seen, heard, and appreciated within the family. Their emotional experiences were closely tied to family communication, parental attention, and emotional validation. Recognizing these needs and creating a supportive environment where middle children felt included and valued strengthened family relationships and promoted their emotional well-being.

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