CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDREN’S NEEDS IN INFORMAL KINSHIP CARE IN RURAL CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Kinship care is the oldest form of alternative child care in the world. Recent years have witnessed a significant increase in the number of children being placed in kinship care across Western countries. However, in contrast to rapid knowledge advances about formal kinship care, far less is known about the needs of children in informal kinship care, especially in Asian contexts. This thesis and the study upon which it is formed sought to redress this knowledge gap. Qualitative approach was adopted to explore social constructions of children in informal kinship care in rural China.

Parents in China seeking work in cities have left behind around 58 million rural children, mostly with relatives and without the involvement of the state. The present study examined caregivers’ and school personnel’s understandings of these school-age children’s needs through semi-structured interviews with 23 kin caregivers and five school personnel in Shijiapu Town, Jilin Province, China. The central question that guided the whole study is: What are the needs of children in informal kinship care in rural Jilin Province, China? Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to categorise and interpret the qualitative data. Based on participants’ constructions, this study developed a need model with eight themes. They are: (1) emotional needs and mental health, (2) relationships, (3) empowerment and agency, (4) safety, (5) education, (6) basic care, (7) physical health, and (8) personal development. These needs are grounded in the Chinese context, and therefore a good understanding of Chinese culture is essential to address them. The first four needs particularly capture children’s separations from their parents, and the rest are more general, and can be applied to most Chinese children. To meet the most important need for children left behind, namely education, these caregivers determined that others needs sometimes have to be compromised.
Children left behind are a vulnerable group in contemporary rural China, and their diverse needs are attended to by several groups. This study found that as children’s closest kin while their parents are away, caregivers play a vital role in salving the children’s emotional loss. Caregivers’ love and familial obligations strongly motivate them to care for these children, and sensitivity to social stigma makes them strive to show their love and care to compensate for perceived differences between these children and their peers. Caregivers’ efforts to make children happy, however, were sometimes criticised by some school personnel, who see this as spoiling. The conflicting viewpoint between caregivers and school personnel indicate their different roles and perceptions in children’s lives, and the latter influence these children in a more authoritative way.

Informal kinship care has several advantages of addressing children’s needs, especially their needs for emotional bonds with family. Community-based kin networks provide children with both emotional and material support. However, these advantages sometimes are restricted by caregivers’ child rearing capacity. Having developed a model of the needs of children left behind in China, this study suggests that caregivers, school personnel and government social services work in harmony to be child-centred and meet these children’s diverse needs. The unmet needs of children left behind mainly result from unbalanced development between urban and rural China, therefore, it is imperative to enhance state policies and programs that improve wellbeing for this growing part of China’s people.
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List of abbreviations

ARACY Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

ACWF All-China Women's Federation

IPA Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

UNCRC United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child
Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: QUT Verified Signature

Date: 18/06/2013
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1 INTRODUCTION

Ideally, children should be cared for by their parents (United Nations Children's Fund, 1989), however, in some circumstances parents are neither able to or available to provide the care. In this case, children are usually placed in alternative care. Kinship care is the oldest and most widespread form of alternative child care (Shivers, 2006), and it has gained increasing attention in recent years in both the child welfare services and research communities (Berrick, 1997; S. Brown, Cohon, & Wheeler, 2002). Child welfare researchers have recognised that there are two main types of kinship care arrangements: formal kinship care that functions like foster care, which means children’s kin are licensed as foster parents by the relevant authorities, and assume caring under the legal auspice and oversight of child welfare agencies; and informal kinship care, where the kin caregiver takes on primary care for the child outside of the knowledge and auspices of the child welfare system (A. W. Harden, Clark, & Maguire, 1997; Howard, 1994; Simpson & Lawrence-Webb, 2009). The past twenty years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of formal kinship care (see for example, Cuddeback, 2004); yet far less is known about the wellbeing of children in informal kinship care, though they are the overwhelming majority of children who reside with kin (Gleeson et al., 2008; Howard, 1994).

This study explores the needs of school-age children left behind in informal kinship care in rural China. The subjective constructions of these children’s needs are based on semi-structured interviews with 23 kin caregivers and five school personnel in Shijiapu Town, Jilin Province, China. Both general and specific needs of children left behind are identified, and the latter ones relate to children’s separation from their parents.
Over the last decade, a significant number of children have been placed in kinship care around the world (Cuddeback, 2004; Holtan, Rønning, Handegård, & Sourander, 2005; Schwartz, 2002). For example, in 1997, 1.8 million children in the United States of America (USA) lived with relatives with neither of their parents present in the home, and around 70% of these children lived with kin privately without involvement of the child welfare system (Ehrle, Geen, & Clark, 2001). In 2011, around 4% of all the children in the USA lived without their parents, and most of them were cared for by their grandparents (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2012). In Australia in 2012, 47% of the 39,621 children in state care in Australia were in formal kinship care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). Yet, there are many more children in informal than formal kinship care (Spence, 2004). In New Zealand, approximately two-thirds of children in long-term care are with kin (Worrall, 2001). According to Norway’s national statistics for 2000, 13% of children in state custody are living in kinship foster care (Holtan, et al., 2005). This proportion is smaller than that of the United Kingdom (UK), where kinship foster care has been estimated to be in the region of 18% of foster caregivers (Sellick, 2006). Although national usage of kinship care in Canada has not been calculated, census data shows that children cared for by their grandparents without the presence of the children’s parents increased by 20% between 1991 and 2001 (Gough, 2006).

Historically, kinship care has been widely used informally among African-American families in the USA. In recent years, the child welfare systems in the USA and some other countries, such as Australia, have begun applying it as an alternative to foster care (Danzy & Jackson, 1997; Spence, 2004; Susan & Glen, 2009). In China, much of the social care and support is informal. And, in some cases, is even self-initiated or self-financed (Tsang, Sin, Jia, & Yan, 2008). Therefore, the utilization of foster care is different from that in many Western countries. In most
Western countries such as Australia, children placed in foster care usually have been suffered from maltreatment or neglect. In China, however, most children placed in foster care are orphans or abandoned children without being abused (Zhong, 2004). To date, formal kinship care in China is still excluded from foster care practice. It is even absent in “Temporary Measures on Foster Care Management”, which is the first and only national foster care guidance published in China (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2003). In contrast with formal kinship care’s absence in the Chinese social service, informal kinship care has been the main form of alternative care for children left behind in rural areas (Ye, Murray, & Wang, 2010).

‘Children left behind’ in China refer to rural children who live with their relatives in local communities without the state’s arrangement, while their parents temporarily work in cities. According to the latest census, there are around 58 million Chinese children left behind, accounting for 28.29% of the total rural children (All-China Women's Federation, 2007). To date, the most active organization that addresses the needs of children left behind is the All-China Women's Federation (hereafter ACWF), which aims to promote Chinese women and children’s wellbeing. Within this context, the distinct attributes of a rural life style make it necessary for social service practitioners to understand rural contexts, as well as the needs of local residents (Cheers, Darracott, & Lonne, 2007). Compared to living situations in urban areas, the educational and medical facilities are generally lower quality in rural China (B. Y. Hu & Szente, 2009). However, generally speaking, rural residents have to face similar social pressures as the rest of society even with limited resources (Zapf, 2009). In view of the substantial number of rural children in informal kinship care, it is imperative for researchers and social policy makers to explore the specific needs of this group.
While local Chinese research in this area is increasing, most studies have focused on the negative impact of parents’ migration on children (A. Hu, Li, & Liu, 2011; Li, 2002; Tang & Lu, 2006; A Xu, 2009; Ye & Pan, 2011). These risk-based studies uncovered a variety of problems with regard to the behaviours of children left behind. Nevertheless, the overwhelming emphasis on family function disorders has largely overlooked some protective factors of kinship care (Jing Luo, Wang, & Gao, 2009). An appropriate understanding of children’s needs is, however, essential to guide policy makers and service provision given the increased use of kinship care (Dunne & Kettler, 2006). Despite dominant quantitative findings, the subjective construction of children’s needs remains largely ignored and potentially misunderstood.

This study, set in rural China, explores the constructions of school-age left-behind children’s needs from caregivers and school personnel perspectives. These two groups were selected because they are active in children’s daily lives and their involvement and points of view have a direct impact on children’s wellbeing. Caregivers were chosen to be the primary participants, and all but one of them were children’s grandparents. Detached from their parents, children left behind mainly rely on caregivers to support their growth and development. In this respect, how caregivers understand children’s needs and their child rearing practices are critically important influences in maintaining these children’s wellbeing. To date, some research has been conducted to explore caregivers’ own rewards and difficulties of assuming caring (see for example, see Dunne & Kettler, 2006; Strozier, Elrod, Beiler, Smith, & Carter, 2004). However, little attention has been given to caregivers’ subjective constructions of children’s needs. School-age children left behind in China are an overlooked population. There is limited research about their needs, specifically in the context of rural China. Education and educators have been highly valued in
Chinese society, and this is especially the case for children left behind who may have a close connection with school. Therefore, school personnel’s voices are also included in this study. This study uses a social constructionist paradigm to explore diverse constructions of children’s needs from different sociocultural perspectives. The central research question developed in this study is: *What are the needs of children in informal kinship care in rural Jilin Province, China?* A social constructionism stance encourages people to construct their own realities rather than accepting objective certainty. The meanings and understandings are historically and culturally specific, and developed through daily interactions among people (Burr, 2003). These principles are particularly pertinent in this research, as Chinese participants’ constructions contribute to the existing ‘realities’ that have hitherto been dominated by Western research. Moreover, the appreciation of culture and rural context enabled me as the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants’ roles and knowledge, which fundamentally influence their childrearing experiences. In addition, a consideration of interactions between participants and others helps to probe the process of participants’ social constructions.

As stated previously, other than commonly recognised needs, this study also explores children left behind’s specific needs due to the separation from their parents. To achieve this, two theoretical frameworks—Attachment Theory and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (hereafter ARACY) needs identification mechanism are integrated. Being well-grounded in empirical study, Attachment Theory highlights children’s emotional and psychological ties to their caregivers, and also sheds light on the children’s reactions to their parents’ absence (Bowlby, 1980). The ARACY needs identification mechanism, on the other hand, is more theoretically derived rather than coming from empirical research findings. It was developed by the ARACY. As a complementary approach, it allows me to place children’s
separation at the centre of analysis, while also being sensitised to a wider range of needs than those identified by using Attachment Theory.

Focused on children’s needs in rural China, the present study is significant for three main reasons. Firstly, it explores the relatively invisible phenomenon, and advances current knowledge regarding the role of informal kinship care in meeting children’s needs. In contrast with formal fostering arrangements, informal kinship care provides a more natural home atmosphere. It has been argued that because social workers are minimally involved in informal kinship care, families have more autonomy and privacy (Lewis & Fraser, 1987). However, limited interactions with social service providers can also result in the families being marginalised or overwhelmed in the face of new demands and changing roles. This study provides an in-depth picture of the characteristics of informal kinship care for caregivers in rural setting in Northern China, which can be used to inform formal and informal care practice.

Moreover, this study has an additional benefit by illustrating caregivers’ perceptions of children’s needs through semi-structured interviews. Becoming a caregiver is a life changing experience since they take on new responsibilities (K. E. Holland, 2007). Specifically for kinship caregivers, many researchers have stressed that they have to confront enormous emotional strain when caring for their relatives’ children (Bunch, Eastman, & Griffin, 2007; Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Farmer & Moyers, 2008). Compared with the significant body of research on caregivers’ own experiences, the original contribution of the present study is the opportunity to capture children’s needs from their caregivers’ viewpoints. Choosing caregivers as primary participants and valuing their voices is important, because caregivers’ constructions of children’s needs directly shape their behaviours and actions in caring. In this regard, caregivers’ viewpoints are essential for improving children’s wellbeing.
Lastly, this research is conducive to rethinking current Chinese social policies. As a vulnerable group in China, kin caregivers’ voices are rarely heard by social policy makers. Thus, understanding caregivers’ perceptions and experiences is not only important in itself, but such knowledge is of practical importance so the authorities can better understand the welfare needs of the large and increasing number of children left behind when their parents move to cities to find work. Furthermore, it is noted that unbalanced social policies between urban and rural areas in China has led to rural residents’ wellbeing being overlooked to some extent. By exploring kinship care in a rural context, this research reveals the wellbeing of rural children as well as accessible resources available to them. It is hoped that findings such as in this study will act as a catalyst for policy responses and initiatives that promote more effective tailoring of services for these vulnerable children and increased social support for caregivers.

The thesis is organised in eight chapters:

This first chapter has provided an overview of the study.

Chapter 2 examines the literature centred around kinship care. Considering the role of social constructionism in guiding the whole review process, it is introduced at the outset. The general concept of children’s needs is reviewed, then more specifically, research into the needs of children in care is furthered analysed. In order to integrate academic and practical insight, commonly used needs frameworks as implemented in different countries are also reviewed. The ARACY needs identification mechanism is deemed the most appropriate for guiding the investigation, notwithstanding the differences in the rational and cultural contexts. As this research explores the wellbeing of children mainly from caregivers’ perspectives, a critical review of targeted caregiver research is also conducted. Both the rewards and challenges of
taking on the caring role are identified, and justification for exploring caregivers’ constructions of children’s needs is articulated here.

Following this, Chapter 3 aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of contexts’ relevance to children’s needs. It critically examines the study’s contextual characteristics and is divided into three parts. Part one focuses on the economic and social context in contemporary China, which highlights the impact of social development on children left behind. Part two reviews rural studies, especially those related to children’s development. This section provides a broad picture of rural children and their families in China. Part three reviews the literature about worldwide child rearing practices, including those in China. This structure is influenced by social constructionist perspective, which inspires me to critically evaluate the role of environment and culture in shaping participants’ experiences.

Chapter 4 begins by laying out the specific research questions, and provides a rationale for the use of a qualitative approach. It then outlines why an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (hereafter IPA) approach is adopted in the present study and how well it fits with social constructionism. A detailed research design is described based on this discussion above. Decisions about sampling, data reduction, and ethical considerations are also described and justified.

Chapters 5 and 6 report the research results. Participants’ accounts are used to illustrate what are the needs of children left behind in rural China. Caregivers’ motivations for assuming the caring role is presented at the beginning, as they underpin caregivers’ constructions of children’s needs. A needs model has been developed to present eight themes of children’s needs. Within the model, needs are organised and discussed according to their applicability to children left behind.
Chapter 7 analyses Chinese participants’ understandings of the general and specific needs of children left behind. The ARACY needs identification mechanism is compared with the needs model developed in this study, and key findings emerging from the Chinese context is highlighted. Attachment Theory is used to explore children’s emotional needs, especially their ties to different adults in their lives, such as caregivers and parents. The specific needs of children left behind are then outlined. Following this, more general needs are also discussed. I argue that children’s needs are constructed in a particular context and, therefore, the needs of children left behind should be understood within Chinese culture.

Chapter 8 draws together the numerous threads of the study, and articulates my thesis concerning the vulnerability of these children and ways to best meet their specific and diverse needs. The protective factors of kinship care in meeting children’s needs are acknowledged, which explain why it is preferable to foster care found in some Western studies (see for example, Gibbs, Bir, Duncan, Kasten, & Hoover, 2006). This part is followed by a discussion about caregivers’ capacity to meet children’s needs, which highlights the resources needed to support children left behind and their families. This chapter also discusses the practical implications of this study, and suggests a collaborative strategy which involves government, social work services, as well as community. I discuss this study’s limitations and suggestions for future study. The chapter concludes with a reiteration of the key findings and ways in which to address the critical issues raised.
2 CHILDREN’S NEEDS AND CAREGIVING

Children’s needs can be constructed in different ways. In this chapter, I introduce social constructionism and discuss its relevance to this study. I present how the concept of needs is understood at a broader level, and examine its relationships with other concepts such as rights. I then focus on the needs of children, especially children in care, because there are some similarities between them and those of children left behind in China. Following this, I examine frameworks associated with children’s needs. The last section reviews studies regarding caregivers, who have been chosen as primary participants in this study. The review not only provides a sound conceptual base for this study, but also identifies the need for exploring the constructions of children’s need in informal kinship care.

2.1 Social constructionism: multiple ways to explore children’s needs

The central question addressed in this research was: *What are the needs of children in informal kinship care in rural Jilin Province, China?* To answer this question, I adopted a social constructionism paradigm, which underpins the whole process of exploring children’s needs in a Chinese context. In the following sections, social constructionism is incorporated in reviewing relevant studies, whereby it provides the fundamental stance of conceptual understanding of children’s needs. In Chapter 4, I will discuss more about social constructionism, which plays an important role in my research design.

The development of social constructionism has been influenced by postmodernism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Postmodernists reject notions of objective truth and argue that people construct knowledge based on their own understandings of complex circumstances. Therefore,
there are diverse comprehensions of what the world is and should be. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) argued, everyone lives in a world linked to their own thoughts and behaviours, and they construct different spheres of reality with consciousness. They explained how society is regarded as subjective reality in terms of socialization. An individual becomes a member of the society by understanding other’s worlds around them, and eventually integrates this understanding into the definition of their own world. Then, more specific realities and relevant knowledge are further internalized, and subjective realities are further modified via multiple conversations. In this respect, social constructionism criticises objective fact and adopts a relativist view of the world.

For this study, it is important to firstly review concepts that are relevant to needs, since they reflect humans’ diverse constructions within society. By comparing these different concepts, we can explore the traits of needs and see how the concept of need is formed and transformed contextually (Ackermann, 2001). In view of the dominance of Western studies in children’s needs, the following sections not only review some Western frameworks, but also discuss Chinese ways of conceptualising children’s needs. As existing knowledge is mostly constructed by authoritative scholars and agencies, caregivers’ versions of children’s needs are yet to be fully explored. To address this, I also review studies on caregivers at the end of this chapter, adding more depth and diversity to our understanding of children’s needs.

2.2 Human Needs

Needs is a extensive concept, ranging from physical requirements for human beings’ survival to participating in social interaction, an essential element for all human beings living in a given society (Langan, 1998). Researchers Doyal and Gough (1991) stress that social policies cannot function well without taking human needs into consideration. This view is supported by other
scholars, such as Percy-Smith (1996) and Thompson (2009), who both acknowledge the fundamental role of definitions of needs in public services, and highlight its importance for social justice. However, the concept of need is more complicated and controversial than it initially seems to be.

One of the disputes over needs is focused on epistemology, that is, on the way needs are constructed and understood. Thomson (1987) considers need as objective in terms of its discoverable traits. By contrasting fundamental with instrumental needs, he concludes that needs are vague but not necessarily relative. Similarly, in their view of needs, Doyal and Gough (1991) list two universal human needs, namely physical health and autonomy. They believe that these needs are independent of individual preferences, although people’s understandings of needs may vary under diverse circumstances. With respect to specific needs, they further argue that specific human needs are objective, since these are the basic needs that support survival and development of human beings.

Nevertheless, since needs are always located in a society and social context, we can hardly regard needs as a fixed essence. Needs are constructed by people during their social interactions, and are always prone to change from time to time, from culture to culture (Thompson, 2009). Even in the same society, the needs of an individual are also relative to other members. In other words, society members have different expectations of the extent to which their needs should be met. These relative needs are important. Since, more often than not, it makes some essential needs become relative. Even the amount of calories taken in can be dependent on what others are expecting of you. For example, besides the amount needed for survival, a person needs more calories if he or she intends to engage in social life when other people are all playing sports (Goodin, 1990).
Adopting a relative position regarding needs is more appropriate for this study, as it is in accordance with social constructionism which values diverse realities. And, undoubtedly, it challenges Western ways of constructing need. Located in an Asian setting, even physical health should be understood from different perspectives. As Ware and Goodin (1990) point out, water and food, as well as shelter, are essential for human beings. However, what individuals need, and the extent to which they need, do vary according to different physical environments, so there is no absolute point of view. Along with a relative position, the review above also draws my attention to some related concepts. Relationships between these concepts and needs are discussed in the following section.

