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Prakash Sharma [1,*], Chitra Bahadur Budhathoki [2], Bishnu Kumar Adhikari [3] and Pramila Pudasaini Thapa [4]

[1] Faculty of Education, Butwal Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Butwal, Nepal; prakasharma35@gmail.com

[2] Health and Population Education Development, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Kirtipur, Nepal; cbbudhathoki@gmail.com

[3] Department of Health, Physical and Population Education, Sanothimi Campus, Faculty of Education, Tribhuvan University, Bhaktapur, Nepal; sheshnathpra@gmail.com

[4] Founder at Life Skills Education, Nepal; pbrt426@gmail.com

* Correspondence: Prakash Sharma; Email: prakasharma35@gmail.com

Abstract: Background: The early childhood development stage is highly critical in setting up cognitive, affective, and social skills for learning and overall well-being. **Objectives:** The purpose of the study were to explore how family disputes affect the learning and development of children and to assess the challenges and coping strategies of mothers at a time of family dispute. **Methods:** The study used phenomenological approach under the qualitative research design. Rupandehi district of Nepal was selected as a research site, which is the suitable place to witness the complexity of early childhood learning in conflict-affected families. Early childhood development (ECD) centers were focused in this study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 13 mothers. Semi-structured and open-ended interview was taken at ECD centers and homes of the participants (HP) through creating a good and comfortable environment. All interviews were audio-recorded by taking permission. Transcripts were carefully read and repeatedly reviewed. The initial codes were allocated and developed it into the organizing and global theme. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis technique in this study. **Results:** The findings showed that the physical presence of father, destructive home environment, imitation of children from family disputes and alcohol consumption of parents have impact negatively in learning of children and maternal coping strategies and mitigation of family disputes have the positive effect in learning and development of children. **Conclusion**: Family conflict and emotional distress of children, destructive home environment, fight within couple have negative effect and family dynamics, parental emotional support has positive effect in children's learning. Many mothers have been facing the challenge of domestic violence. Even though, they have coping and mitigating strategies. A conscious effort of mother and father is necessary to avoid family dispute.

Keywords: family dispute; early childhood; learning and development; challenges and coping strategies

Introduction

Early childhood plays a dynamic role in shaping cognitive, emotional, and social growth, founding the basis for lifelong learning and complete well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A steady and nurturing family environment is crucial for nurturing this growth. Family disputes, conflicts, and emotional distress can meaningfully impact a child's initial learning practices, often leading to emotional insecurity, condensed cognitive engagement, and poor speculative performance(Grych & Fincham, 1990; Raver et al., 2015; Krahé, 2020). In many households, mainly in low-income and socially varied communities, children are regularly visible to parental conflicts, which may interrupt their sense of constancy and security.

Mothers, as principal caregivers, play a crucial role in determining a child's learning environment, particularly in conflict-affected households (Parke, 2004). Their perceptions, surviving mechanisms, and emotional well-being directly impact how they support their children's education and complete development (Parke et al., 2004). In the context of Nepal, where traditional gender roles often place childcare responsibilities on mothers, understanding their perceptions and experiences becomes decisive for designing effective involvements (Grusec & Davidov, 2010).

Family arguments are a common but often ignored factor distressing early childhood education. When parents engage in regular conflicts, children may adopt stress, anxiety, or emotional distress, which in turn hinders their attentiveness, social relations, and learning inspiration (Cummings & Davies, 2011). Despite the well-documented effects of family volatility on child development, limited research has been conducted on how mothers observe and respond to these challenges within their homes (Cabrera et al., 2014).

In Nepal, traditional parenting customs and economic challenges extra complicate this problem. Numerous mothers dearth emotional and economic support, making it difficult for them to safeguard their children from household conflicts while confirming a encouraging learning environment (Conger et al., 2010). Moreover, there is a gap in understanding how maternal stress, cultural prospects, and inadequate peripheral support systems figure children's learning experiences in conflict-affected families (Lansford et al., 2021).

This study discovered in what way mothers perceive their children's learning and development amid ongoing family disputes. It searches to understand the challenges they face, their handling strategies, and the effect of family conflicts on early childhood learning. The study focused on mothers in the Rupandehi District of Nepal, where varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds impact parenting practices. Therefore, the study aimed to explore how family disputes affect the learning and development of children as well as to assess the challenges and coping strategies of mothers at a time of family dispute.