2.2.1 Needs vs. wants

Similar to needs, the concept of wants also suggests goals and implies individuals require something for their own good. However, wants are more affected by individual preference and cultural environment. Each person tends to develop distinguishable wants based on their own interaction with the environment (Doyal & Gough, 1991). In this respect, wants are absolutely subjective, and it is the people themselves that determine what they want. In some cases, people may want some things which they do not need or vice versa (Ware & Goodin, 1990). Taking children in rural China for example, they may want a brand new mobile phone to show off among their peers, but it is not something that they necessarily need in their daily lives.

2.2.2 Needs vs. desires

Desires are influenced by individual’s beliefs to a great extent, so they are reflections of people’s subjective expectations. The difference between needs and desires can be revealed through their relationships with harm. Most notably, people are able to stay away from harm even when their
desires are not achieved. Needs, on the other hand, may cause severe harms to human beings if they are not addressed well. Thus, needs are more important than desires in public policy-making (Thomson, 1987). Given this, and the conceptualising of wants above, it is therefore apparent that desires and wants are two similar concepts. In contrast to needs, they are both cognitive acts, which involve the feeling of attraction. This feeling changes according to actor’s perceptions of what is desirable and accessible to them.

2.2.3 Needs vs. rights

Needs are attached to culture. It is the value held by the individual that defines the concept of needs. Human rights, however, are seen as universal and invisible. They are normally based on a convention, and can be applied to any culture around the world. There is a link between human needs and rights, in that individuals should have the right to define their own needs (Ife, 2001). Brock (2005) has discussed the relationship between human needs and rights. Human needs, as he points out, are what we use to maintain basic functions as human beings. Human rights, however, are focused on entitlement and protection which empower us as a member in the society. Since recognising human rights draws on the respect for human needs, a needs-centred consideration is therefore more fundamental than a rights-centred one.

In contrast with other concepts above, human rights are the most relevant to human needs. They share the common trait of highlighting human beings’ survival in a society. Section 2.6 (p. 27) will further discuss children’s rights, given that children’s needs have been rarely addressed in Chinese culture.

To sum up, need in this study is seen as a relative concept. Meeting needs is essential for an individual’s survival and development. It should be noted, however, that needs is not purely
based on an individual’s subjective expectation or preference. Rather, it carries on common traits that can be applied to a society. The concept of needs is especially important for social policies, because an individual can be harmed if his/her needs are not understood and addressed appropriately.

2.3 Children’s needs

In recent years, there has been an increasing global debate around children’s needs and wellbeing (Kabeer, Nambissan, & Subrahmanian, 2003). In order to function well and eventually develop into adults, children’s physical, emotional, social and intellectual needs should all be satisfied. Pringle (1993) categorises children’s developmental needs into four aspects, the need for: love and security; new experiences; praise and recognition; and responsibility. She maintains that these needs are interrelated and should be met from the early stage and throughout children’s whole life course. It should be noted, however, that Pringle’s viewpoint on these needs is based on her experiences in a Western society, which cannot be fully applied to other cultures. For instance, children’s need for new experiences, especially exploration, is not well recognised in collectivistic cultures (Yeo, 2003), such as China.

Scholars Brazelton and Greenspan (2000) are well known for their work on child development and health, and they identify ‘seven irreducible needs’ of children: ongoing nurturing relationships; physical protection, safety, and regulation; experiences tailored to individual differences; developmentally appropriate experiences; limit setting, structure, and expectations; stable, supportive communities and cultural continuity; and protecting the future. The last two domains are well suited from an ecological perspective, which emphasises not only local community and culture’s role in children’s development.
Besides these theoretical frameworks, some empirical studies have also been conducted in children’s needs. For example, Russ, Garro and Halfon (2010) argue that current child health policy in the USA has failed to meet children’s health needs, especially children regarded as vulnerable groups. They appeal for a health-needs based model for the new integrated and connected services for children, which provides benefits for children’s whole life course. When examining the American educational system, Pallas (2010) claims that children from low-income families or families that can only provide little support tend to achieve low educational performance. He also highlights the role of schooling as an integrated social resource, which means instead of being isolated, basic education should be included in the web of social capital as integral to meeting children’s needs. This view is supported by Magnuson and Shager (2010), who draw our attention to the relationship between early education and subsequent basic education.

2.4 The needs of children in care

The wellbeing of disadvantaged and vulnerable children can be only improved by a good understanding of their needs (Department of Health, 2000). Besides examining the general population, some researchers also address the issue of children in formal alternative care, concluding that children in care often experience problems. For instance, some children are not able to control their impulses. With being transferred from one foster home to another one, these problems often become more severe (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000; Pringle, 1993).

Children placed in care tend to have complex physical, emotional, and developmental needs (Rosenbach, Lewis, & Quinn, 2000; Simms & Halfon, 1994). Problems are found in the areas of children’s health and general wellbeing (Parton, 2006). In particular, both physical and mental
health needs are emphasized by some scholars (See for example, Simms, Dubowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000; Stanley, 2007; Sullivan & van Zyl, 2008). Children living in care have been identified as unacceptable levels of poor health (Dania & Dimitra, 2007). In the USA, children in care are more likely to have mental health and substance abuse issues than other Medicaid children (Rosenbach, et al., 2000). The Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care (2002) suggest that ongoing health evaluation and monitoring should be applied to the whole health care services in the USA, so that every child’s needs can be treated equitably. Similar research findings are also reported in Australia. For example, Dania and Dimitra’s (2007) study based on comprehensive health assessment shows that children in care confront more severe health problems than the average population of Australian children.

In addition to health needs, much of the evidence indicates that many children in care do not succeed educationally (Andrea, Lois, & Christina, 2004; Parton, 2006; Tracey, 2007). In an American study by Grant (2000), around 66% of the 44 children referred for schooling problems had difficulties in concentration, and eight were diagnosed with both oppositional-defiant disorder and depression. By reviewing 308 American case files, Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm (2003) found that the majority of children in foster care were diagnosed with academic and behaviour problems. Moreover, neither caregivers nor case workers were well equipped with sufficient information about their educational needs.

Compared with foster care, kinship care is still a relatively new area but has drawn increasing academic attention. Existing studies generally focused on formal kinship care for children who have been neglected or abused have identified two main advantages of kinship care in meeting children’s needs.
First, kinship care features caregiver’s special commitment, which facilitates stable and child-focused environment. Many caregivers shoulder the responsibility of care because they want to meet children’s needs and provide them with a sense of belonging (Gleeson, et al., 2008; Harris & Skyles, 2008; J. Mason, Falloon, J., Gibbons, L., Spence, N., & Scott, E., 2002). Several studies found that although formal kin caregivers were eligible to receive foster care payments, their motivation was based on familial obligation rather than payment (Beeman & Boisen, 1999; Spence, 2004; Susan & Glen, 2009). From kin caregivers’ points of views, an appreciation of family ties and commitment to children’s development also contributes to successful fostering as well (Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler, & Cox, 2007). According to Farmer and Moyers (2008), significantly fewer kinship care placements are disrupted when caregivers are highly committed to the children.

Second, kinship care alleviates deleterious effects that children’s parents may have on them (Worrall, 2001), and ameliorates the difficulties and trauma they experience throughout placement (Berrick, 1997). A study on African-American families by Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler (2002) found that maltreated children benefit from the security provided by kin network. These children have frequent interactions with their relatives, whereby they also obtain emotional support. This finding has been confirmed by an Australian study by Downie, Hay, Horner, Wichmann, and Hislop (2010), who identified several protective factors of kinship care for children’s mental health, including security and safety, love, care and belong, as well as family contact. These factors function together and contribute a normal family feeling for children in care. Based on preferred living conditions and family bonds, children in kinship care are most likely to interact with their parents and develop healthy relationships (Dubowitz, 1993). In the long run, the relationships that children develop with multiple relatives are conducive to
children’s wellbeing and play an important role in constructing a good childhood (Abebe & Aase, 2007).

In spite of the commonly agreed benefits of kinship care, there have been some contradictory viewpoints regarding its perceived preference over foster care. For example, by comparing 29 American kin caregivers with 33 traditional foster parents, Berrick (1997) concludes that children who live with their kin were less emotionally traumatised than those in foster care. However, the latter group have more living space at home than children in kinship care. Another American comparative study found that kinship care is preferable to foster care, especially in the way it alleviates children’s trauma due to separation from their parents. Nevertheless, generally speaking, kin families receive substantially less services than foster families, which limits their capacity for meeting children’s needs (Gibbs, et al., 2006). This conclusion is consistent with an earlier study by Scannapieco, Hegar, and McAlpine (1997), who found foster families receive more transportation assistance and parenting training. They also compared children’s academic performance and social adjustment at school, but found no difference between two groups. On the other hand, Sawyer and Dubowitz (1994) surveyed 372 American children in formal kinship care and found these children’s schooling performance was poorer than children who lived with their parents. In a UK study, children placed with kin caregivers were less likely to show multiple health difficulties than those in foster care (Farmer & Moyers, 2008). Although Spanish scholars Palacios and Jimenez (2009) acknowledge the advantages of kinship care in terms of its family based culture, their measurement indicated that traditional foster parents meet children’s needs better than kin caregivers. They considered this partly results from insufficient professional intervention and stimulation.
In addition to dominant Western studies above, there have been increasing academic interests in kinship care in Asian countries. In Southeast Asia, informal kinship care is widely used in transnational families. Children of these families are cared for by relatives when their parents migrate to other countries for temporary work. Based on quantitative survey in the Philippines, Quisumbing and McNiven (2010) found that remittance from migrant parents has a positive impact on children’s education and human capital. Along with migration, remittance also contributes to a household’s transition out of agriculture. In spite of these benefits, a comparative study shows that Indonesian children in transnational families are less likely to be happy than those in non-transnational families. Moreover, insufficient contact with migrant parents generally has deleterious effects on children’s subjective wellbeing (Graham et al., 2012). Similar results have been found in another quantitative study conducted in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, which also concludes that longer durations of being separated from parents enhances children’s resilience (Jordan & Graham, 2012). It should be noted that children in transnational families share some common needs with children left behind in China, however, the latter group also have specific needs, as their parents are internal migrants. I will review the needs of children left behind in China in more detail in Section 3.4 (p. 62).

The review above has identified two research gaps. One, most studies measure children’s needs by quantitative approaches, but little attention has been paid to subjective constructions of children’s needs such as health (Stanley, 2007). More qualitative studies need to be done to explore this area through participants’ subjective experiences. Qualitative approaches deepen our understandings by examining participants’ inner worlds. Thus, our understandings of needs can be informed by the views of caregivers and the actions they take to address children’s needs. This exploratory study values caregivers and school personnel’s personal experiences and
feelings, and therefore minimises the limitations caused by standardised measures. Two, although there has been substantial research conducted in foster care, kinship care, while especially informal kinship care, remains relatively unexplored (Simpson & Lawrence-Webb, 2009). This gap is addressed in the present study, which aims to explore the needs of Chinese children who have been left behind when their parents have moved to cities to find work and not typically subjected to abuse or neglect.

2.5 Attachment Theory: children’s separation from their parents

Children’s vulnerability to separation from their parents has been well recognised. Therefore, an important part of the conceptual frameworks for this study is Attachment Theory, which as its name suggests, sheds light on children’s ties to others and potential outcomes from disruption through separation or loss (Bretherton, 1995). Attachment is vital for humans’ functions: physical and psychological (Osmond & Darlington, 2001). The theory was originally formulated by Bowlby (1980), a psychiatrist who made invaluable contributions in child psychology. Bowlby (1989) defined attachment behaviour as ‘a form of instinctive behaviour that develops in humans, as in other mammals, during infancy, and has as its aim or goal proximity to a mother-figure’ (p. 87). This behaviour is particularly common during human childhood, but it also impacts into adulthood. Attachment behaviours are activated when children have negative emotions, such as feeling anxious or insecure. These behaviours are the ways in which vulnerable children seek protection and care from adults, and these two components are essential for competent caregiving (Howe, 2003).

Bowlby used the term ‘affectional bond’ to further explain children’s attachment to their attachment figures (normally familiar caregivers such as mothers). Affectional bonds are
someone’s attraction to another person (Bowlby, 1989), and development of such bonds is seen as a universal need for human beings (Howe, 2003). This bond is love based, and maintaining the bond provides humans with secure feelings (Bowlby, 1989). Children who feel secure and comfortable are more likely to explore their surroundings. Therefore, the affectional bond meets children’s need to experience the world, as well as make sense of themselves and people around them (Howe, 2003). The bond stimulates interactions between children and their attachment figures, whereby the self-worth and self-esteem of both groups are developed (Fahlberg, 1988). Children’s personality development is even influenced throughout this process (Osmond & Darlington, 2001). Affectional bonds to attachment figures are especially important for children who are under three years old. It is believed that when the mother figure is not available, children are better cared by relatives or familiar figures rather than strangers (Bowlby, 1989).

Based on his earlier work with the World Health Organization, Bowlby wrote a book with Fry and Ainsworth (1965), in which he introduced the ‘maternal deprivation’ hypothesis. This hypothesis was influenced by study of the needs of homeless children, such as orphans or children who are separated from their families. Bowlby acknowledged the importance of parental care for young children’s future mental health, and he used maternal deprivation to represent a situation in which children do not have relationships with their mothers. This deprivation can be either complete or partial. Complete maternal deprivation commonly exists in institutional care, where children have no particular figure to take care of them in a personal way. It should be noted that even partial separation can cause a variety of mental problems for children, such as ‘anxiety, excessive need for love, powerful feelings of revenge, and, arising from these last, guilt and depression’ (Bowlby, et al., 1965, p. 14). Moreover, the negative impact of deprivations on
children’s development not only exits during their separation or reunion with their mothers, but is theorised to extend into adulthood.

Bowlby’s maternal deprivation hypothesis in 1960s promoted the development of foster care, which pays more attention to children’s emotional wellbeing than institutional care. In spite of the contribution made by this theory, there have been criticisms. For example, Smith, Cowie, and Blades (2003) argue that children’s bond to others can be formed at later stage of childhood, so the negative impact of maternal deprivation is not specific to the first two or three years of children as proposed by Bowlby. Besides mothers, other attachment figures need to be considered in children’s attachment and separation, such as fathers, siblings, and other family members (Rutter, 1972, as cited in Colton, Sanders, & Williams, 2001).

In his later work ‘Attachment and Loss volume 2’, Bowlby (1980) further developed the concept of maternal deprivation and drew more attention to children’s separation from their attachment figures. According to Bowlby, being alone means potential danger, so children are best to be cared for in a familiar environment by familiar companions. By doing so, children are relatively safe and free from hazards. Well cared for children normally encounter little intense distress and fear, and they are apt to respond to separation with less fear. Insecure attachment, on the other hand, restricts children’s capacity for coping with distress and challenges in their later lives (McLewin & Muller, 2006). Children who have experienced attachment disturbance normally encounter difficulties in understanding and expressing their feelings (Porter, 2009), and they are most likely to experience more anxiety and have less trust in alternative caregivers (Drury-Hudson, 1994). The causes of insecure attachment are complicated, and social disadvantage does not necessarily compromise attachment (Goldberg, 2000). Nevertheless, if caregivers have
multifaceted problems such as poverty, children are more at risk of receiving insufficient care and love (Rogers, 2010).

It should be noted that the consequence of separation for children is not always damaging, as it can be mediated by a variety of factors, such as circumstance of separation, children’s previous experiences of separation, and the presence of familiar persons (Rutter, 1972, as cited in Colton, et al., 2001). Bowlby also recognised children’s diverse responses to separation, arguing that the response of children who are cared for by kin caregivers depends upon whether the conditions are favourable (Bowlby, 1980).

By reviewing different experiments in separation, Bowlby (1980) concluded that the intensity of children’s anxiety is associated with their age. Younger children, especially those who are under three years old, are likely to suffer intense anxiety and distress. Even when their attachment figures return, these children normally recover slowly from separation. As children grow older, they are more capable of verbal communication. And, therefore, are less affected by attachment figures’ absence.

Decades of research has provoked an array of concerns about children’s attachment, and it has been agreed that parenting that involves affective attachment contributes to optimal child and family wellbeing (Golding, 2008; Porter, 2009; Rees, 2010). By adopting Attachment Theory, this study was well placed to consider the experiences of caregivers, with an emphasis on children’s emotional needs. Accordingly, my study’s data collection and analysis were also informed by Attachment Theory. For example, particular attention was given to children’s specific needs due to their parents’ absence.
In addition to its implications in the case of separation, Attachment Theory also helped me to interpret caregivers’ motivations. Attachment theorists reject caregiving as a selfish behaviour. Instead, they believe that caregiving is oriented toward children’s needs, and can be observed from caregivers’ sensitive and responsive parenting (Shaver & Fraley, 2000). However, from the views of Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, and Morelli (2000), caregivers’ sensibilities differ across diverse cultures, and their response may only make sense in a particular context (Simpson & Lawrence-Webb, 2009). This viewpoint is consistent with Rogoff (2003), who emphasised cultural variations in children’s attachment, especially attachment figures. Yeo (2003) used Attachment Theory to gain insight into Australian Aboriginal child rearing practice. Based on a collectivist culture, Aboriginal caregivers assume a social role given in a community and take steps to make sure children are comforted and secure. Similar to Australian Aboriginal people, Chinese have a collectivist orientation with traditional preference for kinship care when children’s parents are not available. Guided by Attachment Theory, this study was able to capture caregivers’ roles and address children’s needs in terms of their motivations.

As discussed above, there is a strong yet overlooked link between caregivers’ motivations and their understandings of children’s needs. Taking this study as an example, I found the motivations for paternal and maternal grandparents as caregivers were distinctly different. A paternal grandfather even described rearing his grandson as his life’s purpose, which obviously stimulated his endeavour to capture and further meet the child’s needs. Through an Attachment Theory lens, I have been able to understand how inherent factors, such as culture, can affect participants’ constructions and actions.
2.6 Frameworks relating to children’s needs

Children’s welfare has increasingly aroused the attention of policy makers. During the last two decades, some countries have developed specific frameworks to address children’s needs. These needs frameworks indicate a new trend in children’s welfare, especially in social work practice. As stated previously, the concept of human needs is highly relevant to rights. Undoubtedly, the development of these needs framework has been influenced by existing knowledge of children’s rights. In this section, I will firstly discuss the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is the first and most widely acknowledged treaty across the world addressing this area. The discussion sheds light on the universal rights of children as vulnerable human beings, and also examines Chinese children’s specific rights.

2.6.1 The United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UNCRC was developed in 1989, and is underpinned by the human rights framework established by the United Nations. The United Nations appeals to all countries to recognise and protect their citizens’ rights. These rights are presented as universal and essential for an individual’s survival and development in a society.

Generally, children have the same rights as adults, however, specific consideration and priority should be given to this group due to their vulnerability. Children mainly rely on adults in their early lives, and they are more vulnerable to governmental actions than other groups in the society. Therefore, the whole society should protect and address children’s needs, especially if their families fail (United Nations Children's Fund, 1989). Family’s role in children’s lives is highly valued by the Convention, which considers kin caregiving as optimal for children. Doubtless, Children benefit from their relationships with family members, which provide children with
personal meaning in their social presence. These relationships, in some cultures, can even extend to children’s local community (Melton, 2010).

Although children are inherently vulnerable, the Convention argues they still have equal status as adults as part of the society. Children are not adult’s property, rather, they are individuals who have their own rights. This construction underpins the UNCRC. The Convention consists of 54 articles which are divided into three parts. The first part clarifies children’s definition, interests, as well as government’s responsibilities for assisting families with childcare. The other parts of the Convention detail government’s work to ensure children’s rights are well protected. The main body of the Convention covers children’s rights in various circumstances. It not only outlines most children’s basic rights, but also includes the rights of specific groups, such as children who are separated from their parents, adopted children, refugee children, children with disabilities, children in care, and children who are exposed to war, drugs, sexual exploitation, or harmful labour.