Methodology

This study employed phenomenological approach under the qualitative research design. This approach was allocated since it is concerned with lived experiences, which is paramount in understanding mothers' experiences of family conflicts' effects on children. The study was carried out in Rupandehi District, Nepal, which is known for cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity and hence a suitable place to witness the complexity of early childhood learning in conflict-affected families.

Primary caregivers, i.e., mothers of children in the preschool age group, attending government-run Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers were focused in this study. Purposive sampling method was used to recruit 13 mothers who had gone through domestic conflicts and were in a position to give valuable views on the impact of conflict on children's growth. Recruitment took place between April 20th to May 2nd, 2021, by undertaking semi-structured and open-ended interviews at ECD centers and homes of the participants, thereby creating a good and comfortable environment for interview (Sharma et al., 2023).   Interview guide focused on critical domains such as mothers' views of their child's learning, the promotion of cognitive and emotional development as a result of conflicts within the family, coping, and the simplicity of supporting mechanisms.

The interviews were audio-recorded by taking permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim to ensure fidelity. All the transcripts were carefully read and repeatedly reviewed to become familiar with the data. The initial codes were allocated based on emerging concepts and participant experiences. The codes were developed into basic, organizing and global theme. The data were interpreted by thematic analysis to understand underlying behavioral factors. The trustworthiness was enhanced by member checking, where the transcripts were reviewed from the participants to ensure accuracy. The second researcher checked this process to enhance reliability and mitigate the subjective biases (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical permission was obtained from the ethical review board of the Nepal Health Research Council (ERB approval No. 2078-56/2021) prior to data collection. Informed consent was taken in written form before carrying out the interviews, and detailed information regarding the purpose of the study was explained to the participants (Sharma et al., 2024).   To provide anonymity, all identifying details were removed from the transcripts, and the participants were assured that their responses would only be used for research purposes. The subjects were provided with a relaxed and private setting to be interviewed. They were free to stop or withdraw from the study at any time.

Results

The perceptions of mothers toward family disputes and its impact on learning and development of children based on their own experiences have been explored in this study. The factors which shaped those mothers' experiences of family disputes have also been investigated. The findings of this study were physical presence of father, destructive home environment and learning, imitation of children from family disputes, father's role in child development, alcohol consumption of parent and child learning, maternal coping strategies and mitigation of family disputes, which are described here:

Physical Presence of Father

The study showed that the mere physical presence of father does not guarantee a harmonious family environment. While some mothers lived with their husbands, others were in long-distance marriages due to employment abroad. Despite these differences, disputes were present in both scenarios, indicating that the quality of the relationship, rather than the father's presence, is a significant factor in family harmony. Several mothers reported stable relationships with minimal conflict, but others faced emotional distress due to communication gaps or disagreements, particularly in long-distance marriages. One mother of our study shared that although her husband was abroad, they maintained a good relationship, yet conflicts still arose from time to time, especially when discussing child-rearing:

"My husband is in a foreign country. We have a good relationship, but if we argue, it is for the betterment of our baby" (Mother 1)

Another mother, whose husband was a businessman, noted that her daughter's academic performance was suffered because her father, who doted on her, lacked the discipline needed to guide her studies effectively:

My husband was abroad, but now he is a businessman. My daughter does not perform well in studies because her father loves her too much and does not discipline her. We have good relation but sometime dispute. We do not fight. He does not drink. I do not care what the children do when we are quarrel at home *(Mother 2)*

In contrast, one mother disclosed that her husband's drinking habits led to frequent arguments, with their children visibly distressed during such moments:

"My husband drinks and creates disputes. I hide somewhere when he starts to fight with me. My children start crying when they see our fights and ask us to stop." (Mother 3).

This quotation has explored the significant role of parents in developing appropriate environment for children in learning and development.

Destructive Home Environment and Learning

The study indicated that children exposed to frequent family disputes exhibited various emotional and behavioral responses. Many mothers acknowledged that these conflicts deeply impacted their children's emotional well-being and academic performance. Some children cried, withdrew, or displayed signs of anxiety when exposed to arguments, while others reacted with aggression or

anger. A few mothers observed that their children's ability to focus on schoolwork was compromised by the stress generated at home. One mother shared that her child became aggressive and had trouble engaging with peers, likely due to the destructive home environment a participant added

> *"If the home environment is destructive, children become aggressive, and their behavior is not good even at school and with friends." (Mother 4).*

Another participant observed her child's sadness and emotional withdrawal during arguments, noting how the conflict affected the child emotionally and academically:
"My child looks angry and hopeless when we argue. She supports me emotionally, but I know it affects her learning. we have disputes sometimes and quarrel. I think it gives negative effect to the child if we quarrel in front of the child but I do not know what my husband thinks about it, I haven't asked her. It is good to have discussion between spouses in the absence of child (Mother 5)

Another mother reflected that her daughter, while emotionally supporting her during arguments, could sense the tension, which further contributed to her distress:

> *"My daughter listens when I quarrel with my husband on the phone. She tells me not to talk with him because she knows he is a quarreling man" (Mother 6).*

From this quotation, it has been clear that destructive home environment has the critical for Learning and development of children.

Imitation of Children from Family Disputes

Children's ability to observe and internalize family disputes emerged as a significant theme in the data. Some children, upon witnessing arguments, would advise their parents to stop fighting, showing an early sense of maturity. Others, however, began to exhibit behaviors associated with conflict, either becoming aggressive or avoiding confrontations. One mother noted that her son often advised other couples not to fight, a behavior she attributed to his own experiences at home:

> *"My son advises other couples not to fight when he sees them arguing. I think it's because of what he saw at home." (Mother 7)*

Another mother shared that during arguments, her children would cry and beg for the fighting to stop, a clear indication of their emotional distress:

> *"When we fight, my children cry and beg us to stop. I know it affects them emotionally" (Mother 8).*

These reactions suggested that children not only internalize the conflicts they witness but also adapt behaviors based on their observations, which may shape their future responses to conflict.

Father's Role in Child Development

The perception of fathers' roles in child development varied significantly among the mothers. Some mothers strongly believed that fathers played a crucial role in their children's learning and overall development. They noted that their husbands remained involved in their children's education, such as asking about homework and daily activities. In contrast, other mothers felt that a mother's involvement was sufficient for a child's growth and well-being. if a mother adequately cared for the child, the father's role became less significant.   In this scenario, one mother of our participant expressed her view that,

> I think there is no role of a father if a mother takes care of the child well. My husband is together at present. We have almost good relation between husband and wife. we have disputes sometimes but save not fought till now (Mother 9).

This perspective illustrated that various factor, including the financial stability of the family and cultural norms also have influence in learning of children.   Regarding paternal involvement in

children's growth and wellbeing in some cases, fathers were seen as essential figures in nurturing their children's educational and emotional development, while in others, the mother's dedication was considered enough. One mother shared how her husband, though busy with work, remained highly involved in their child's education, she portrayed that,

> "My husband calls our child every evening and asks about school and homework. He talks to her more than he talks to me" (Mother 10).

This quotation showed that the father has emotional attachment with his children which acts as a catalyst for learning in children. Therefore, we can say that the role of father and mother both have significant contributor to manage family disputes and child learning.

Alcohol Consumption of Parent and Child Learning

Alcohol consumption of father and social stresses created an environment of insecurity for children, with several mothers noting how the tension directly affected their children's emotional and cognitive well-being. Another mother of our participants shared how her husband's drinking led to frequent arguments, which left her children in tears, hiding from the confrontation, she spilled her grief that,

> "My husband also drinks and creates problems at home. Even though, when he starts fighting, I hid it from my child" (Mother 11).

Another mother, grappling with emotional strain, reflected on how these challenges not only affected her family's stability but also had lasting effects on her children's development. She added that,

> "I think family disputes affect child learning. It may affect their minds, and they will not be good citizens." (Mother 12)

In this way, the consumption of alcohol and economic strain emerged as a major factor contributing to family tensions, which, in turn, affected children's emotional security. Many family disputes stemmed from financial pressures, including unemployment and the inability to meet basic needs.