Children’s rights do not solely exist in political considerations, rather, they are inherent in terms of children’s survival and development. In this regard, some children’s rights overlap with their needs. For example, children are in need of attachment to their biological families. The Convention emphasises children’s fundamental dignity and wellbeing as human beings. It applies to all children regardless their background such as race, colour, language, religion, and social origin. The rights proposed by the Convention are universal, however, it also attracts some critique of its cultural feasibility. Children are social human beings, which means their rights are closely linked to the culture they reside in. Unsurprisingly, there is a fundamental tension between universal rights and cultural difference. This tension requests a proper ‘choice between universalism and cultural relativism’ (Kaime, 2011, p. 159).
The principles above have been involved in many states’ efforts to improve children’s rights, even though there is no enforcement mechanism regarding the optional protocols to the Convention (Engle, 2011). In 1992, China adopted the Convention and started to improve Chinese children’s rights across the country. One of the most significant steps in its implementation was the development of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors (Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress, 2007). In this law, minors are defined as individuals who are under the age of 18. As part of the society, they have the rights to survive, develop, be protected, and participate. The law states a shared responsibility of various groups to ensure minors’ rights, including the government, society, school, and family. The term ‘minor’ indicates children’s vulnerability and difference from adults, so the law requires specific care and attention to this group. In addition to general rights, the law also details some specific rights of different groups, such as children left behind.

According to the law, it is parent’s obligation to arrange alternative adults to take care of their children when they are away. Although children’s rights can be found in other legislation, China still lacks a systematic framework to address children’s rights (Human Rights in China, 2005).

This study focuses on the needs of children left behind. In rural China, children left behind are a special group who have been drawing more and more social and media attention. As stated previously, parents are expected to arrange children’s care when they temporarily migrate to cities for work. However, due to the household registration system in China, internal migrants confront enormous discrimination when they try to access to compulsory education in cities (Chunli, 2006). For example, most children of rural migrants are not allowed to attend urban schools or have to pay extra fees (Garcia, 2011). To meet educational needs of migrant children, specific schools have been established in some cities, however, these schools’ conditions are
generally not as good as those public schools for urban children. For children who are left behind in their local communities, relatively poorer educational resources in rural areas restrict their learning capacity (Ye, et al., 2010). The uneven access to education for Chinese children is yet to be addressed (Human Rights in China, 2005).

As discussed previously, I adopted a relative position regarding the term ‘needs’, which allows more respect for cultural difference regarding views on children’s wellbeing. The Convention has undoubtedly aroused the attention of policy makers’ attentions across the world. This influence can be found in several needs frameworks for children such as the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families developed in the UK. Compared with the Convention, these frameworks are more specific to a given culture and context, and therefore provide more specific understanding of children’s needs.

In the following sections, I will review two needs frameworks. The first one is the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families from the UK. It is one of the most well known and earliest needs frameworks in Western countries. The other one is the ARACY needs identification mechanism. It was developed in 2010, and therefore provides some new knowledge and trends in constructions of children’s needs.

2.6.2 The UK Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families

The UK Framework (Department of Health, 2000, see Figure 2.1) is an empirically-derived framework developed by the UK government to assess needs of children in need and their families. Targeting all the children in need, the UK assessment framework indicates the transition of the government’s responsibility. It used to focus on the protection of maltreated children, but now has evolved into to include all children’s needs and wellbeing (Parton, 2006).
The systematic framework is constructed in three dimensions: children’s developmental needs, parenting capacity, and family and environmental factors. It is believed that these dimensions can be universally applied to all children (Ward, 1995, as cited in Parton, 2006). Guided by the Children Act (1989), the framework is child centred and ecologically directed (Gray, 2001).

Since this framework was implemented in 2000 across the UK, there have been some critiques from both researchers and practitioners. For example, Calder (2003) argues that it ignores social and cultural influences on children’s development. Therefore, the socio-political environment, such as perceptions of child maltreatment, social policies related to family structure, working patterns, and health, should be included in an ecological approach.
Figure 2.1 The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families (Department of Health, 2000)

This framework outlines the relationship between children’s developmental needs and parenting capacity. These two domains intersect to some extent. For instance, basic care is constructed as part of parenting capacity in the framework, but it can be also seen as part of children’s needs. As this study is interested in constructions of rural children’s needs, it requests a more needs-focused framework that also recognises the community’s roles.
2.6.3 The ARACY needs identification mechanism

The ARACY needs identification mechanism (see Figure 2.2) is currently being trialled to assist any practitioners working with children to provide children and their families with appropriate services. Derived from Bronfenbrenner’s social-ecological approach, the ARACY needs identification mechanism is also child-centred. Within this needs mechanism, the six domains of children’s needs include: physical health; mental health and emotional wellbeing; safety; material wellbeing; learning and development; and relationships. There are some common domains between these two frameworks, such as relations, mental health and emotional wellbeing (named emotional and behavioural development in the UK framework), and physical health.

Figure 2.2 The ARACY needs identification mechanism (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2010).
However, there are two domains that distinguish the ARACY needs identification mechanism from the UK framework: one is safety, which is used to identify risky and harmful factors for children’s development; and the other is material wellbeing, which aims to assess whether children and their families have access to material resources. These two domains are not stated in children’s developmental needs in the UK framework, rather, they are considered as parts of parenting capacity as well as family and environmental factors. Children’s safety needs are well suited in the context of the Australian child welfare system, which is heavily focused on tertiary child protection services (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2010). Physical environment, on the other hand, is supposed to be considered in child welfare services (Zapf, 2009). Material resources, such as spaces in the house, and housing conditions, are essential parts of the physical environment for children’s wellbeing.

Currently, there is no nationwide needs framework implemented in the USA. In 2012, a national report was released, which covered seven key national indicators of children’s wellbeing: family and social environment; economic circumstances; health care; physical environment and safety; behaviour; education; and health (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2012). Although these indicators refer to some conceptual frameworks of children’s needs, they are not able to examine relationships among children’s needs, caregivers, and broader environments.

The Chinese government has not hitherto developed any needs or rights framework in child welfare (Human Rights in China, 2005), and there has been little specific research done in this area. However, a well structured needs framework was needed throughout this study, as it deepened my understandings of children’s diverse needs, and provided insight into the ones that might be overlooked by participants.
It was decided that a suitable framework to adopt in this study is the ARACY needs identification mechanism. Although this framework was developed in a Western context, it allows exploring some common needs that exist among all the children regardless of their cultural backgrounds. For example, children have basic needs for surviving, and they also have needs for learning and development as human beings. These broad needs are inherent throughout their growth in any social environment.

Adopting the ARACY needs identification mechanism is consistent with this study in several ways. For example, it is designed as a wheel, and all the domains of needs are addressed from three spheres: child, family, and community. This ecological consideration highlights the role of community in addressing children’s needs in a Western context. Strong rural communities can provide local residents with a sense of belonging, social identity, and care (Cheers, et al., 2007). Despite little research being done regarding the impact of community on informal kinship care in China, Shang (2008) concludes that extended families can strengthen caregivers’ capacity and safeguard vulnerable rural orphans. Whilst family is a vital resource for children left behind within rural communities, others can certainly support kinship care, including schools and neighbours.

The domain of material wellbeing in the ARACY framework is feasible for the rural context in China, and therefore can reveal more information regarding children’s needs. It is acknowledged that physical and economic environments in rural China can be quite different from those in Western countries. The domain of material wellbeing, in this respect, enables a good understanding of the needs of the relatively economically disadvantaged group, namely children left behind.
Considering the cultural and economic disparities between Western countries and China, the ARACY needs identification mechanism has been used in this study with some caution. For example, mental health is an essential component of children’s needs in the framework. However, in rural China, most caregivers do not recognise this domain, as there is little information about mental health due to generally poor access to high quality medical services.

Safety is another domain that should be clarified in this exploratory study. Most notably, child protection has become a central issue for child welfare research in some Western countries. However, this area is still relatively unexplored in China (D. Qiao & Chan, 2005). Although it is not the major aim for this study to explore child maltreatment, it still worthy to explore participants’ perceptions of children’s safety and need for protection.

2.6.4 Chinese ways of conceptualising children’s needs

In most Eastern countries such as China, there is no specific needs framework for children, much less a theory of children’s needs. This is part of reason that the ARACY needs identification mechanism has been adopted to inform this study. It could be argued that Chinese conceptualisations of children’s needs are largely influenced by Confucianism. Confucianism is one of the representatives of oriental culture, and it has shaped Chinese people’s understandings of life and human beings for over one thousand years. Compared with other philosophical or religious systems in East Asia, Confucianism has a more substantial impact on Chinese people (Yum, 1988). Along with liberalism and socialism, Confucianism is still a dominant intellectual trend in modern China. It proposes commiseration and harmony, but also recognises some Western values, such as human rights and personal indignity (Weiming, 2011). To date, there has been little research conducted on human needs in the context of Confucianism, however, some
researchers have been interested in the connection between Confucianism and human rights (Sim, 2004; Williams, 2006). As discussed previously, human rights and needs share some common traits, so a review of Confucianism’s impact on human rights can shed light on Chinese people’s understandings of needs.

Confucianism is a set of pragmatic rules of daily life, which is derived from the educational, moral, social, political, and philosophical thoughts of Confucius (551 B.C.–479 B.C.) (Lai, 2008; Mok & Defranco, 2000). It is a humanistic world view, which explores an individual’s virtues in the society. Confucianism also pays attention to the needs and interests of ordinary people (C. Gu, 2004).

Confucius promoted five basic virtues, namely benevolence (Ren), righteousness (Yi), propriety (Li), wisdom (Zhi), and faithfulness (Xin). As a fundamental virtue in Confucianism, benevolence means to care about and love people, which is the foundation of being a human being. Benevolence especially values empathy and care when an individual is exposed to suffering. In this regard, an individual’s humanity can be only fulfilled through their kindness and care for others. Based on this view of Confucianism, we can see the Chinese’s community basis and relative character of human rights. This relative stance means human rights exist in individual’s relationships with others (Johnson, 1988). According to Confucianism, human relationships are the basis of the society (Yum, 1988). There are five fundamental relationships in which most human beings are involved in: (1) ruler and minister; (2) parent and child; (3) sibling and sibling; (4) husband and wife; and (5) friend and friend. As familial beings, we are all naturally born and cared for by family members. Family and community are essential for an individual’s survival and achievement (Cao, Chen, & Fan, 2011; Xiao, 1998). Indeed, caring for family members is seen as a moral obligation and part of personal integrity (T. K. Wong & Pang, 2000). Within the home and community environment, benevolence
indicates a deep interest in attending to children’s needs for love and safety. Kin show their moral integrity through benevolence for children, especially when children’s parents are not available.

Influenced by Confucianism, the Chinese family features hierarchical relationships, which means the young should always respect their elders. Chinese parents are expected to play an authoritative role in children’s lives (Yunus, 2005). It should be noted, however, that this role also involves responsibilities. Parents, especially mothers, not only provide education and care, but also assume the responsibility for children’s moral development (Cheng, 2004). Children’s moral formation is achieved in various ways, and Li (propriety) has been seen as one of the standards of moral behaviour. As one of the five virtues introduced by Confucianism, Li represents religious protocol and behavioural propriety in Chinese society. An individual follows ritual to communicate with others and to present themselves in a morally acceptable way (Lai, 2008). In parent and child relationships, parents are required to guide and cultivate children’s morality, especially Li. On the other hand, it is part of children’s needs to learn Li, so they are well aware of their status in a hierarchical society. For example, children need to learn to respect and obey elders, and fulfil their filial piety.

In addition to familial relationships, Confucianism also pays attention to social relationships such as friendship. In contrast to other relationships, which feature unbalanced power and rights, the relationship between friends is relatively equal. Within this relationship, an individual also assumes less responsibility to others, but it is built on mutual trust. This relationship benefits an individual in terms of his/her personal and transpersonal transformation. In other words, the relationships between friends are not for economic or social advantage. Rather, it is humanity oriented, which reflects the cardinal principle of Confucianism (Dallmayr, 2003).
Human rights reflected in Confucianism are different from those of Western worlds, yet founded on similar principles. In Western culture, human rights normally assume an individualistic basis, which means personal interests and autonomy are highly valued. Confucianism, on the other hand, is more community based. The rights in Confucianism are gained through interpersonal relationships, with an emphasis on the common good (D. B. Wong, 2004). Along with benevolence, Confucianism proposes free conscience and personal dignity, which are the basis of human rights (C. Gu, 2004). Harmonious human relationship is encouraged by Confucianism, which requests an individual to think of, and treat, others as he/she would treat him/herself. In this regard, personal dignity is inherent and universal to all human beings, and everyone is expected to think and act from other’s positions. No matter what social role an individual has, his/her dignity should be always respected (Tu & De Bary, 1998). In other words, the equality of the society is based on the recognition of personal dignity. This viewpoint can be applied to children’s need for dignity. Children are human beings with their own rights and freedom, which means adults should take actions to protect children’s personal dignity.

Similar to personal dignity, Confucianism also advocates free speech. It believes that speech is human beings’ basic need to express their ideas and communicate. Free speech should be encouraged without punishment, as it is the way in which people understand each other (C. Gu, 2004). However, it should be noted that this free speech is rooted in a generic conception of rights, as human beings are characterised as relational being (D. B. Wong, 2004). Undoubtedly, conflicts exist when free speech is applied to multiple relationships such as the relationship between parent and child. Traditionally, Chinese parents are in dominant positions at home. Children are expected to respect and obey their parent, which is seen as part of children’s filial piety. In this regard, parents sometimes disregard children’s viewpoints, especially if they believe that adults know better than children.
Education is another human need which has been profoundly influenced by Confucianism. According to Confucianism, education not only provides knowledge, but should also cultivate individuals in terms of virtues. It especially places emphasis on moral education (F. Y. Wang, 2004), and aims to cultivate people’s loyalty, fidelity, and obedience. These characteristics are essential for a society’s stability and harmony (Tran, 2000). In other words, education contributes to an individual’s moral formation, and further benefits family and the whole society. In traditional Chinese society, education is closely associated with a person’s social class, which is mainly judged by occupation and the moral character attached to it. Confucianism particularly values intelligent individuals who have high morals and character. Thus, the potential of an individual to improve their social class and contribute to the society is closely linked to his/her educational level (Huang & Gove, 2012). Most Chinese parents believe education is central to children’s success, and they expect teachers to share the responsibility of educating children. Confucianism acknowledges teachers’ role in transmitting knowledge. And, unsurprisingly, teaching is a well respected occupation in China. Generally, teachers play formal roles and have absolute authority in children’s learning (Su, Su, & Goldstein, 1994).

To sum up, Confucianism’s impact on Chinese people’s understandings of children’s needs is indirect. The way of Confucianism conceptualising children’s needs is reflected through its philosophical thoughts on human beings. Confucianism emphasises human relationships, which are the foundations of the society. Children’s needs are involved in these relationships, ranging from family to broader social environment. The virtues introduced by Confucianism, such as benevolence, guided adults’ caring attitudes toward children, and these virtues also affect adults’ expectations of children’s presence in the society. In addition to Confucianism’s fundamental impact, there are also several contextual elements that influence participants’ especially caregivers’ constructions of children’s needs. These elements will be discussed in Chapter 3.
The review above has presented an overview of children’s needs, ranging from a conceptual base to practical assessment frameworks. It should be noted, however, that the needs of children in informal kinship care are mostly addressed through their caregivers. The following section presents research findings and perceptions on this group, who normally have the closest relationships with these children other than their parents.

2.7 Caregivers

Along with kinship care studies, there have been studies focused on kin caregivers (see for example, Dunne & Kettler, 2006). Kin caregivers play important roles in meeting children’s needs, and they also contribute to the permanence of kinship care (Lorkovich, Piccola, Groza, Brindo, & Marks, 2004). By providing care, kin caregivers feel satisfied to keep their relatives’ children out of foster care, and they are also rewarded by receiving children’s love in turn (Coakley, et al., 2007). However, the burden of caring for a relative's children can be heavy, especially when the children have been maltreated by their parents (Bunch, et al., 2007; Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Gleeson, O'Donnell, & Bonecutter, 1997). Emerging literature suggests that compared with foster caregivers, kin caregivers are more likely to be older, single, and have lower income and educational level (Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Holtan, et al., 2005; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). As age increases, caregivers are more likely to assume caring as licensed caregivers (Swann & Sylvester, 2006). It should be noted that ageing is not always considered as a negative factor for caregivers. For instance, Hayslip, Shore, and Emick (2006) report that older age may indicate greater wellbeing of custodial grandmothers, as well as more positive relationships between them and their grandchildren. These findings are consistent with a study by Goodman (2006), who found that age generally affects a grandmother’s care in a positive way.
For vulnerable grandmothers who are single, having low income or health problems, ageing has negligible negative impact on their wellbeing.

The research, by and large, also indicates kin caregivers’ poor health status. Compared with foster caregivers, American kin caregivers are more likely to suffer chronic illness, and receive medical treatment (B. J. Harden, Clyman, Kriebel, & Lyonsa, 2004). Similar conclusions can be also found in Australian studies. Yardley, Mason and Watson (2009), for example, found that the stress of kin caregivers has been increased due to caring, and significantly more kin caregivers have reported poor health status than foster caregivers. This finding supports an earlier study by Dunne and Kettler (2008), who found that grandparents who care for their grandchildren experience higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression than grandparents who are not involved in kinship care. Furthermore, a relationship between caregivers’ psychological health and social disadvantage is also confirmed. In contrast with formal kin caregivers, informal kin caregivers tend to experience more depression, and have lower level of life satisfaction (Bunch, et al., 2007).

Several factors contribute to caregivers’ health problems, including children’s specific needs, limited financial support, complicated family relationships and structure, as well as a shortage of social services and support (Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Goodman & Silverstein, 2002). Due to the complex needs of children, caregivers’ parenting capacity tends to be limited if only low levels of social support and resources are available (Bamard, 2003 as cited in Dunne & Kettler, 2008). Compared to foster caregivers, kin caregivers are much more likely to be widowed and provide children without another adult present in the household. Moreover, kin caregivers are less likely to be employed than their counterparts (B. J. Harden, et al., 2004).
Generally speaking, providing caring for relative’s children bring considerable costs for kin caregivers (J. Mason, Falloon, J., Gibbons, L., Spence, N., & Scott, E., 2002). In spite of the caregivers’ disadvantages outlined above, accessible financial support for kin caregivers has reduced significantly in the USA (Gibbs, et al., 2006). Moreover, Park (2006) found that some kin households remain poor even after receiving income assistance. Another American study by Brandt (2004) reports that informal kin caregivers confront a variety of difficulties. For example, informal kin caregivers cannot always prove legal custody, so some schools do not enrol the children. These informal kin caregivers also often lack support when the children are in need of medical treatment. Surveys such as that conducted by Shivers (2006) show that existing training programmes for kin caregivers have often failed to meet their needs. It should be noted, however, that in addition to governmental social services, kin caregivers’ capacity for meeting children’s needs is also affected by features of their neighbourhood (Chipman, Wells, & Johnson, 2002).

Although there is a growing body of literature about kin caregivers, there is very limited research on kin caregivers’ subjective constructions on a range of matters, including children’s needs. Much of the current literature has been focused on caregivers’ own characteristics and difficulties, with scant regard to children’s needs. This brief review of the literature underscores the imperative for further examination of children’s needs from caregivers’ point of view. Existing quantitative approaches, including self-reported measures, partly constrain caregivers’ own constructions of meanings. They have to answer standardised questions which do not necessarily capture their instant responses, leaving them little chance of actively expressing themselves. The qualitative approach employed in this study addresses this shortcoming, since it encourages the interaction between caregivers and researcher.
2.8 Chapter summary

This chapter was focused on children’s needs and kin caregivers. In reviewing the literature about the needs of children in care, two major research gaps were identified: the shortage of qualitative research exploring caregivers’ constructions of needs; and little information about the needs of children who are in informal kinship care. In order to explain how children’s needs are understood and addressed by practitioners, two needs frameworks were reviewed. The ARACY needs identification mechanism was chosen to guide the present study, because it is feasible for the context of rural China and highlights the role of community in children’s development.

As this research explores children’s needs mainly from caregivers’ perspective, studies around kin caregivers were also reviewed. Most existing literature is focused on caregivers’ challenges and rewards of providing care, and there is little known about how caregivers perceive children’s needs. This study sought to address this.
Chapter 3 provides a context for understanding the needs of children left behind in rural China. It starts with an overview of economic and social development in contemporary China, and then reviews rural studies in both global and Chinese contexts. To probe deeper into Chinese children’s needs, it also presents information about diverse child rearing practices, especially those in rural China. This section has been organised according to the ARACY needs identification mechanism discussed in Chapter 2.

### 3.1 Contemporary China: the economic and social context

China is the world’s most populous country with around 1.3 billion people. Among 56 distinct ethnic groups, Han Chinese account for 91.59% of the overall population. Unsurprisingly, the diverse ethnic groups have created multiple cultures across the country. As a socialist state, China is governed by a single party, namely, the Communist Party of China. Besides the Communist Party of China, there are eight minor parties which participate in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress. The latter and local People's Congresses constitute electoral system in China, whereby representatives of People's Congresses at different levels represent voters’ civil and political rights (Dillon, 2009). The vast country is governed at six administrative levels: the state, province, prefecture, county, township, and village. Parallel bureaucracies have been established from national to local level. At village level, rural residents vote for a Village Committee which manages all the local affairs.

Before China was established as a communist nation in 1949, it had experienced World War II and the Civil War between the Communist Party of China and the Chinese Nationalist Party. Therefore, the whole country was recovering from civil chaos in the 1950s. From 1953 when the
first Five-Year Plan began, the government started to implement a centrally planned economy. Under the planned economy, the central government directed and controlled economic output and resources distribution. Most products in the markets were produced by state-owned enterprises. The advantages of the planned economy were obvious, as it stimulated industrialization and alleviated poverty. However, to some extent, it failed to balance social production and social needs (Guo, 2012).

During this period, the government also carried out national land reform, through which peasants obtained land ownership. Historically, Chinese peasants were a vulnerable group and exploited by squires. Before land reform, approximately 90% of rural residents were peasants, however, they only owned less than 30% of the total lands in China. Land reform not only improved peasants’ material wellbeing, but was also a catalyst for increased agricultural productivity. It should be noted that, until 1977, China was still a predominantly agricultural economy.

In spite of having a centrally planned economy and unstable politics, China still experienced a healthy growth rate between 1949 and 1978. Since the implementation of reform and opening up policies in 1978, political development in China has gradually progressed. The Communist Party of China has been establishing political stability through political institutionalization, which also contributes to the economic boom (Lee, 2010). With fast-growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), China has become the world's second-largest economy. However, due to its huge population, China's per capita GDP is still average in a global context, which means individuals’ social wellbeing still needs to be improved.

Along with reform and opening up policies, China implemented the ‘one child’ policy which aims to control excessive population growth. The ‘one child’ policy has effectively reduced China’s
population and alleviated poverty, however, it has also resulted in some problems. Chinese parents, especially those who live in rural areas usually have a son preference (refer to section 3.2, p. 53), but they can only have one child due to the restriction. In this case, some parents choose to abort or abandon their first child if it is a girl, so they can have more chances to have a son. Li, Shang, and Cheng (2004) conducted a study about orphans and children who are disabled being abandoned in Beijing, and they found that son preference was an important reason that girls are abandoned. In recent years, there have been some changes regarding this policy. In 2007, the National Population and Family Planning Commission confirmed that the state would still encourage one child, but Chinese parents were then allowed to have a second child as long as the couple are both the only child in their family. In view of unbalanced population growth in different regions, residents who come from Henan province are not entitled to the new policy.

China is composed of four directly controlled municipalities, 23 provinces, five autonomous regions, and two self-governing special administrative regions. Recent figures released by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2010 shows approximately 50 percent of the national population live in rural areas and rely on agriculture. The economic boom and rapid urbanization in China has resulted in ill-balanced development between some urban and rural areas, and a significant income polarisation between urban and rural areas has been witnessed. This polarisation even exists among rural residents, which is closely associated with non-agricultural job opportunities.

The urbanization in China created a significant number of new non-agricultural jobs, which have attracted more and more rural residents who migrated to cities for better income (Du, Park, & Wang, 2005). However, there have been obstacles for rural migrants’ social inclusion, as the central government tends to restrict the fast growth of big cities (Garcia, 2011). The distinct division between rural and urban communities makes it difficult for rural residents to migrate
and obtain an urban identity. This situation is partly attributed to China’s household registration (hukou) system (Du, et al., 2005), which limits rural residents’ access to urban social services. Even though rural residents can temporarily work in the city, their access to social services are heavily restricted compared with their urban counterparts. For example, generally speaking, a migrated worker’s children cannot enrol in an urban school unless the child has an urban hukou. Moreover, the living cost in cities is usually high for rural migrants and their families, which often prohibits these migrant’s children from living with them. Thus, enormous numbers of rural children have been left behind in their local communities, and have to live with their kin.

3.2 Rural research: from international to Chinese context

Most existing studies about rurality have been conducted in urban contexts with the wellbeing of rural children in care largely invisible (McGuinness, 2009). As an increasing body of literature has investigated rural social work (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2001; R. Pugh, 2003), a review of this area contributes to a better understanding of rural children’s needs. Three commonly studied areas have been identified and will be addressed in the following section. They are rural culture, geographical influences on rural residents’ life, and the problems that arise from limited resources (Saltman, Gumpert, Allen-Kelly, & Zubrzycki, 2004).

Edwards, Torgerson, and Sattem (2009) argue that rural residents are generally socially conservative. Consequently, they tend to protect their life styles as well as the reputation of their hometown. For example, homeless young people might experience social stigma if receiving allowances from the government, as this behaviour could be regarded as being against local ways of coping which emphasise individual self-reliance. These preferred coping strategies are underpinned by a strong tendency for cooperation and participation in the local community (M.
E. Edwards, et al., 2009). Connections within the local community, especially with kin, are generally reliable resources for rural residents. Seeking assistance from the government may involve the risk of being judged negatively by other community members (Owens, Richerson, Murphy, Jagelewski, & Rossi, 2008). Thus, compared with their urban counterparts, rural residents have lower expectations of social services (R. Pugh, 2003). However, rural communities typically have strong informal social support (Abebe & Aase, 2007; Beach, 1995; Shang, 2008). In Beach’s (1995) study, U.S. rural parents preferred informal child care support. However, the link between cultural beliefs and their actual choice of social services is not always obvious.

Generally speaking, rural communities are portrayed as having an atmosphere of harmony for local residents. Compared with multicultural urban areas, rural communities are more likely to be culturally homogeneous. However, Murdoch and Pratt (1997) note that more attention should be given to differences in rural areas. Some scholars in the UK have explored the identity of rural woman and labour from a feminist perspective. Little (1997) argues that, generally speaking, the roles of wives and mothers take priority over employment for rural women. As Hughes (1997) further points out, “domesticity was central to their gender identities and their feelings of self-worth” (p. 135). In rural USA, more frequent contact with kin has been found among older retired women than men. These women act more actively and rate higher affectional closeness with kin families than men (Dorfman & Mertens, 1990).

The geographical features of rural areas affect their residents’ lives and social service provision in many ways. For rural social care practitioners, these include the physical environment, economic basis and the physical infrastructure within a community (Cheers, et al., 2007). Being isolated in remote regions, some rural residents have to travel long distances to obtain necessary
services or goods. This is especially difficult if public transportation is not available (Pullmann, VanHooser, Hoffman, & Heflinger, 2010). Moreover, living far from a metropolis often results in significant increases in the cost of living (Zimmerman, Ham, & Frank, 2008). In addition, residents in remote areas can even suffer intense social isolation due to the vast space and low population density (R. Pugh, 2003).

The economic base of rural areas can be affected by many factors. In addition to physical environments, social and political changes also play a role in altering the economic base. In this regard, rural economies often strongly rely upon support from government, either in terms of labour force input or financial assistance (Roberts, 2003). It is not uncommon for rural areas to be in poorer condition than that found in urban environments (R. Pugh, 2003). For instance, US studies show that rural residents confront poor phone services in terms of coverage and price (Zimmerman, et al., 2008), undeveloped public transportation (M. E. Edwards, et al., 2009), as well as limited day-care centres (Beach, 1995). Similar findings have been also found in Asian countries, such as China. Taking health resources as an example, fewer hospital beds and equipment are allocated to rural Chinese residents than their urban counterparts. Moreover, the disparity of quality of equipment between the urban and rural is more significant than that of quantity (Hua Li & Chang, 2008).

Social services provided for rural residents are generally not as good as those for urban residents. The imbalance results from the higher cost of social services provision in rural areas (R. Pugh, 2003), which is associated with geographic features of rural areas (Zimmerman, et al., 2008). In addition, some literature also documents the shortage of committed practitioners in rural social work. For example, Lonne and Cheers (2000) reported a high rate of staff turnover and recruitment difficulties among Australian practitioners. Apart from the physical environment,
insufficient support from employers and organizations are also reasons for the rural practitioner’s early departure.

Rural residents’ participation in social services, on the other hand, also draws researcher’s attention. For example, Pullmann and colleagues (2010) interviewed some rural American caregivers who foster children with emotional problems. They found that these caregivers often felt isolated and only half of them were engaged with social service agency. Although more specific services are usually provided, the stigma of receiving mental health services was the major barrier that resulted in the caregivers’ absence. This finding is consistent with Edwards and colleagues’ (2009) study mentioned above. Consistent with the review above, it can be argued that rural residents usually prefer informal social support rather than formal assistance, especially if formal services involve perceived stigma. Their social network involves kin, neighbours, and close friends. These groups are usually reliable resources when rural families are in need of assistance. Nevertheless, close ties in some small communities can be also detrimental. Some rural residents may feel stressed to be judged by other community members, or concerned about confidentiality of receiving social services.

To sum up, besides culture, geographic features can also lead to a way of rural life that is distinguishable from that of urban communities. For this study which was focused on rural caregivers’ perceptions of children’s needs, it is important to examine community members’ interactions along with accessible informal support. For example, dispersed population distribution could make rural caregivers isolated and excluded from high quality social services.

For caregivers who care for their relative’s children, living in rural areas may be somewhat like a double-edged sword. They are isolated and have limited access to social services. On the other
hand, they also benefit from frequent connections within local communities. Based on a close social network, kin caregivers are able to receive a variety of assistance. A review of rural studies in Western countries sheds light on the context which influences Chinese caregivers’ constructions and behaviours. It provides a general understanding of rural life, which is integrated with traditional Confucianism as presented in Chapter 2. The following section will address these contextual elements in more detail.

Given the unbalanced development between rural and urban areas in China, the central government has implemented an array of policies which aim to improve rural residents’ wellbeing. For example, the rural cooperative medical service is a major strategy which addresses rural residents’ heavy financial burden of medical treatment. Participating in this insurance like service is voluntary, and they can claim parts of their medical treatment expenditure from the local government. Before its launch in 2002, around 90 percent of rural residents had been paying all the costs of medical treatment on their own. Hence, more often than not, rural residents would not go to see a doctor until they were seriously ill (Liu & Rao, 2006). The rural cooperative medical service has not only increased rural residents’ hospitalization rate, but has also improved medical infrastructure and service ability in rural areas (Z. Jiang & He, 2009).

In addition to health care, rural residents also confront the high cost of education. The government has announced a policy which waives tuition and textbook fees in rural primary and middle schools. Nevertheless, the disparity between the rural and urban remains obvious, as the government’s investments on rural compulsory education is much less than that in urban areas (Bao, 2006).
In some parts of China, Western religions have a profound impact on rural residents’ daily lives, even though some centuries-old Asian religions, such as Taoism, and Buddhism, have existed much longer. Among the five mainstream religions, Christianity has been dominant among Northern rural communities. The dominance of Christianity in northern regions is more obvious than the south, since traditional religions in the north have largely disintegrated. Ancient folk religions and ancestor worship in South China, however, still actively influences rural families (Sun Yefang Foundation, 2009).

The coexistence of nuclear and extended families has been replaced by the predominance of the nuclear family in China (Y. Wang, 2003). This change has resulted in less available kin support in child care, which makes it more challenging to care for vulnerable rural children such as orphans (Shang, 2008). Even so, average family size in rural areas is still generally larger than that of the urban ones (C. Tang, 2005). Rural residents generally have a preference for sons. As a traditional value in China, the male shoulders the responsibility of carrying on the ancestral line and supporting parents. The role of the female, by contrast, is largely seen as to give birth and take care of all the family members. It is worth noting that, however, the concept of this patriarchal value can differ to some extent. Due to lagged development in Northeast China, the notion of clan has not been well developed. Therefore, local residents’ preference for boys is not as strong as found in other parts of China (He, 2009).

In rural China, residents heavily rely on informal support. Besides core family, kin, neighbours, and friends are all important resources for most rural residents. They may even play a more significant role than the government. Among these groups, kin are found to be more supportive in terms of finance, labour and information (Chang & Feuchtwang, 1996). In addition to the commonly recognised support, religious groups are also considered as social support in some
rural areas in China. For example, Gao’s case study of Mao village (1999) found that local Christians maintain close connections and provide assistance if anyone suffers from illness or debt.

Traditional family culture still dominates the daily lives of rural residents. A preference for sons indicates patriarchal authority within a household. Women, on the other hand, are expected culturally to maintain a patrilocal marriage and take care of the whole family. However, private support from kin family, neighbours, as well as close friends is widely used by rural residents, especially when they encounter emergencies or illness. In addition, Western religions, such as Christianity which promote a close connection among believers, have prevailed in northern rural areas. In this respect, it not only provides rural residents with spiritual support following the collapse of traditional folk religions, but also creates a social network which can secure them against family misfortune (Sun Yefang Foundation, 2009).

Needless to say, a good understanding of gender, religion, family structure and social support in rural China is essential for the present study, as these factors all influence rural children’s development to some extent. For instance, nuclear family structures have reduced the complexity of family relationships and built closer emotional ties between children and their parents. At the same time, these children are often seen as the only hope in the family, so their parents have become increasingly prone to have higher expectations of the children’s achievement (C. Wang, 2009). On the other hand, substantial numbers of children left behind still rely on kin families’ support, but migration makes informal support less accessible due to geographic distance (Luan, 2009).
3.3 Child rearing

Based on the review of rural studies above, this section is focused on the impact of culture on child rearing practices, especially those found in rural China. The rich literature addressing child rearing in diverse cultures reminds us of the relationship between child rearing attitudes and caregivers’ responses toward children’s needs. The following review is organised according to the ARACY needs identification mechanism.

3.3.1 Health and emotional wellbeing

The term health in this section incorporates both physical and mental health, and the latter is usually associated with children’s emotional wellbeing. A parent’s attitude towards children’s health needs can be reflected in their valuing of children. For instance, in Cuba, children are considered as the most valuable resource and their needs take priority over any other matter. Therefore, children are treated as first priority if they suffer medical shortages (Estrada & Canals, 2008). In an Australian study by Cuskelly (2006), parents continue to live with their adult children with intellectual disability, as they see it as necessary for their children’s quality of lives. Similarly, Torres Strait Islander parents believe children have a special need for emotional care if they are sick or hurt (Kolar & Soriano, 2000).

There is a lot of cultural diversity in child rearing, especially with regard to children’s health and emotional wellbeing. To ensure their infant’s comfort, Aboriginal Australian parents check their children regularly to see if they are awake and ready for the next meal. In contrast, Anglo-Australian parents are more sensitive to children’s physical distress signals, such as crying (Yeo, 2003). Affectionate and warm care also commonly exist in African parents’ child rearing, who anticipate children’s every need and address them accordingly. Young African children are
usually cared along with emotional security, and they are rarely separated from their mothers. It is not uncommon that these children sleep on the back of their mothers or other relatives. Parents’ sensitivity and delicate care benefit children in the long term. When they grow older, these children usually adjust well to being touched by strangers (Lambo, 1973). As part of stimulation, Brazilian parents especially value communication with children, which contributes to children’s bonding and emotional development (Vieira et al., 2010).

In China, many parents consider children as part of “bones and flesh”, so they treat the children like their own bodies to make sure the children are valued and well protected. However, the over concern from parents sometimes also provokes children’s struggle for independence (Lew, 1998). Although many studies have been conducted on parenting attitudes, little attention has been drawn to parents’ subjective constructions of children’s health, especially physical health. The present study partly addresses this research gap by examining caregivers’ child rearing experiences.

3.3.2 Material wellbeing

Material wellbeing includes life sustaining necessities required for children’s daily lives. In an Australian study by Downie, Hay, Horner, Wichmann, and Hislop (2010), children who lived with their grandmothers were found to be happy with their material needs being met. The material resources include food, clothes, bed, TV, as well as other home appliances. Likewise, Vietnamese parents believe it is important to provide children with a well-balanced diet, as well as a healthy developmental environment (Kolar & Soriano, 2000). The material wellbeing of children left behind is associated with the level of economic and social development in China.
Besides food, clothing, and living space, access to computer is now also seen as important for children’s development (C. Wang, 2009).

Although socioeconomic status plays important roles in addressing children’s material needs, children from low-income families are not necessarily emotionally disadvantaged. For example, Chin (2001) found that African-American children from low-income families are able to construct their childhood in an active way. They mediate material oppressions through their social interactions. It should be noted, however, that these African-American children may attach great emotional energy to their belongings. Due to constrained spending, they value small items, such as new shoes, which may be considered as less valuable by their White peers. Pugh (2004) also conducted an ethnographic investigation on low-income families, and majority of her participants are African American. She found that resource constraints do shape these families’ constructions of child rearing. And, more importantly, children from low-income families see money as both necessary and unpredictable. Due to instability of available money, low-income parents are not able to use money to modify their children’s behaviours in a timely way, such as rewards and encouragement. Moreover, when these parents command, they can only rely on their emotional bonds with children as material power is lacking.

3.3.3 Safety

In some Western countries, such as Australia, children’s safety generally refers to child protection. In other words, ensuring children’s safety normally means protecting them from maltreatment. Since culture affects parents’ attitudes about child maltreatment, the difference between reasonable punishment and child abuse should be treated carefully across different ethnic groups. Generally speaking, parents who value children tend to be less tolerant of
mistreating behaviours. For instance, physical discipline is more commonly used among African-American parents than Hispanic and European American parents (Ferrari, 2002).

The terms ‘child maltreatment’ and ‘child abuse’ are rarely used in China, and the government does not interfere into family’s private lives unless severe harm has occurred. In traditional Chinese values, the child is considered as part of parents’ property. Thus, it is socially acceptable for parents to take whatever punitive actions to educate their children (D. Qiao & Chan, 2005). Child sexual abuse, however, is seen as a different case in China. Consistent with most Western studies, Chen, Dunne, and Han (2004) found that child sexual abuse is not necessarily associated with socio-demographic factors. For example, the likelihood of children being sexually abused between urban and rural areas is similar. However, little research has been conducted among rural children.

While child abuse and neglect have attracted enormous attention around the world, some studies have reversed this stereotyped view of safety. For example, it is argued that children’s safety should include “security, stability, dependency, protection, and freedom from fear, anxiety and chaos” (Elton, 1996 as cited in Prince & Howard, 2002, p. 29). Based on this interpretation, it is reasonable to assert that to develop well, children need a safe and supportive neighbourhood. Parents in remote areas appear more likely to have attachment to physical space than their urban counterparts (B. Edwards, 2006). Speaking generally, advantaged communities, on the other hand, facilitate good quality parenting (Simons, Johnson, Conger, & Lorenz, 1997).

In rural China, children usually play together within the community and spend a lot of time outside their homes (Chi & Rao, 2003). The loose control reflects Chinese parents’ confidence in their community’s safety. However, many Chinese parents are also found to be overprotective,
overcaring, and restrictive for young children (Lew, 1998). This has been found to be associated with the ‘one child’ policy, as parents usually spoil the only child they are allowed to have (Jing & Zhang, 1998).