Maternal Coping Strategies and Mitigation of Family Disputes

Mothers employed a range of coping mechanisms to protect their children from the adverse effects of family disputes. Some mothers ensured that arguments occurred behind closed doors, away from their children's ears, while others faced the challenge of domestic violence or financial hardship, which made it difficult to shield their children. Several mothers expressed the belief that minimizing disputes in front of their children would reduce emotional harm, although some were unable to do so due to their living conditions. For example, one mother mentioned that, even minor disputes occurred, her husband's silence during disagreements scared their children. She said that,

> "We have minor disputes, but my husband tolerates everything and remains silent. If he is angry, he does not speak for days. My children get afraid and start crying when we fight." (Mother 13)

Another participant living in a single-room rental could not hide her arguments from her children, recognizing that it inevitably impacted them she expressed her sadness in her own voice,

> "I live in a single rented room. I cannot go outside to argue, so my children hear everything. I know this affects them, but I have no option." (Mother 8)

However, another participated mother emphasized that she and her husband made a conscious effort to avoid arguing in front of their son, recognizing how such conflicts could affect his emotional state her quotation was that,

> "We never quarrel in front of our son. If we do, it will affect him. My husband also understands this" (Mother 13).

This quotation advised us to avoid arguing, quarrel and conflict in front of our children which may affect the learning in children.

In nutshell, keeping silence, good relation between husband and wife, coping scope, emotional attachment and care from father and mother for children have crucial role rather than physical presence. Family quarrel **e**conomic strain creates major problem in learning and development of children.

Discussion

This study revealed that the physical presence of fathers does not necessarily equate to a harmonious family environment. Disputes were prevalent in both cohabiting and long-distance marriages, suggesting that relationship quality, rather than physical proximity, plays a critical role in family stability. These finding challenges traditional assumptions that fatherhood inherently brings stability to child development. Previous research emphasizes that children thrive in emotionally supportive environments, regardless of physical proximity (Bornstein et al., 2010).

Conversely, emotionally distant or conflict-prone fathers may contribute to children's distress, even when physically present, as seen in the experiences of mothers whose children exhibited anxiety and emotional withdrawal despite their father's presence at home (Amato, 2000). One mother noted that although her husband was physically present, his lack of emotional engagement left her child feeling insecure and distressed during family conflicts. The importance of emotional availability is further supported by studies on transnational families, which indicate that long-distance parenting can still provide emotional security when fathers engage meaningfully, although emotional unavailability may increase stress and behavioral disruptions for children (Reimer, 2017; Parke, 2004).

In relation with destructive home environment (DHE) and learning, parental conflicts were found to significantly affect children's emotional security, cognitive development, and academic performance. Children exhibited withdrawal, aggression, and a decrease in concentration at school, which aligns with previous studies on the negative effects of household instability on child well-being (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Raver et al., 2015). This study's findings align with key psychological and educational theories, particularly Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, attachment theory, and social learning theory.

The Model of   Bronfenbrenner(1979) highlights the role of multiple environmental layers (family, community, and societal structures) in shaping children's development. In this study, children whose family environments were characterized by persistent conflict exhibited emotional distress and behavioral issues, illustrating the disruptive effects of a strained microsystem on early childhood development. The emotional security theory suggests that exposure to family disputes increases emotional reactivity, impairing cognitive processing and social skills (Cummings & Davies, 2011). The findings reinforce the idea that family stability and parental relationships significantly affect early childhood learning, supporting prior research that links household conflict with emotional distress and reduced academic motivation (Cummings & Davies, 2011).

The attachment theory of Bowlby, (1983) further explains why children exposed to frequent parental disputes exhibit emotional distress, withdrawal, or aggression. The emotional security hypothesis suggests that children require stable parental relationships for psychological well-being; when exposed to conflict, their sense of safety is compromised, leading to disrupted cognitive and emotional development. In this study, many mothers observed that their children displayed signs of emotional insecurity, including anxiety, avoidance, or increased aggression. These findings align with previous research showing that household instability impairs self-regulation and emotional resilience in young children (Raby et al., 2016). These findings not only align with previous research on household instability and child well-being but also reinforce the theoretical grounding in ecological systems, attachment, and social learning theories.

Regarding the Imitation of children from family disputes, children actively observe and internalize family disputes, which can shape their future interpersonal relationships. Some children advised their parents to cease fighting, while others developed aggressive or avoidant behaviors. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) supports the idea that children model observed behaviors. This

supports Bandura's (1977) assertion that children learn through observation, as evidenced by participants' reports of their children imitating conflict behaviors or advising parents to stop fighting. In this study, some children attempted to intervene in parental conflicts, while others exhibited aggressive tendencies or internalized conflict-related stress. This mirrors findings from Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor (2017), which indicate that children raised in conflict-prone households are more likely to develop negative coping mechanisms, behavioral aggression, or emotional withdrawal. The intergenerational transmission of conflict resolution styles is a key concern, as children who witness frequent parental disputes may adopt similar conflict-handling patterns in their future relationships.