3.3.4 Learning and development

Children’s learning and development can be reflected in their parents’ child rearing beliefs. Undoubtedly, parents’ expectations of children’s development differ across different cultures. For example, Russian parents allow far less freedom with their children’s activities around home than their American counterparts, while the latter group also shows less spoiling attitudes (Tudge, Hogan, Snezhkova, Kulakova, & Etz, 2000). Generally, Anglo parents expect children’s independent behaviour and obedience/self-regulation at an earlier stage than Vietnamese parents. Furthermore, compared with their Vietnamese counterparts, Anglo parents value more independence and social skills (Wise & Silva, 2007). Encouragement of children’s independence also exists in other Asian countries such as China. Lin (1990) found that Chinese parents even have higher rating on children’s independence than do Anglo-American parents. They see this as an indicator of Chinese parents’ high value of children’s achievement, which means children’s independence is essential for their adaptation in social change.

As discussed previously, Confucian tradition has a significant socio-cultural influence on Chinese people. Generally speaking, Chinese parents value children’s moral socialization, and they also cultivate children’s filial piety values (Lieber, Fung, & Leung, 2006). As traditional cultures in China, filial values mean the fulfilment of a child's obligations and respect for their parents. Although Chinese parents value children’s independence in social environments, they normally show more parental control of their children than Anglo-American parents within the
family (Lin & Fu, 1990). Similar to Chinese parents, Indian parents also value children’s obedience, but they are more likely to accept children’s individual differences and emotional expression (Raoa, McHaleb, & Pearsona, 2003).

Most Chinese parents value children’s learning and have high expectations of their scholastic achievement. Chinese parents hope their children can succeed by receiving good quality education (A. Wang, 2008). For rural parents, this expectation may be more related to short-term economic rewards instead of moral cultivation, since a good educational background in China normally brings better job opportunities. Chinese rural parents consider children’s school performance as the teacher’s responsibility. Therefore, rural parents are more actively engaged in housework rather than children’s schooling (Chi & Rao, 2003). On the other hand, rural parents’ attitudes are found to be associated with their own education level. Parents with higher education are prone to invest more on children’s educational development, such as purchasing educational materials or guiding children’s education (P. H. Brown, 2006). If educational opportunity is limited within a family, boys are more likely to receive education than girls. This partly illustrates rural residents’ preference for sons (Y. Li, 2007).

### 3.3.5 Relationships

Children’s relationships normally involve those with parents, kin, as well as other community members. The quality of relationship between parents and their children can be indicated by their interactions. A comparative study shows that the interactions between Korean parents and their children are more negative than that of Australian counterparts. For instance, less warm care and involvement in children’s cognitive development are found among Korean parents. Similar findings have been also found in Chinese parents, who live within a collectivistic culture.
Compared with Australian parents, Chinese parents are less expressive in caring for, and responding to, children’s needs (Oh, Shin, Moon, Hudson, & Rapee, 2002).

In some Western countries such as Sweden, the divorce rate is very high. The breakup of parents’ intimate relationships can bring children enormous stress and trauma. These children are more likely to experience loss and develop other emotional problems (Trost, 2008). In China, as autonomous marriage has gradually replaced pre-arranged marriage, the divorce rate has been increasing accordingly, perhaps leading to similar stress issues for children (L. Hu, 2004).

Chinese parent-child relationships are affected by a variety of factors, including the ecological context, family-level life stressors and social support. Both authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles exist, and they are prone to change according to parents’ adherence to traditional Chinese values (Yu et al., 2005). However, Chinese children are generally trained to obey their parents and be dominated through parental decision making. Compared with boys, girls are typically considered weaker by their parents. Thus, Chinese parents sometimes apply more restrictions on girls’ social life in order to protect them (Lew, 1998).

In some communal cultures, child rearing is a shared responsibility within the family. In other words, children are not only cared for just by their parents, but also receive care from their relatives. For example, African Americans highly value family ties, and children are seen as the shared concern of extended families. In this regard, kinship relations are essential for children who suffer from separation or loss from their parents (Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). Similarly, Australian Aboriginal people also have strong bonds to their families and communities. Australian Aboriginal children are usually cared for by several mother figures, and it is not uncommon for them to develop multiple attachments. Their collective way of rearing children
allows more support and resources, which contributes to children’s emotional health throughout their life course (Yeo, 2003).

Chinese society features collectivism, where extended family harmony is well recognised and valued. In some parts of southern rural China, up to five generations reside in the same village. Local wet-rice farming facilitates the interactions among family members, which contributes to intimacy and relatedness of kin (Santos, 2008). Although contemporary China is experiencing an increasing trend towards the nuclear family, extended family child rearing traditions still commonly exist among rural residents (Shang, Saldov, & Fisher, 2011). Generally, grandparents are the primary kin caregivers when children’s parents are not available. Even in urban areas, 50–70% of young Chinese children are mainly cared for by their grandparents (J. Jiang et al., 2007, as cited in Li, 2005; Lu, 2004). Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese grandparents assume the role mainly based on their strong family obligation. However, this caring behaviour can be also seen as a reciprocal exchange, which benefits both caregivers and children in the long run. For example, after children have grown up, they are expected to take care of their caregivers (F. Chen, Liu, & Mair, 2011).

3.4 The needs of children left behind in China

Internal rural-urban migration has become a social problem in China, and the state has implemented several policies to protect rural migrants’ rights in cities. These policies aim to eliminate discrimination existing for rural migrants, however, the positive outcomes have been limited (Meng, Manning, Shi, & Effendi, 2010). The emergence of children left behind in China results from unbalanced development, especially different social structures between rural and urban areas (Ye, et al., 2010). As this rural group grows bigger and bigger, the state has realised
the necessity of addressing their needs. Although there is still no national policy specific to children left behind, the state has included them in the latest legal document for protecting minors, which clearly states their needs for care and protection (Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress, 2007).

A good understanding of the needs of children left behind is fundamental for promoting their rights (Aidong Xu, 2009). Children left behind have a variety of needs. Some of these needs commonly exist among most Chinese children, while the others, however, are specific to children’s separation from their parents. According to Xu’s study (2009), the needs of children left behind are mostly reflected in their emotion, study, and daily lives. She found that children left behind have a strong need for spending more time with their parents, and these children feel happy if this need is being met. Although kin caregivers care about these children’s education, a need for appropriate tutoring was reported by most children. As these children are not cared for by their parents, they also reported the need for emotional support, especially communication with adults. However, as a results of deficient parental care and intimacy, the emotional needs of children left behind are normally overlooked or fail to be met (Ye & Pan, 2011).

The majority of studies on children left behind have been focused on the impact of parental migration. Although some studies have shown that children left behind and their caregivers may benefit financially from remittance from children’s parents (see for example, X. Zhang & Wu, 2003), Ye and Pan (2011) concluded that parental migration usually influences the needs of children left behind in negative ways. These children not only had less time to play and study than their peers, but also suffered from psychological pressures. These findings are consistent with those of Hu, Li, and Liu (2011), who found that the overall level of children’s welfare became lower after being separated from their parents. Although children’s material welfare
increased, their social and mental welfare level declined accordingly. Compared with their counterparts, children left behind were 2.5 times more likely to suffer from loneliness. The likelihood of developing loneliness was even greater if children left behind were cared for by their grandparents (Jia & Tian, 2010). Moreover, the safety of children left behind has been a big concern, and they were more likely to suffer non-fatal injury than children who are cared for by both of their parents (Shen et al., 2009). However, living with kin caregivers still benefited children left behind, as being with non-kin caregivers put children at high risk to manifest emotional and behaviour problems (Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010).

Extensive research has also been done upon the health of children left behind. Generally speaking, children left behind have poorer health-related quality of life than their counterparts, and this mainly results from psychosocial dysfunction (Jia, Shi, Cao, Delancey, & Tian, 2010). Higher rates of anxiety tendency has been found among children left behind than their peers, and this anxiety is involved in both study and interaction of children left behind with people (L. Qiao, Chen, & Yuan, 2008). It should be noted that findings of mental health problems of children left behind have been controversial among some researchers. Although most researchers believe these children suffer severe problems, some argue that the problems are not as severe as are being reported (Q. Jiang & Björn, 2010).

Based on a quantitative study with 744 children left behind, Luo, et al. (2008) found that these children have less food intake than their peers. Although the basic care of children left behind was addressed by their grandparents, these children’s nutrition level was lower than that of the control group. Similar findings can be found in other studies. By contrasting parent caregivers and non-parent caregivers of children under seven years old, Tan, et al. (2010) found that non-parent caregivers had relatively poor nutrition knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. These non-
parent caregivers’ nutrition knowledge, attitudes and behaviours were positively associated with their willingness to care. Another comparative study by Gao, et al. (2010) found that school age children left behind were more likely to have a less healthy diet and physical activities than children who live with their parents. Therefore, it is unsurprising to find that children left behind have higher rates of stunted growth and being underweight (All-China Women's Federation, 2007).

The education of children left behind is another area that draws researchers’ attention. It has been found that the academic standing of children left behind is not as good as that of children who live with their parents, and this is especially the case for children’s confidence and interest in learning (Liang, Hou, & Chen, 2008). A higher rate of dropping out of school has been found among children left behind than their counterparts (Y. Gao, et al., 2010). Moreover, children for whom both parents migrate have worse academic self-concepts and teacher-student relationships (Yao & Mao, 2008).

To sum up, these risk-based approaches uncovered a variety of problems with regard to the behaviours of children left behind. Hence, the overwhelming emphasis on family function disorders has overlooked some protective factors of kinship care (Jing Luo, et al., 2009). Similar to Western studies on children in care, most existing Chinese studies on children left behind have been based on scientific indicators. Needless to say, there needs to be more qualitative studies to explore diverse needs of these children from caregivers’ perspectives. Qualitative approaches encourage caregivers’ own constructions, which also deepen researcher’s understandings of caregivers’ sense making process.
3.5 Chapter summary

Based on a review of children’s needs, this chapter focused on the environment and culture that affects caregivers’ understandings. The social and economic development in contemporary China was firstly reviewed. Since the present study was on rural children, studies around rural context were firstly reviewed, with three aspects being discussed: rural culture, geographical influences on rural dweller’s lives, and the problems that arise from limited resources. Rural residents generally receive poorer social services than their urban counterparts. However, they benefit more from strong social connections within communities, and this is especially the case for rural children who live with their kin. A specific review of rural China was then conducted, including the impact of the economic boom on rural areas, social policies targeted at rural residents, family values and structure, as well as the informal support among rural communities.

Following this was a discussion of child rearing practices around the world. This section aimed to better understand how child rearing values and traditions can be different across diverse cultures, and how these differences influence caregivers’ understandings of children’s needs. The needs of children left behind were then discussed, and the need for exploring protective aspects of informal kinship care was identified. Given these pertinent contextual factors, a qualitative research method was selected and it is to the methodology that we now turn.
4 METHODOLOGY

Chapter 4 begins with outlining the research design, and then describes the development of the central research question, going on to explain my theoretical perspective decisions. A justification is provided as to why this study’s inclusion of social constructionism is warranted, and illustrates how this lens has affected my view of participants’ experiences. Details of the data collection, including sample selection and semi-structured interviews, are also provided. Following this, the next part of the chapter presents data transcription and translation. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach is considered suitable for guiding data analysis in this study. A discussion of the study data’s trustworthiness and the ethical considerations concludes the chapter.

4.1 Development of the research design: drawing on social constructionism

While several practical needs frameworks have been developed in different countries, studies specific to the needs of children in care have been scarce (J. Mason & Gibson, 2004). As elaborated in Chapter 2, most existing research has focused on the outcome or impact of alternative care on children. Although these studies are vital for revealing children’s needs at a practical level, it is the concept of need that underpins the development and implementation of family and child services (Percy, 1999), which will benefit from including a cultural dimension. In this respect, exploring caregivers’ constructions of children’s needs deepens our current understandings of child services at the theoretical and program levels.

As little is known about informal kinship care (Gleeson, et al., 2008), this research adopted an exploratory design, which allowed me to use imagination and research children’s needs from
their original situations (Stebbins, 2001). The central question developed in this research was:

*What are the needs of children in informal kinship care in rural Jilin Province, China?*

This overarching question provided a broad framework which enabled me to elicit caregivers’ and school personnel’s views. In talking with my participants, I sought to examine cultural and environmental circumstances that affected participants’ feelings and understandings of children’s needs. I believe that there are reasons behind the “what” question above and it can only make sense in a given context. In the course of my investigation, I learnt how knowledge was achieved though participants’ interactions with other community members (Burr, 1995). Consistent with the central research question, I adopted a social constructionist perspective. For a study that aims to explore children’s needs in a Chinese context, social constructionism justifies the necessity of involving multiple voices, and enables consideration of the impact of rurality and culture on participants’ subjective experiences.

Social constructionists critique the notion of objective fact and acknowledge relative views of the world. This stance is “against authority, against the status quo, against established versions and taken-for-granted realities” (Potter, 1998, p. 41). In contrast with traditional ways of seeking truth based on some assumptions, methodological relativism means this process is rooted in a rhetorical interpretation (Potter, 1996). From this perspective, the traditional way in which objects are categorised as false and true is abandoned. The validity of the truth, namely the way of talking and writing, can only be achieved in a particular context (Gergen, 1999).

In response to the criticism that social constructionism precludes the possibility for intercultural understanding, Gergen (1994) challenges the traditional way in which people understand language. He points out that the meanings of a language are dependent on its social circumstance.
It is the conditions across diverse cultures that provide the possibility of comparing different systems of meaning. Therefore, how participants construct children’s needs is explored through the Chinese culture they inhabited (Gergen, 1994). The knowledge of participants is constructed based on their own understandings from particular social and cultural perspectives. In this regard, Chinese context underpins the constructions of participants’ knowledge, which is socially negotiated (Raskin, 2002). Specifically, participants interact with others during their daily lives, and use language to construct and share their understandings of needs. In other words, social interactions are the source of sense-making, and truth can be no more than participants’ subjective ways of understanding their worlds (Burr, 2003).

Therefore, the present study has been interested in how participants interact with others and further develop their own knowledge. It can be argued that participants do not just passively accept local conventions; instead, they keep changing their own understandings based upon ongoing social interaction within their local communities, so I have to keep in mind that nothing can be known for certain (Young & Collin, 2004). As this study was conducted in rural communities, frequent interactions were reported among my participants. For example, caregivers normally have close relationships with their kin and neighbours. However, it is not just what everyone knows within a local community. But, more importantly, caregivers present themselves by integrating discrete elements of their own knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

Social constructionism challenges taken-for-granted knowledge, and criticises traditional psychology for assuming Western ways of understanding the world as the ‘right’ ones. Within social constructionism, all forms of knowledge are historically and culturally specific, which means to understand participants’ knowledge, we must not only associate it with the time, but
also locate it within the cultural context (Burr, 2003), in this research the Chinese context. This context is central to the construction of children’s needs (Rodwell, 1998), and it shapes the interplay between participants’ views and children’s needs. Social norms maintained by participants cannot be overlooked in this study, since they are the representatives of cultural reality (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg, & Echevarria-Doan, 2008). While mainstream studies on kinship care have been conducted in Western countries, they cannot be simply interpreted as truth as multiple realities are constructed across diverse cultural contexts. Exploring informal kinship care in rural China enriches existing knowledge about this world-wide phenomenon and, hopefully, also challenges taken-for-granted realities constructed by Western communities.

4.2 Entering multiple participants’ subjective worlds as a researcher

As stated previously, social constructionism adopts an ontological position of relativism and encourages diverse views, as there is no sole explanation of reality. Focused on school-age children’s needs, the present study selected two groups as participants, namely, kin caregivers and school personnel. When parents are away, school-age children spend most of their time with caregivers and school personnel. Thus, these two groups are both very familiar with left-behind children’s needs. Involving different voices enriched the information I gathered, especially when these two groups have different roles in left-behind children’s daily lives. Children left behind were not considered as participants, primarily because I did not have much experience in working with and interviewing children. Moreover, the time limit set by the Scholarship for data collection did not allow me to reach more groups.

The reviewing of studies conducted in the area of kinship care showed that caregivers were normally the researchers’ first priority as participants (see for example, Dunne & Kettler, 2008;
Gleeson et al., 2009; Goodman, Potts, Pasztor, & Scorzo, 2004; Shang, 2008; Simpson & Lawrence-Webb, 2009). Given their vital role in left-behind children’s lives, caregivers were also chosen as primary participants in this study. The following data analysis, especially the development of needs themes, therefore, was mainly based on caregivers’ accounts. Some caregivers reported that these children have even developed a closer relationship with them than with their biological parents. In this respect, caregivers’ understandings of left-behind children’s needs have a direct impact on children’s wellbeing. Nevertheless, as a hidden group, caregivers’ voices are rarely heard in rural China (Ye, et al., 2010). This study aimed to explore caregivers’ own constructions of children’s needs, which also examined their capacity for addressing these needs. The findings based on caregivers’ reports can be used in both practical and academic communities. In this regard, eliciting caregivers’ viewpoints arouses both policy-maker and scholarly attention in terms of empowerment.

As I was interested in school-age children’s needs, I also invited school personnel to participate. School personnel are more involved in children’s studies and group activities, and thus offer a different viewpoint from that of caregivers. Education has been highly esteemed in Chinese society (Cleverley, 1991), and ‘teacher’ is an authoritative occupation that gains enormous respect (Chan & Chan, 2005). Thus, Chinese parents generally show respect and courtesy toward teachers, and follow their advice on children’s development. My interviews confirmed this proposition, as interactions with school personnel obviously affect caregivers’ constructions. Moreover, a part of school personnel’s responsibilities is to ensure children’s safety and provide appropriate guidance. In view of their impact on children’s wellbeing, school personnel’s experiences should not be ignored.
Constructionist researchers normally use qualitative methods to collect data. Compared to quantitative methods, qualitative methods are more useful for obtaining in-depth information about complex and multi-layered phenomena such as feelings, subjective experiences, and emotions (Baker & Charvat, 2008). Qualitative approaches target unquantifiable realities, and allowed participants to share their perceptions with me. By utilising qualitative approaches, I am able to understand better how meanings are constructed within the context of each participant’s daily life. Moreover, I can examine the social settings with which participants are affiliated, as well as the ways in which participants interpret their surroundings through symbols, social roles, and so forth (Berg, 2007).

More often than not, researchers encounter obstacles during investigation, and qualitative methods are at an advantage of smoothing my communication with participants (Glaser, Strauss, & Ebrary, 2006). The interplay between qualitative researchers and participants is influenced by a variety of traits, such as gender, ethnicity, age, and social class (Padgett, 2008). Based on spoken words and observations, qualitative methods enable me to interact with participants directly and closely (Rodwell, 1998). Few kin caregivers in this study had ever participated in any social research. When they first met me, most of them were quite shy or felt a bit uncomfortable to express themselves. To break the ice and establish trust with my participants, I used some dialect in our conversation. As a researcher who grew up in a small town, I have the same ethnicity and similar social class as participants. This advantage, together with my familiarity with rural life, contributed to the development of open and trusting relationships.

Among multiple identities I carried (Padgett, 2008), I found the role of researcher was weakened to some extent, which actually helped me to enter the world of participants. Once they knew that
I had some sense of common ground, most caregivers appeared more relaxed and could talk openly.