Regarding the role of fathers in child development, mothers had divergent views on fathers' involvement in early childhood education, with some emphasizing the importance of paternal engagement while others believed maternal care was sufficient. This difference in perception aligns with cultural and socio-economic theories of parenting, where maternal and paternal roles are influenced by financial stability, relationship dynamics, and societal expectations (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). Studies indicate that active paternal involvement improves children's academic and social skills, but in traditional or financially unstable households, mothers often take on the primary caregiving role (Parke, 2004).

Similarly, alcohol consumption of father and social stresses have been problem of insecurity for children. In the same way, the tension, fighting and quarrel were found directly affected the children's emotional and cognitive well-being. While the study effectively explores the impact of family disputes, a broader examination of cultural influences on parenting in Nepal would enhance contextual understanding. Traditional gender roles often place primary caregiving responsibilities on mothers, with fathers playing a more distant role in daily child-rearing.

Previous studies on Nepalese parenting of Lansford et al (2021) has highlighted how maternal stress, financial hardship, and limited external support systems contribute to parenting challenges in conflict-affected households. Integrating these cultural aspects more explicitly into the discussion would provide a richer interpretation of maternal coping strategies and children's emotional responses. Comparing these findings with prior research also reveals important consistencies and new contributions. The study confirms well-established links between family conflict and children's emotional distress (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Raver et al., 2015).

However, it also highlights unique socio-economic and cultural factors shaping maternal responses and children's coping strategies in Nepal. While studies from Western contexts emphasize parental separation and legal custody disputes as primary stressors, this study suggests that financial insecurity, domestic violence, and traditional gender roles play a more dominant role in shaping children's emotional and academic outcomes in Nepalese households. Financial struggles were linked to parental stress, alcohol consumption, and increased domestic conflicts (Mistry et al., 2008), with research confirming that financial instability can reduce parental emotional availability and increase marital discord, ultimately affecting child behavior (Conger et al., 2010; Dearing, 2004). Family economic stress theory suggests that financial pressure exacerbates frustration among parents, heightening the likelihood of conflict and negatively affecting children's learning and emotional well-being (Lansford et al., 2021).

Therefore, to mitigate family disputes, mothers have employed various coping mechanisms to shield their children from family conflicts, such as avoiding disputes in front of children or engaging in discussions away from them. However, economic hardship and domestic violence significantly constrained their ability to protect their children. Research supports the notion that mothers play a pivotal role in buffering children from stress, though their effectiveness is contingent upon external factors like financial stability and social support (Conger et al., 2010). In cases of domestic violence or severe economic stress, maternal coping strategies are less effective, leaving children vulnerable to emotional distress (Evans & Kim, 2013). These findings underscore the importance of addressing not only conflict resolution but also the socio-economic conditions that limit maternal resilience, as suggested by family stress theory (Lansford et al., 2021). This study contributes to the growing discourse

on parenting in Nepal by highlighting how financial stress, societal expectations, and limited paternal involvement uniquely shape maternal coping mechanisms and child outcomes.

Conclusion

This study concluded that family/parents have critical role in developing appropriate environment for children in learning and development. Family conflict and emotional distress of children, destructive home environment, fight within couple negatively affect the children's education, homework and daily activities. Family dynamics, parental counseling, emotional support that help children in learning and development effectively. In the context of Nepal, many mothers have been facing the challenge of domestic violence or financial hardship, which made it difficult to shield their children. Even though, the mothers have the range of coping and mitigating strategies. If the mother and father both made a conscious effort to avoid arguing in front of their children, the family dispute can be disappeared even the husband is not with his family. Future research should expand on diverse family structures, socio-economic variations, and cross-cultural differences in parental conflict and early childhood education. A more integrated approach that incorporates both theoretical perspectives and cultural contexts to enhance our understanding.

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Data Availability: All essential details of this study are included in the manuscript. However, upon reasonable request, the principal author can provide certain identified data fields.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

DHE	Destructive Home Environment
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ERB	Ethical Review Board
HP	Homes of the Participants
NHPC	Nepal Health Research Council

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