Being familiar with local values deepened my understanding of participants’ views. Nevertheless, this advantage could also bring some risk, as I was also influenced by the pre-existing knowledge which potentially compromised my ability to critically analyse. It should be noted, however, that all social science research is attached to researcher’s own beliefs and feelings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Even though I tried to approach participants without any predetermined definition of children’s needs, it was not completely realistic to dismiss my personal values. I acknowledge this dilemma and have been open to data that does not fit with my experience (Denz-Penhey, 1997). For example, before entering the field, I thought parents were the most important figures in children’s lives. As my interviews progressed, I found children’s relationships with others were more complicated than I expected. Caregivers reported that while parents were away, some children had developed close attachments to caregivers. Children’s reactions to caregivers’ absence or illness could be stronger than they experience for their parents. I chose to adopt caregivers’ understandings, as it is participants’ experiences and expressions that really matter rather than myself (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Along with conflicts, my communication with participants was a collaborative process from which both of our constructions were reshaped (Gergen, 1999; Rodwell, 1998). During the course of interviews, a few participants seemed to presume that I wanted to hear the problems of children left behind. I then clarified my position of opening to their overarching viewpoints, and further inspired participants to reveal both protective and risk factors for children in informal kinship care.
4.2.1 The selection of sample site

This study adopted a purposive sampling strategy to explore the experiences of kin caregivers and school personnel in a specific area of rural China. Purposeful sampling, maximizing the understandings of left-behind children’s needs within a Chinese context was used to obtain insight to informal kinship care rather than to generalize a population (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). In other words, purposeful sampling generalised the nature and interpretative process involved in participants’ experiences rather than distribution (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009).

Given that most existing studies have been conducted in South China, the present research chose a sample site elsewhere, namely, in Northeast China. The literature review provided the evidence that culture and economy vary across different regions in China, so this research offered a new perspective with a geographic consideration.

Specifically, the proposed participants were recruited from the rural areas of Shijiapu Town (see Figure 4.1). Administratively, this town belongs to Lishu County. Shijiapu is a medium-sized Town in Jilin province in Northeast China. The total area of Shijiapu is around 202 km², including 15 villages and one central community. Shijiapu has a population of around 34,670 and most residents live in rural areas (Lishu County Government, 2012). Traditional agriculture is the main economic base in Shijiapu. Besides farming, industries such as cement and ethanol production and water bottling also contribute to the local economy and employment. A national highway passes the central community, so residents can easily travel out of the town. However, it is very difficult for villagers to get to the central community, because the public transport option connecting it to the villages is not well developed. It is common in rural Shijiapu that three
generations reside in the same community, and this residential style enabled me to explore kin’s roles in meeting left-behind children’s needs.

![Figure 4.1 The location of sample site (red capital A)](image)

By using purposive sampling, I was able to make my choice purposefully to maximize and minimize differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Besides region preference as mentioned above, I chose Shijiapu Town as sample site because the Central Primary School in town has been awarded as a National Level Demonstrative School for its outstanding work with children left behind. The school has not only established the profiles of children left behind, but has also organised several seminars for kin caregivers and their families. It was anticipated that participants from this area were more experienced in supporting left-behind children. Given that better school services had been provided to these children, participants, especially school personnel, were most likely to have broad and detailed understandings of children’s needs.
Children’s needs refers to broad concepts which cover a variety of areas, and a relevant understanding can only be built up by involving a wide range of views and situations. Therefore, kin caregivers of any age, gender, race, and marital status were eligible for this study, as long as they had been assuming full-time caring for their relative’s children for at least two months. In Shijiapu, villagers live on farming and they are seen as rural residents. Since I was interested in rurality’s impact on participants’ experiences, I restricted kin caregivers to those who lived in the villages rather than the central community. For school personnel, I not only recruited senior staff who were involved in management roles, but also frontline teachers who had left-behind children in their class. This sampling strategy promoted possibilities of revealing diverse constructions by capturing the broadest information.

Participants were recruited with the help of local authority, which was approved within the ethics application at the university. It was ensured that all the information collected from participants was confidential and no authority figures were aware of who participated in this study. There were no non-governmental organisations providing social services in the rural areas of Lishu County, and it was not feasible for me to locate participants on my own. Since this research focused on school-age children’s needs, I contacted the Bureau of Education in Lishu to seek their support. They agreed with my proposal and introduced me to the Principal of Central Primary School in Shijiapu Town. Initially, I planned to reach village schools in Shijiapu area as well. However, I was told that all the village schools had been closed, because local residents preferred to send their children to central school for better education. Therefore, central primary school at Shijiapu was where I recruited all my participants.
To ensure the credibility of the findings, the size of sample should refer to respected research conducted in this field (Baker & Charvat, 2008). My literature review shows that existing similar studies have sampled from seven to 13 participants. For example, Simpson and Lawrence-Web (2009) conducted interviews with seven African-American grandmother caregivers to explore community resources in informal kinship care. Shang (2008) made her conclusions based on 13 in-depth interviews with kin caregivers in rural China. The present study was conducted on my own, and I was only able to spend two months to complete data collection. Thus, it was not feasible to plan for a large sample. However, I decided that interviews of around 20 caregivers and five school personnel should enable me to obtain an in-depth understanding of left-behind children’s needs.

4.2.2 Recruiting participants

Based on the Principal’s agreement, the flyers for recruiting caregivers were handed out to each class at school. These flyers clearly stated the research aims and some details about the interview. Unfortunately, after two week’s waiting, only two caregivers contacted me and inquired about the research. I then talked with the Principal and he provided me with an information sheet with all left-behind children and their caregivers’ contacts. I called them one-by-one and explained in detail about this study. Although just a few turned me down, most of them agreed to participate.

A total of 23 kin caregivers from 19 households took part in the interviews. The caregivers ranged in age from 42 to 71 years old. Among these caregivers, 22 of 23 were children’s grandparents, and the other was the child’s uncle who also lived with the child’s grandmother. The time period that caregivers had cared for the children ranges from two to 13 years. Most (16) caregivers were children’s paternal grandparents. Almost all caregivers made their living on the
farm, and some of them also worked temporarily in the city. It should be noted that grandmothers were normally the main caregivers. However, male caregivers also made up a high proportion of my interviewees, because some of their partners were not available to participate. In some cases, both of the children’s grandparents were at home and willing to join the interview, so I included both of them to gather diverse perspectives (See Appendix A: Profile of Caregivers and the Children in Their Care).

Based on each caregivers’ consent, I conducted two rounds of interviews with most (16) of them. The first interview was about 30 minutes long, and elicited the information about the caregivers’ family background, including how the child came into their care. The second interview, which took around one and a half hours to complete, explored the caregivers’ understandings of children’s needs (see Appendix B: Interview Guide for Caregivers). I divided the interviews into two sections, so caregivers would not feel exhausted from being interviewed for too long. Considering travel difficulties for caregivers, I chose their homes as first priority to conduct interviews, so that they could feel more relaxed and comfortable. On the other hand, other neutral locations, including a motel room and school classroom, were also arranged based on participants’ preferences (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009).

School personnel were contacted through the Principal. Two senior staff, including the President of the School Labour Union and the dean, were recommended to this study by the Principal. They were both in charge of administrative affairs regarding left-behind children. Three frontline teachers were selected based on my discussion with the President of School Labour Union. They all had rich experiences in working with children left behind. The interviews with school personnel lasted around one hour, and questions were more focused on their own reflections and
school resources available to left-behind children (see Appendix C: Interview Guide for School Personnel).

4.3 Data collection: Interviews

An appropriate research method facilitates the researcher to address specific questions (Willig, 2001). The central question guiding this study was: *What are the needs of children in informal kinship care in rural Jilin Province, China?* As I was interested in examining local constructions, the answers could only be captured from authentic depiction of participants’ experiences and feelings. Therefore, I chose interviewing as an avenue to enter their subjective world. As stated previously, interviewing was an active interaction between participants and me, whereby the ‘how’ of their lives in a rural context was explored (Fontana & Frey, 2008). By conducting interviews, I witnessed the process of participants recreating those traditional terms in a contemporary context (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009). For example, as previous researchers have identified education was highly valued, this study adds to this understanding that education to children left behind was seen as a way which entitled them to high quality life in the city.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants’ constructions (see Appendix B: Interview Guide for Caregivers, & Appendix C: Interview Guide for School Personnel). This approach allowed me to ask systematically designed questions, and also to probe beyond prepared questions (Berg, 2007). To avoid restricting participants’ own constructions to the framework, I firstly asked open-ended questions such as “What comes to your mind when I say children’s needs?” My interview direction then followed participants’ initial answers rather than prepared questions. The structured questions regarding the domain of children’s needs were only asked after the participant had finished reporting their own meaning constructions. The ARACY
needs identification mechanism, in this respect, functioned more like a reminder, which aimed to gather information about formal themes that my participants did not mention.

Another advantage of using semi-structured interviews was that I could handle a variety of obstacles in unpredictable circumstances. As noted above, most caregivers in my study were senior aged rural residents with low education, and their response sometimes was not well organised, and occasionally was even overly emotional. If I rigidly stuck with structured questions, some information might not be able to be revealed smoothly. For instance, there was a woman who kept talking about her personal suffering from past marriages, so I tried to deflect her with prompt questions about children when these fitted into her conversation.

A good rapport between interviewers and interviewees determines interview success (Berg, 2007). I appreciated participants’ ways of expressing themselves and had the freedom to ask flexible questions. Semi-structured interviews, in this regard, encouraged participants to talk openly and make sense of their lives with their own social identities (Willig, 2001).

4.4 Data analysis: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method

All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Electronic recording facilitated the interview by allowing me to interact with participants, and capture accurate information which may be missed from my memory (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009). In order to address participants’ potential fear of being audio-recorded, I explained clearly that recording was only used for research purposes and would be kept confidential (Willig, 2001). Audio data was transcribed into Chinese text. By transcribing, non-written conversation was transformed into
prototypical text with structures and boundaries, so I was able to analyse the data without missing its original meanings (Johnstone, 2008).

At this stage, I utilised computer software to facilitate data analysis. Nvivo 9 was used in this study to help me to search, link and categorise data, as well as keep a record of my own thinking (Weitzman, 2008). It should be noted, however, that qualitative data analysis software is just a tool which should not replace my creativity as a researcher. The manual process of identifying prevailing themes and developing a needs model was guided by an IPA approach (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Originating from psychology, IPA has been used in diverse disciplines to explore sense-making based on participants’ personal experiences. In accordance with social constructionism, IPA highlights the impact of social-cultural process on our personal lives and understandings (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008).

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) developed several stages in the analysis of text, which enabled me to locate the themes and interpret participants’ accounts in a particular context (See Appendix D: the Process of Coding the Data from Caregivers). The initial stage involved close reading and noting. I read each transcript at least twice before taking any notes, so I could be fully familiar with the conversations between participants and me. Through repeated reading, I was able to enter participants’ worlds and, at the same, be aware of my active role as a researcher. After reviewing the structures and sections of participants’ stories, I began to take note of whatever came to my mind. This was an exploratory step, so my comments were not just focused on children’s needs, but also included my reflections on participants’ roles as well as the broader context, such as family, community, and social change in China. This process was time consuming. However, it was essential for the following stage of theme development. And, more
importantly, the notes made at this stage helped me to understand the process of participants’ sense-making. For example, I noted that one caregiver frequently mentioned her low education level. When I was analysing her viewpoints regarding children’s development, my earlier note contributed to explaining her lack of confidence.

At the next stage, I developed diverse themes based on the exploratory notes described above (J. A. Smith, et al., 2009). This process was more about selecting participants’ accounts and categorising them as instances of particular themes with relevant meanings. The concepts of children’s needs, for example, were identified and attached with phrases that described participants’ understandings. Although the present study adopted some phrases from the ARACY needs identification mechanism, the development of themes at this stage was based on participants’ own accounts in Chinese language context. Themes that emerged here were diverse and yet to be organised. Some of them were centred around children’s needs, others related to caregivers’ caring experiences, or children’s characteristics as perceived by both caregivers and school personnel.

The emergent themes then were categorised and connected to each other. Different strategies were used to find the patterns among diverse themes, especially those relevant to children’s needs. From this point, needs were categorised according to their functions or meanings for children’s development. Furthermore, by creating super-ordinate themes, similar sub-themes were gathered together and some of them were merged into one theme. For instance, education was created as a super-ordinate theme, which included two sub-themes: formal education’s significance and the other one being schooling support. The first one captured participants’ understandings of formal education’s meaning to children who had been left behind, and the
latter one was action-oriented, which referred to caregivers’ practices to support children’s schooling.

While the content of participants’ accounts determined the relationships among themes, numeration was considered as an indicator of each theme’s relative importance. Taking education as an example again, it was initially created as a theme of personal development from caregivers’ accounts. However, as data analysis progressed, I found most caregivers considered education superior to other needs, and they repeatedly emphasised education’s significance for a child’s future. In Nvivo 9, education emerged 119 times as a node, which accounted for around three fourth of personal development (149 times, see Appendix E: Themes Compared by Number of Coding References). In view of the significance of education to participants as well as its frequency, it was then developed into a super-ordinate theme parallel to personal development. It should be noted that some uncommon needs were also included in the final model. These themes were not reported as frequently as other common ones, but they were parts of children’s systematic needs and were believed to have vital roles in children’s development.

After constant pattern searching across all the cases, children’s needs were eventually categorised into eight super-ordinate themes, including 31 sub-themes and 996 codes (or references as called in Nvivo 9). Figure 4.2 (p. 85) provides diagrammatical relationships among these eight themes (refer to section 7.1, p. 224 for detailed relationships among these needs). The red box indicates how caregivers highlighted education’s central meaning to children’s development. As they stated, to ensure children’s education, other needs such as basic care could even be compromised to some extent. Emotional needs and mental health, relationships, empowerment and agency, and safety are placed within same green box, because they are seen to
be particularly important for children whose parents are absent. On the other hand, basic care and physical health are more fundamental needs, which can be applied to most Chinese children regardless of whether or not they have been left behind. All these needs further support children’s need for personal development. These eight needs can be addressed at four different levels, including children left behind, family, community, and sociocultural context. It should be noted that these needs are not discrete, rather, they are integrated together.

In addition to children’s needs, the present study developed a few subordinate themes throughout data analysis, such as the characteristics of children left behind, caregivers’ motivations and roles, environmental factors, etc. Some of these themes will be addressed in the following chapters, as they deepen our understanding of children’s needs in terms of eliciting participants’ sense-making process.

4.5 Trustworthiness of the data

The assessment of qualitative data is distinguished from that of quantitative research. Qualitative researchers use different criteria for evaluating qualitative studies, such as truthfulness, goodness, integrity, etc. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this constructionist research, trustworthiness was used to assess research rigor, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Rodwell, 1998).

4.5.1 Credibility

Credibility means the researcher should conduct the study by using appropriate approaches, which can ensure accurate information and findings. Several strategies can be used to increase
Figure 4.2. The needs model of Chinese rural children left behind
research credibility, such as triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks (Rodwell, 1998). As noted above, this study was conducted in rural China where local post was hard to access, so it was not realistic to send participants a transcript from Australia.

However, I used the second interview with caregivers to double check my understandings of their initial reports. This on-site approach smoothed my communication with participants, and also improved the accuracy of collected data.

All data in this study was transcribed and analysed in Mandarin. There were around 1,000 codes based on participants’ reports, so it was not feasible to cite all of them in this thesis. Since each theme developed above were based on a number of codes, only the most relevant codes were chosen to best describe and highlight particular themes. Hence, not all participants were quoted in each theme reported here. To ensure the credibility of translation, I firstly translated some quotes from the participants, and then asked two Chinese PhD candidates who studied in Australia to check my translation. Before becoming involved in this work, they all agreed to protect participants’ confidentiality. Confusing terms were discussed together and optimal ways of translating were sought. Given the time restrictions and availability of these PhD candidates, not all the quotes could be discussed in this way. However, this approach did improve my ability to reveal participants’ real thoughts, and was also used in the deeper levels of data interpreting.

4.5.2 Dependability

In constructionist research, dependability means all technologies used to collect, analyse and interpret data should be consistent with constructionism philosophy (Rodwell, 1998). From the earlier stage of data collection, the constructionist perspective has been used throughout the
design process, with my particular interests being in how children’s needs are constructed in a Chinese context. In order to explore multiple understandings of children’s needs, school personnel were included in the present study even though caregivers were chosen to be the primary participants. Furthermore, using semi-structured interviews allowed meanings and realities to be understood in a specific cultural context, and this is well located in the position of social constructionism. Collected data were analysed by using the IPA approach. This approach and social constructionism share the commonality of focusing on personal experiences, and both of them recognised the cultural influence upon participants’ feelings and understandings.

4.5.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the relationship between raw data and the theory generated, which means research findings should be based on, and linked to, data. In this case, other researchers who use the same procedures can understand and follow the process which generates the final findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). All the data from this study, including audio files, transcripts, coding materials, and memos, were securely stored. In the following chapter, I will use participants’ translated quotes to illustrate the results of this study.

4.5.4 Transferability

It is worthy to note that transferability is not the same as generalizability. Rather, it allows the meanings to make sense in a similar context. For the present study, Chinese participants’ understandings within a rural context cannot be entirely applied to the Western world. However, parts of the findings still make sense in other parts of China or even societies that share similar cultures. As a researcher, I have been illustrating a detailed process of knowledge generation,
and providing sufficient background information so that readers can determine if transferability is feasible.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Social scientists have an ethical obligation to ensure the rights, privacy and welfare of their participants (Berg, 2007). For qualitative research, it is essential for the researcher to follow the procedures developed by organisational bodies (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009). This study was conducted with the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Queensland University of Technology, and it was confirmed as meeting the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research in Australia (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009), the standard, which was also applied to my research in China (see Appendix F: Human Ethics Approval Certificate).

A major concern about ethics is potential distress or harm to participants, which can be caused by the research (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009). The present study involved caregivers as primary participants, and it was considered as low risk as there was no harm likely to be done to them. However, I was aware that talking about children who were separated from their biological parents could cause some caregivers discomfort. Therefore, most interview questions were designed based on their child rearing practices, and the content involved was no more than their daily conversation. In the course of interviews, I observed carefully and was sensitive to the participants’ responses. Once discomfort or upset occurred, I let participants take a break and asked if they would like to continue. Participants were told that they had the right to withdraw from participation at any time during the interview without comment or penalty.
In Shijiapu and most rural areas of China, counselling services have not been established. Rural residents who need emotional support commonly share their experiences with friends or kin among local communities. Therefore, this research did not provide any counselling services for participants, and this is culturally appropriate in this part of China.

Another ethical consideration refers to the confidentiality of participating. All the details about this research were clearly stated on the flyers or directly explained to participants, emphasising that interview data would be protected by pseudonym. All the data gathered is only used for academic purpose and will not be disclosed in a way that can lead to identification. Prior to the interview, I also asked for participants’ informed consent to make sure that they were participating voluntarily. Participants were told that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Given that local transport had not been well developed and most caregivers were old, I chose interview locations based on their preferences. In most cases, I travelled to caregivers’ homes and made sure interviews did not interrupt their farming and other responsibilities.

4.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I provided rationales for adopting social constructionism and a qualitative approach to explore kin caregivers and school Personnel’s understandings of children’s needs. The details of research procedures were then described, including selecting the sampling site, collecting data by using semi-structured interviews, analysing data based on IPA, and ensuring trustworthiness of data. Ethical considerations were also discussed, especially the issues around participants’ risk and confidentiality.
5 CAREGIVERS’ MOTIVATIONS AND THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

In this chapter, I report the accounts of caregivers and school personnel. These accounts have been structured to address the central research question: “What are the needs of children in informal kinship care in rural Jilin Province, China?” Before depicting participants’ constructions of children’s needs, I will first present caregivers’ motivations for providing care for children left behind, because these motivations influenced the ways in which caregivers perceived the children and their needs. The main body of this chapter is centred around children’s specific needs which particularly captures the needs relevant to children’s separation from their parents. Relatively common needs of children left behind, which can be applied to most Chinese children, will be addressed in Chapter 6.

5.1 Motivations for caregivers

This study sought to examine children’s needs through kin caregivers’ social constructions, since this adult group’s understandings directly impact on their child rearing practices. In other words, children’s wellbeing is closely associated with their caregivers’ subjective perceptions. It can be argued that some of children’s needs are not being addressed well, because their caregivers have been unaware of or overlooked them.

Acknowledging caregivers’ motivations helped me enter caregivers’ inner world and gain access to their understandings in this particular context. They indicate caregivers’ perceptions of their own children, children left behind, as well as the whole family. These motivations are important in terms of explaining caregivers’ particular attitudes and behaviours, especially probing the
protective aspects of informal kinship care. Moreover, they influence caregivers’ choices when they have to balance the interactive needs of children left behind. This is particularly the case if children’s needs are conflicting.

Caregivers’ motivations were sought by asking ‘Why did you decide to take care of the child (ren)?’ Answers revealed participants’ understandings of children left behind in a family context. As noted earlier, almost all the caregivers in this study were the children’s grandparents, so it was not feasible to compare their roles with other kin caregivers. However, interviews revealed high commitment among grandparents who were willing to care for these children, even though it involved sacrifice. Most grandparents took caring for their grandchildren for granted, even if other kin in extended families were available to step in. Grandparents’ roles as kin caregivers, in this regards, underpinned their close relationships with children left behind, whereby these children could have a sense of belonging.

Four main motivations were identified from caregivers’ interviews, (1) supporting their own children, (2) love for the third generation, (3) family ties, and (4) family obligation. This study suggests that no matter what relationships had been developed between kin caregivers and their own children, they were willing to provide assistance as parents. In this regard, caregivers saw themselves as the older generation who should take the guardian role when their own children migrated to cities. This arrangement was based on family harmony and, therefore, caregivers valued the role of children’s parents even though they were absent. Generally speaking, caregivers accepted the viewpoints of children’s parents regarding child rearing. On the other hand, children’s parents reportedly respected kin caregivers as elder family members, so they allowed freedom for kin caregivers in their child rearing roles.
Different motivations were found between paternal and maternal grandmothers, as their perceived roles in children’s lives were not the same. In order to deepen our understandings of caregivers’ motivations, I will present their accounts separately. However, I should note that these themes were not discrete; instead, they were likely to overlap to some extent. It was not uncommon that caregivers reported multiple motivations during the interviews. For example, many caregivers indicated how much they loved the children left behind, even though caregiving was perceived as a way to support their own children. In other words, the different motivations were not conflicting. Rather, motives combined together to build the caregivers’ determination. Since caregivers reported strong motivations to take care of the children, it was not surprising to find that their child rearing practices prioritised children’s needs.

5.1.1 Supporting their own adult children

Caregivers generally showed strong intention to support children’s parents. Children’s parents, as caregivers described, had to leave home and work hard in the city. These parents were reluctant to make a living in this way but local farming could not provide adequate income. Parents’ migration was considered as being for the good of the family, especially the children. For instance, a caregiver said:

Our family, to be honest, is poor. So how can we keep our children from going out to make money? They cannot raise their children without making money (C05).

As part of the whole family, caregivers wanted to make some contributions in terms of sharing the burden of child rearing. Almost all the caregivers expressed their willingness to take care of children during parents’ absence. Caregivers chose to assume this role because their own
children needed them, and they believed it was their responsibility to offer help as parents. This motivation was voiced spontaneously even when caregivers felt that children’s parents had let caregivers down. A caregiver (C23) shared a lengthy story that particularly demonstrated this embodied motivation. She had three marriages and her son from her second husband came to her home when he was 11. The stepfather, who was her current husband, felt reluctant to raise this son, so she worked very hard to prevent her husband’s complaints. Her son, however, did not appreciate her suffering and often quarrelled with her. He gambled without stable income. His wife could not tolerate him, so they finally divorced. Although the caregiver was extremely disappointed with her son, she still chose to take care of his daughter when he worked in another province. Nevertheless, it should be noted that her son’s behaviour had influenced her feelings toward her granddaughter. The woman was not sure whether her granddaughter would take care of her in the future, so she did not expect any reward from caregiving.

Caregivers’ support for their own children was a big part of their motivations for caring for children left behind. Almost all the caregivers accepted the children’s parents’ absence. These parents were seen as doing the right thing for the whole family, so the children could be financially supported. Most caregivers did not hesitate to assume this role, as they saw supporting their own children as their role.

5.1.2 Love for the third generation

Most caregivers were grandparents and, during the course of interviews, emphasised their love for the third generation: children left behind. This love, which had an intergenerational feature, was different from that for their own children. More precisely, some caregivers reported loving their grandchildren more than their own children:
As I said, this is another generation, and it is not like my own child. I love my grandson even more than my own children\(^1\). Seriously, this is different. I buy whatever she likes. (C22)

Anyway, I like raising this granddaughter more than my own children. I’m willing to pay whatever it costs. (C02)

Take the woman outlined earlier (C23) for example, even though she did not expect to be rewarded for taking care of the child, she described her deep love for her granddaughter:

My family has only got one (grandchild), so I spoil her like she is the apple of my eye. She is the third generation, so I spoil her more than my own children. I have never spoiled my own children like this. I particularly spoil her. I can seriously slap my own children if they don’t behave well, but I wouldn’t do that (to her). Even if I’m extremely angry, I just yell at rather than slap her. (C23)

Exploring deeper behind caregivers’ love, we can find that caregiving provided them with new meaning to purpose in life. As most caregivers in this study were in their 50s or 60s, there were a few who reported that they felt a bit flat from time to time, especially when their own children were away. Grandchildren, in this regard, provided caregivers with companionship and purpose. More importantly, caregivers could find hope for their lives with these children:

People around my age, generally speaking, live for the next generation. Otherwise, we are now around 50 and can think about nothing when we close our eyes. What’s the point

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\(^1\) As an old characteristic of the Chinese society, parents normally have a son preference. Some parents even call a girl as ‘son’, which shows their love for her is equal to that of boys. In this case, the caregiver called the girl as grandson because she really liked this child. This typical way of address girls will repeat in the following quotes.
(of living) then? … The next generation are happy, then we are happy to live. On the other hand, you can only be proud and motivated to live when you have the next generation. If I don’t have grandsons, then life is just to witness what is happening in China, work, eat, and sleep…(C15)

Most caregivers reported they loved children left behind more than their own children. Thus, these caregivers were more than happy to care for the children, as their own children were away to make money. These caregivers found new meanings of their lives from taking care of the children, and they also rest hopes on this new generation. This love, which will be addressed in the following sections, impacted their understandings and actions regarding children’s needs.

5.1.3 Family ties

Family ties were a predominant motivation mainly found in paternal grandparents. Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, most paternal grandparents perceived themselves as children’s priority caregivers when parents were away. Therefore, maternal grandparents only played an alternative role, and most only provided care because children’s paternal grandparents were not available. One of the paternal caregivers (C06) insisted her grandson should stay with her. She worked around 70 hours per week to raise the family, but said she did not mind hardship and preferred to look after the grandson herself. The child’s maternal grandmother lived in another town where local schooling was better, however, this caregiver turned down the maternal grandparents’ offer of support. The woman even indicated that she could not bear missing the child if he was not in her care. As she further stated, the child was the source of her motivation to work extremely hard.
Paternal grandparent’s motivation can be best explained by their understanding of family. Under the same family name, children were expected to be a close member of the paternal household. Most paternal caregivers chose to take care of children mainly because they belonged to their sons:

I have determined to raise him until he grows up, even though I’m old. I’m doing this because he is the child of our family, and the child of my son. (C01)

How can paternal and maternal grandparents be the same? (They are) not the same. Even the children are not the same…Old ideas…He is the child of the Wang (pseudonym). Daughter and son’s children are different. (C17)

Along with paternal caregivers’ family ties to children left behind, they also described their determination to take care of the children. Since the children carried their blood and hope, paternal caregivers were willing to sacrifice themselves to ensure the children’s development:

Now I just (live) for this grandson and will provide whatever schooling he needs, although I’m old and in poor health…I do whatever I can to send him out (of the village)…(C01)

I just hope the child can have some achievements. As grandfather, I’m willing to make every effort, whatever, to bring him up. Anyway, I try my best. (C03)

One paternal grandfather (C19) said, “raising grandson should be taken for granted”, and therefore he “assumed this role without any doubt or regret.”
5.1.4 Family obligation

Maternal grandparents normally assumed the role of caring for children left behind when their paternal grandparents were not available. In contrast with paternal grandparents’ motivation in terms of fulfilling family obligation, maternal grandparents seemed more passive about stepping up to look after these children. As noted earlier, some children’s paternal grandparents were not capable of raising children for several reasons, such as ill health or poor finances. Under these circumstances, maternal grandparents expressed complicated feelings. They loved the children and wanted to support children’s parents. More importantly, they were motivated by the need to ensure the children’s wellbeing. They could not allow their grandchildren to be unattended or even in poor quality care. Maternal grandparent’s motivation, in this regard, was part of their obligation as children’s closest extended kin. The following accounts describe the ways in which maternal grandparents expressed this responsibility:

There was no one to care for him and what should I do? I said ‘since no one is available, then there is no other choice. He has to be here’. (C10)

This child has been with us since he was born. His mum did not have enough breast milk. Both of his paternal grandparents have physical illness, so he cannot go home…So his maternal grandmother has been taking care of him. (C13)

His paternal grandmother passed away after his birth, so we had to take the burden. We cannot see the child being poor or unattended. (C14)
As can be seen, when paternal grandparents were not available, maternal grandparents stepped up to take in the children left behind, motivated by their concern about the children’s wellbeing based on a sense of shared responsibility.

To sum up, motivations for paternal grandparents are slightly different from those of maternal grandparents. This difference reflects caregivers’ roles in children’s families, which is influenced by traditional Chinese culture. Apart from the difference, this study also found common motivations shared by both groups. As grandparents, they all showed deep love for the family, especially for children left behind. This love provokes passionate commitment, which undoubtedly affects caregivers’ ways of understanding and addressing children’s needs.

5.2 The specific needs of children left behind

Children’s needs (as outlined in Figure 4.2, p. 85) constructed by participants were categorised into eight themes: (1) emotional needs and mental health, (2) relationships, (3) empowerment and agency, (4) safety, (5) education, (6) basic care, (7) physical health, and (8) personal development. As this study adopted a social constructionist perspective, I was particularly interested in the participants’ subjective perceptions of needs. Thus, the development of themes was based on participants’ reported experiences and feelings rather than any theories. As stated earlier, I first coded comments about things children required in their lives, so the common feature of these codes was that children left behind needed to grow up and develop well. It should be noted, however, that many codes were derived from caregivers’ caring stories, so they looked more like statements from an outsider rather than children themselves. In order to better preserve participants’ original meanings, I used translated lay language to tag the codes.
As coding progressed, I realised that participants’ understandings of children’s needs were predominantly located across physical, emotional, and developmental areas. Physical areas covered children’s requirements for basic living, and they are relatively visible to others, such as food, clothing, and physical health. The emotional area involved children’s inner state of mind, which is associated with their mood or relationships with others. These subjective feelings and emotions were usually masked but could be interpreted by adults such as caregivers. Children’s typical needs located in this area included being comforted and being respected regarding preference. The last area was underpinned by participants’ developmental expectations of children. This area included requirements so children could achieve the goals set up for their future. These three areas indicated the most important factors for children’s wellbeing, which helped me to collect sub-themes together and finally categorise them into eight themes.

These themes will be explained in detail through the following section. As the breadth of participants’ accounts on each theme is not equal, the numbers of sub-themes under each theme have been spread out accordingly. Table 5.1 summarises these sub-themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional needs and mental health</strong></td>
<td><strong>The need to:</strong></td>
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<td><em>Be understood</em></td>
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<td><em>Be free from pressure or anxiety</em></td>
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<td><em>Manage trauma/grief</em></td>
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<td><em>Receive age-appropriate care</em></td>
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<td><em>Receive encouragement and reward</em></td>
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<td><em>Receive physical affection</em></td>
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<td><em>Have a sense of home</em></td>
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<td>Category</td>
<td>The need for:</td>
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<td>Relationship</td>
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<td>Be treated fairly</td>
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<td>Have a stable environment</td>
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<td><strong>The need for:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relationships with caregivers</td>
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<td>Relationships with other relatives</td>
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<td>Relationships with teachers</td>
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<td>Empowerment and agency</td>
<td><strong>The need to:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Be respected regarding preference</td>
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<td>Have rational communication</td>
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<td>Safety</td>
<td><strong>The need to:</strong></td>
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<td>Have physical safety</td>
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<td>Be protected from others</td>
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<td>Education</td>
<td><strong>The need to:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Receive formal education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Receive educational support</td>
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<td>Basic care</td>
<td><strong>The need for:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Food and clothing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Personal hygiene</td>
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<td>Physical health</td>
<td><strong>The need to keep well</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td><strong>The need for:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discipline and restriction
Play activities
Moral guidance
Relationship and social skills

The need to:
Be guided to independence

Table 5.1 Sub-themes of children left behind’s needs

This chapter starts with the first four themes because they particularly capture participants’ reflections on how children’s separation from their parents impacted on their needs.

5.2.1 Emotional needs and mental health

Emotional needs and the mental health of children left behind is a predominant theme that has emerged from participants’ understandings. As the title suggests, it refers to children’s intrapsychic demands which further affect their psychological wellbeing. It covers a broad variety of human feelings and emotional response, such as love, happiness, anxiety, frustration, and depression. In this study, participants frequently described children’s emotions due to parents’ absence, and they also reported the actions they had to take to meet the children’s needs and improve their emotional wellbeing.

5.2.1.1 The need to be understood

Having their situation understood by participants was central to emotional wellbeing. Children in this study were seen as being timid following their parents’ departure. The term ‘timid’ was used by both caregivers and school personnel. According to their interpretation, being timid means
children lacked courage or felt reluctant to openly express their needs. For example, a child might like a particular dish on the table and wanted to try it, but he had a mixed feeling of being shy and scared and did not express himself. This characteristic was not only found in the family environment, but also commonly existed at school where children interacted with their peers. Some children left behind were seen to lack confidence when they played with others. They might choose to escape when being bullied rather than fighting back, as they did not have parents’ support as other children did.

According to caregivers, some children were even timid at home, despite the fact that they were the closest kin to children while parents were not around. In this respect, participants emphasised the importance of entering children’s subjective worlds in order to understand their thoughts. For example:

Sometimes she quarrels with others, but she won’t tell me when she gets home. The other day I noticed she wasn’t happy, so I asked her what happened. She said she had been at loggerheads with a classmate. I told her teacher, and the teacher talked with me for one hour. She was all good afterwards. (C07)

There were some cases where caregivers reported being actively involved in children’s conversations. It should be noted that most of these communications were centred on children’s meal and clothing choices:

I ask her, “grandson, what would you like to eat today?” She says whatever she likes. She likes meat. Every weekend I cook stewed rib for her. (C07)
Sometimes we go out and I ask what he likes, then I buy the things he asks for. He
doesn’t propose to buy anything. He never asks. (C03)

Although some school staff members criticised how little caregivers spoke to children left behind
about their schooling, a few caregivers mentioned that they occasionally asked about children’s
school life. However, it mostly happened while children were in the right mood:

Sometimes I also would like to chat with her. Sometimes she doesn’t feel like it, and she
won’t talk if she is watching TV. (C16)

School personnel also identified the children’s need to be actively communicated with. One
school staff member (S04) reported that communication was not just scolding, which often
happened among caregivers. She said communication indicated how children were educated, and
adults should keep in mind that every child is different. Another school staff member illustrated
how she communicated with her own child:

She told me the teacher is too strict with them, and they don’t like the teacher…As parent,
I talked to her, “Every teacher is for your good. Even if someone is your teacher for only
a day, you should regard her like your parent for the rest of your life. You must respect
your teacher…If you don’t like the teacher, then it means you don’t like the subject. Then
you won’t do well in the subject…I talk with her like this. But the rural grandparents
don’t understand this…” (S02)

Besides school personnel, some caregivers were also aware of the limitations of their
communication with children:
Sometimes I don’t know (how to communicate) very well. Just like older generation, I’m not as good at communication as others. Some people do, but I don’t know how to communicate. (C10)

Caregivers also mentioned that they tried hard to understand but could only assume the situation, so they were not confident in interpreting what children were thinking. In the following quote, a caregiver explained why his grandson (eight years old) rarely talked about missing his parents:

It seems that sometimes he has something in mind…I think he misses his parents quite often, but he doesn’t talk about it...He is afraid that we might accuse him. I guess so. If he mentions his dad or mum, he is afraid of being sent away. He may have this consideration. This is only my opinion. He is still young, and we cannot communicate. (C15)

Similar experiences were also found in other caregivers’ stories. For example:

One day, she just deliberately didn’t do something as I told her. Sometimes she just makes trouble for me. Maybe her mind is in a tumult or something…like missing her mum, but she doesn’t talk about it. She just makes trouble. (C16)

Children’s facial expressions were generally regarded as good indications of their moods, which normally stimulated caregivers’ concerns:

You can see it. You can see it just at that moment. Her little face was cold, with tears running in her eyes. So I asked, ‘Grandson, what happened to you?’ She then talked. (C22)
Although caregivers tried their best to understand children, some school personnel were critical that caregivers’ care was not meticulous. The following comments from two school personnel illustrated this point:

They (caregivers) don’t sit down and communicate with children every day. For example, “How was your day? Were you happy today? Whom did you play with? What did you do?” Or use more current expressions: “Did you ask your teacher any questions?” Our Chinese education is more about “Did your teacher ask you any questions?” I found caregivers….They don’t raise these kind of questions. What they do is to prepare meals on time. They learn that children need a notebook so they buy a notebook for them. They make sure that children’s pocket money is enough. They ask if children have finished homework. If children say yes, they believe so. That’s it. Their care is not meticulous. Children’s thought is meticulous, and they need a lot of meticulous care. (S02)

They (caregivers) give money if the children ask. Children are inconvenienced if their money has run out. They (children) lack care and love. Why? Loving them is more than just giving money. Some children get the money and spend it in the video arcade. This doesn’t work as care and love. The point is care and love, and this is so important. (S01)

As children left behind were seen to lack care and love, school personnel adopted a variety of activities to involve them in groups at school. For example, one school personnel talked about how she advocated collective care for a child left behind in her class:

I organise class meetings often, and tell our student leaders to care for him more. In the morning, I usually ask him if he has eaten breakfast. I care about him. After class, I ask
his classmates to hang out and play with him. I also ask him if there is anything he
doesn’t understand in class, and encourage him to talk with me. (S04)

A similar account was also found in another school staff member’s experience:

We should care for them in every aspect, from their daily lives to school life. Just as I
mentioned...from clothing to stationary... For example, if they need a pencil, other
students can give them one. Children give out to each other. (S01)

Children’s inner world may not be easy to fully explore, but as one of the school personnel (S04)
stated, adults such as teachers could always talk with children regarding their mood. Once
reasons behind children’s mood have been found, appropriate actions could be taken accordingly.

5.2.1.2 The need to be free from pressure or anxiety

According to both caregivers and school personnel, children were vulnerable in the way that they
could not live with their parents at such young ages. Therefore, most caregivers tried to avoid
any situations which might make children uneasy. They indicated that children need to be away
from pressure or anxiety, as these negative emotions could provoke children into missing their
parents:

I have always been talking with her since she was young and I have never slapped her.
Why I have never slapped? It’s because her mum is not with her. Once slapped, she
might miss her mum. (C02)
The child’s parents are absent, and it will be great suffering for him if you yell at him.

“My mum has left and dad is not around, and now you are teasing me? How can you do that?” (C01)

One caregiver (C10) expressed her concern about her nine years old grandson, as she thought the child was easily upset. Sometimes the child even cried when he saw other peers with parents. In this case, the woman had to take the child home to release his pressure. In view of his unstable mood, this caregiver seemed very cautious about scolding:

I have to consider his parents’ absence. It’s not easy to be a maternal grandmother, as I can neither be too harsh or gentle. It’s not like your own children. To be honest, I could slap my own children, but can you slap him? I don’t want to make him anxious. (C10)

Some caregivers even selected the topics that they could talk with children. For example, they were not apt to mention children’s parents, especially when the children were in a bad mood. A few caregivers also pointed out children needed their own space if they were upset. Besides buying things for children, keeping silence was a preferred strategy to allow the space needed:

I can’t talk too much. If I talk too much, she will cry. She will be still calmed if I don’t talk. Once I say something, she will be in tears and feel ashamed. (C16)

Buy whatever he likes and comfort him. But he doesn’t talk and we can’t mention it in this case. If I ask if he is missing his parents, he will miss more. Usually he asks for whatever he needs, and I meet his needs. After his needs are met and he plays, he will be good. (C15)
School personnel’s reports were mostly consistent with those of caregivers regarding children’s negative emotions. Most school personnel believed that it was not uncommon that children left behind were lonely. These children were reportedly not as extroverted as their peers, and moreover, they get upset or offended easily.

Caregivers expressed complicated feelings of addressing children’s emotional needs. Missing parents reportedly made children upset. Therefore, these caregivers tried to keep children free from pressure or anxiety, as these causes led the children to miss their parents. The child’s need to be free from pressure or anxiety even influenced caregivers’ attitudes toward discipline and communication with children. Some caregivers were not sure about the extent to which they should talk with children, so a few chose to keep silent and distract children’s attention.

5.2.1.3 The need to manage trauma/grief

Caregivers shared a range of experiences about how they helped children to manage trauma/grief. Some of these cases commonly exist in all children’s daily lives, and the other examples seemed more associated with the circumstance of children being left behind. Although most caregivers tried to assume a parental role, their role for children was still seen differently. Inevitably, children occasionally missed their parents and felt upset, so comforting them was a big part of caregivers’ caring experiences. For instance, one child was sent to stay with her parents during a summer holiday. This girl had been living with her grandparents for a few years and had always been fine with them. But after coming back, the girl could not help missing her parents. Her grandmother described her need to manage trauma/grief:
This time things were out of control. She cried for two nights, and said she missed her parents. She wouldn’t go to bed, and then asked me to call her parents and ask them to come back immediately. I said, “How can they come back? Dad and mum are making money. They will support you to go to university in the future...Even now you need the money for schooling, plus food and clothing.” (C18)

Similarly, a few other caregivers also used making money as a reason when they comforted children:

(She) also misses (parents). But she has grown up now and has got used to it…Sometimes I say, “It doesn’t help that you get anxious. How your mum can raise you if she is not making money? We can’t just rely on your grandfather and me.” (C11)

Just tell him, “You need to be a good boy. Your dad and mum are making money away from home. How can you spend money if they don’t make money? …So you can’t go and stay with your dad, plus you need to go to school. He is in XXX (a big city in south China), where you can’t attend school.” (C15)

I comforted him. I said “Your dad and mum have left home to make money for you.” He was then all good. (C06)

Besides missing parents, children left behind in this study were reported to have common interpersonal relationship problems as the same as other children. These problems were generated through their interactions with others, especially peers. If children were found to be at odds with someone, caregivers normally took action to relieve their trauma:
You can tell. She came home with an unhappy face. She was angry, so she came back. I asked “what happened?” “She doesn’t play with me.” I said: “It’s not a big deal that you don’t play together. We can play at home.” ...Then I found something for her, like toys or food. (C18)

I said, “If she doesn’t play with you, then just go home. You can play another time when she changes her mind. Now someone is with her, and she will come to you again when her friend goes away.” (C16)

In spite of love for children, caregivers described how disobedient behaviour could arouse their anger. However, even after enlightening or punishing children, caregivers normally managed to comfort them. As caregivers stated, these children needed this kind of comfort, which reminded them of being loved. This comfort sometimes was found along with caregivers’ compromise:

He was just standing outside instead of coming home. I had no choice but to comfort him, and tried to take him inside. It’s ok to stay outdoors at this season, and he can stay as late as he wishes. But it’s too cold during winter, and he might get cold. (C05)

Children’s need to manage trauma/grief reportedly depended on the situation. In some cases, caregivers had to comfort the children because they missed their parents. Caregivers explained the reasons that children’s parents were not able to be home, and they hoped the children could understand. In addition to this, children left behind reportedly came across normal peer relationships and behaviour problems. In these cases, caregivers sometimes compromised to avoid further distressing the children.
5.2.1.4 The need to receive age-appropriate care

Age-appropriate care refers to care based on children’s maturity level as perceived by participants. While describing caring experiences, caregivers spoke about children’s characteristics, and most emphasised children’s age.

For caregivers, the child’s age needs to be considered in rearing practices. Only by taking this into account could caregivers know that they had appropriately responded to children’s needs. For example, some caregivers thought younger children were not mature enough to think about their bond to parents. These children were seen to spend most of their time on toys and play rather than missing their parents. Therefore, caregivers were not bothered about explaining too much about the absence of children’s parents: instead, they endeavoured to provide sufficient room for children to play. On the other hand, caregivers seemed extremely tolerant of younger children’s improper behaviour and were willing to guide them, since they saw these children having so much to learn.

Most of them thought children were too young to suffer hardship. For example, in rural Shijiapu, there was no public transport available for children’s daily schooling travel. Therefore, it was not uncommon that parents in the same village hired a taxi together, which took the children to school. One caregiver (C05) generally sent his grandson to school by bike. However, in winter, he chose the taxi because it was too cold for the child in the winter especially in bad weather. Another caregiver described her feelings towards her grandson’s need to be free of tiredness:

I’m strict with him for sure. However, I treat him well with food and clothing. I’m just strict with things he does. I don’t let him do chores…He is too young. (C06)
Caregivers also highlighted the impact of age on children’s learning and education. As caregivers were not competent to tutor children due to their own low education level, a few of them chose to send children to stay with their teachers. These children were cared for by their teachers during the week and came back to caregivers’ homes on weekends. Caregivers’ decision on this arrangement was based on their consideration of children’s age, with these children involved in these arrangements being over 10 years old. Younger children were not mature and independent enough to live with teachers, so caregivers preferred to keep them at home as they needed more delicate care. On the other hand, some caregivers reported that children became more and more capable of self learning as they matured. They believed children needed time to explore the society themselves:

In addition to study, he has to learn slowly on his own...He can learn more and more knowledge of the society and whatever. He is getting mature year by year, and he can learn himself. (C19)

Children’s age had been taken into caregivers’ considerations of daily care. In particular, some caregivers perceived that children of different ages responded differently to their parents’ absence. Caregivers were apt to show more tolerance towards younger children, and older ones were seen as more mature and therefore to be given more freedom.

5.2.1.5 The need to receive encouragement and reward

Children reportedly needed encouragement when they felt timid or upset. In these cases, caregivers tried to lighten children’s mood by showing their support:
He hugs me tightly. He grabs my arm very tightly. After he has fallen asleep, I can pull him away. Otherwise it makes me sweaty. He is scared. This child is timid. Sometimes his grandfather is not home and just two of us. Once it gets dark, he will be looking for his grandfather, “Grandma, it’s scared to be only with you.” I said: “Don’t be afraid. There is nothing to be afraid of. The door is locked, so others can’t come in. They can steal whatever they like but us.” (C22)

If he has only a little homework, he comes home happy. If there is a lot of homework, you can see how listless he would be... “Grandma, when can I finish it?” I said: “You have to be confident.”...and then he finished. (C06)

Encouragement was also regarded as a way of guiding children’s behaviours. To minimise naughty or disobedient behaviours, participants preferred to praise rather than discipline these children:

Children need to be praised. You can’t slap, so I bluff (him). I encourage and say nice things to him. Children have a weakness for positive words. I praise him. (C15)

They are children so you have to praise them. You should say they have done every well. You can’t be against him. Nowadays, children can’t be against. If you are against him, he will be more obstinate than you. (C14)

In the class, the teacher’s questioning is only for the good of children’s mental health, and nothing negative. The teacher should question and praise them more...More encouragement is (good) for this kind of child. (S01)
Along with encouragement, caregivers also emphasised children’s need to be rewarded. This rewarding was normally associated with children’s school performance. Furthermore, one school personnel also described how children left behind need to be rewarded at school:

> Psychological education is really important for the children. Some children from poor families steal things. For this kind of child, we reward them with ‘red flower’ through class meeting. They seem really happy (once rewarded). There are so many students in the class, and they are the only one who has been rewarded with ‘red flower’. This stimulates them to study well. (S01)

Similar to the account above (S01), reward was commonly found among the experiences of other school personnel, which was seen as a way to build the self-confidence of children left behind.

Most caregivers seemed dissatisfied with children’s current performance, and they expected children to gradually improve their study results. Rewarding, therefore, was used to motivate children when they had achieved a goal set by caregivers. As reported below, a common way of rewarding was buying children valued items, such as toys, cloths, meals, and stationery:

> I said: “Grandson, you keep on. If you get full marks in both of your subjects, grandma will buy you a PC.” He always fancies a PC. His maternal grandma has a PC, and he always plays there when he visits her. I said: “If you can get two full marks and strive to study well, grandma will buy a PC for you.” (C22)

> If he studies well, I will buy him some toys. He got full marks in maths last year... Last summer, he got 87 out of 100 in Chinese, and the average score in his class was low. He

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2 ‘Red flower’ is commonly used in Chinese primary school to praise student’s outstanding performance. It is made of paper and can be pinned to student’s clothes.
asked for toys. I spent 12 yuan (around $2) ...I don’t know the name of it. It’s like a bounce ball or something. Anyway, I bought it for him. (C06)

This child doesn’t study well, and he is one of the bottom in his class. I said: “You don’t have to be the top two. I will reward you if you can be top 10.”...He has to be rewarded. (C05)

Children’s need to receive encouragement and rewards were commonly identified by caregivers. Encouragement was reportedly important to children left behind when they felt upset or in need of support. Some caregivers even pointed out the unique benefit of encouragement compared with discipline. Rewards, on the other hand, were seen as particularly necessary for motivating children to study well.

5.2.1.6 The need for physical affection

Caregivers’ love for children was commonly expressed in terms of physical touch. Most body touch happened at caregivers’ early caregiving stage, when children were still young and needed attention from caregivers. According to caregivers’ experiences, body touch could occur anywhere, such as homes:

I had to cuddle him while he slept. He has been with me for a long time, and I bring him with me often. (C15)

Some caregivers also reported that it was not uncommon to carry children on farms, as they couldn't trust the children out of their sight. Caregivers thought children were too young, so they need to be well attended:
I told her, “You have to be obedient. Your grandfather and I have done a lot for you. When you were still young and we were plucking crops on farm, your grandfather and I carried you on our back in turn.” (C11)

When she was round five, I had to put her in pram and kept moving. After she fell asleep, I was able to put her in kang (a typical heated brick bed in rural Northeast China)...Sometimes I went to work on the farm. If she cried there, I had to carry her. (C17)

The common forms of touch included kissing, hugging, and carrying. Caregivers usually responded to this need when children cried or felt upset due to various reasons. For example, caregivers described how the child was lulled after parents had left:

This child cried so much...Her aunt, or whoever, couldn’t bear it. Then I comforted her. No matter day or night, I carried and looked after her...I did my best to lull and talk with her. (C22)

At first, he cried. I carried him on my back and walk around outside. (C14)

One caregiver (C06) reported that she kissed her grandson sometimes, especially when she hugged him. However, this behaviour became less and less as the child grew up. Besides age, another caregiver (C15) emphasised the differences between boy’s and girl’s need to be touched. According to him, boys were more reserved than girls regarding emotional expression. Therefore, this caregiver thought putting his cheek on his grandson’s was enough to show his love.
Children’s need for body touch was mentioned by most caregivers. They reported younger children were more in need of this attention. In addition to common form of body touch at home, caregivers also carried younger children to farms because they were concerned about children’s safety. As some caregivers indicated, children especially needed physical comforting when they felt upset.

5.2.1.7 The need to have a sense of home

Both caregivers and school personnel expressed the belief that children needed a place where they had a feeling of being ‘at home’. In this study, most children had already been living with caregivers in the same household before their parents left. As caregivers reported, children grew up with them and, consequently, their understanding of family involved both parents and caregivers. Although children’s parents were absent, caregivers considered their own home as children’s home:

  Being with me and this is her home. (C07)

  She has been here since she was young, and she is familiar with here now. Here is no different from her home. When her parents were here, she was also always here. (C20)

Children’s need to be in a secure and stable environment, namely home, was especially obvious if they stayed with teachers during the week:

  She prefers to stay here. The other day I gave her 50 yuan. I told her to stay with the teacher and not come back on weekend. She disagreed. She said she had to come
home…It’s already not comfortable to stay with the teacher (in the week), and how could
she still stay there on weekends? (C16)

How wouldn’t she like to come back? Her uncle (interviewee himself) and grandma are
here. She comes back immediately after school, and yells “I’m back!” loudly once she
has opened the gate. (C20)

According to participants’ reports, children’s sense of home was associated with company. The
company could be children’s parents, caregivers, or even the teachers whom children stayed with.
There were a few caregivers who said that children preferred to stay with them rather than their
parents. For example, one caregiver talked about his granddaughter’s experience of staying with
parents:

There were just two of us (caregiver and the child) at home. They (the child’s parents)
left around 7am and came back around 5pm. The child wouldn’t like to go back (to
parents). She will be home alone if she goes back. They (the child’s parents) cook lunch
for her and she can eat when hungry. (C17)

Two school personnel also shared stories about how children developed a sense of home while
being with teachers:

I joked with him. I said, “Are you the second child of your teacher?” She (the child’s
teacher) brings him all the time… even when she visits kin or friends. When she visited
her parents during the Chinese New Year, she also took this child…While staying at her
place, the child feels like at his own home. If he sees someone do housework, such as
mopping floor, he will help. He has gotten used to it. (S01)
I asked him, “Do you miss home?” “Teacher\(^3\), I don’t miss home.” That was during the Labour Day holiday and I said, “Don’t come back, because you are supposed to go home. I need to visit my parents as well. I’m not sure when I’m going back, so you have to call me before you come back.” “Teacher, when are you coming back then? I was thinking of staying at home for one night, and then I will be back.” (S03)

Children’s preference with teachers above could be partly explained by a school personnel’s experience. She talked about a child who lived with her grandmother. The other day, the child just left home without informing anyone. Her grandmother and school personnel tried their best to find her, and it turned out she stayed over with another child left behind. This school staff member attributed the child’s behaviour to lacking of warm love at home:

> We know that left behind children lack care and love for sure. They lack care and love in emotions, daily lives, studies, and behaviours. I was thinking about the reason that she didn’t come home the other night. This is because she is a left behind child. What do left behind children seem like? They lack care and love. Why she doesn’t want to come home? That’s because there is no warmth at home. (S02)

Children’s needs for a sense of home were reported by both caregivers and school personnel. A few caregivers believed the sense of home came from the people who stayed with children left behind. Therefore, caregivers did not distinguish children’s home from their own, especially if children had been living with them before the parents left. School personnel, however, reported that children could also develop a sense of home with them based on long time living together.

\(^3\) This is how Chinese students address teachers. It is considered as not polite to call teacher’s first name.
5.2.1.8  The need to be respected

Participants reported that children’s esteem needed to be protected when they ventured into the community. Caregivers especially paid attention to the dress of children left behind in front of their peers. For caregivers, it was important to make sure these children could raise their head among others. In other words, caregivers did not want the children to be embarrassed about their dress:

Others will make fun of him if his dress is messy. “He just looks like a child without mum.” They might say so. I won’t let others say anything bad to him. I just need to take care of him and make sure he is clean. (C01)

As his grandparents, we are extremely frugal ourselves in food and clothing. We save the money for her so she can eat and dress well. Other children have clothes to dress up. They would make fun of her if she doesn’t dress decently. Adults can suffer, but children shouldn’t. As adults, we can dress worse or eat less… (C02)

A few caregivers also talked about children’s self-esteem in the context of parents’ absence. As children were away from their parents, caregivers seemed extremely sensitive to children’s esteem. This was particularly the case when children’s parents were divorced. They wanted to make sure these children look the same as their peers, and be looked after as well as parents could have done:

You must buy something if he looks different from others. For example, if other kids wear new clothes, then you have to buy them for him. It’s ok that you don’t have nice clothes, but you can’t make him look worse than others. Children like him are different
from those of other families. Even a little worse, he will have something in mind. “What if I had dad and mum around? They (other children) all have clothes to wear. If I was with my parents, maybe I could have dressed better. What if my parents didn’t divorce? I could have dressed as the same as others.” You have to make sure he is well dressed to raise his head… (C15)

While children’s parents were away, children’s self-esteem was even considered throughout their daily care especially in the case of punishment. The following accounts comes from two caregivers who are a couple:

Generally we just look after her with caution. Normally we don’t hurt her self-esteem…

(C18)

You know, parents can slap her, but as grandparents, we rarely slap her. If she was our own child, we could slap. But this is granddaughter, and it’s different. (C17)

Besides caregivers, school personnel also emphasised the importance of protecting children’s self-esteem. For example, a child left behind was found to purposely mess his classmate’s skirt. Although this boy’s behaviour had been well known, the teacher still patiently communicated with him to make sure he would not get hurt. This child’s behaviour was linked to his separation from parents, and the teacher showed particular sensitivity to the boy’s self-esteem. Considering the boy’s family was poor, the teacher even bought a new skirt for the girl without letting the boy know.

Children’s need to be respected was centred on their self-esteem, which drew participants’ special attention when the children were in front of other people. Caregivers had been trying to
protect children left behind’s self-esteem by making them look the same as their peers, so these
children could feel confident. School personnel also considered children’s self-esteem when they
addressed these children’s behaviour problems. Participants’ perceptions of this need were linked
to the empowerment of children left behind, which will be addressed in more detail later.

5.2.1.9 The need to be treated fairly

This need applies to the families that have more than one child. In this study, there was only one
caregiver who took care of the grandchildren from his two sons, as the children’s parents both
worked in cities. Our interview was focused on his grandson, but some of the stories were
inevitably relevant to his granddaughter. One dominant theme emerging from his experiences
was children left behind need to be treated fairly. It was not uncommon to find argument and
conflicts among these two children, and this caregiver felt he had to treat them fairly. He
emphasised this need, because he felt pressures from different groups, including children,
children’s parents, as well as other community members. As he indicated, fair treatment applied
to any situation, no matter how old and what gender children were. This caregiver reported that
these two children always competed with each other in meals and clothing. He also added that
the term of older children was constructed by adults who thought older ones should be more
mature. However, this caregiver assumed that from children’s perspectives, older children were
still children, and they expected to be treated fairly.

Unsurprisingly, the motivation of this caregivers’ fair treatment arose from his understandings of
children’s thoughts and wellbeing. Nevertheless, it was also associated with caregivers’ pressure
from children’s parents as well as local community:
They are both the children of my sons. I’m afraid of judgements from my sons. “So what’s the problem with taking care of the young one? He is still your grandson even though he is younger.” “Ours is older, so she is not your granddaughter because she is older?” If they say something like this, how should I answer them? It’s not easy to be an elder. (C05)

Children’s need to be treated fairly was only identified from one caregiver in this study, who had been caring for two children left behind. The children were found to expect fair treatment regardless of age or gender. In addition to the considerations of children’s own emotions, this caregiver also expressed the pressure from children’s parents.

5.2.1.10 The need to have a stable environment

This need was only identified by a few caregivers. However, given that the change of environment might cause significant impact on children’s development, I reserved this sub-theme here. Emotionally, caregivers hoped that children could stay in the same environment until they grow up. They also reported that children became a bit anxious after visiting parents, so some caregivers did not encourage children to see their parents very often. According to caregivers, the change of environment could influence children in many ways. For example, one caregiver talked about reasons that they did not move to the city and live with the child’s mother:

She (the child’s mother) asked us to take the child and move there to live with her. She always wants us to bring the child there. .I thought the child won’t be comfortable. He (the child) can’t understand what people say there4 …I’m afraid that he will get behind

4 Residents in that city speak another dialect which is different from where the caregiver lived.
(in his studies). If so, what a waste of time for the child! I thought I have to bring him up. (C03)

In addition, all the children in this study had lived with caregivers for a long time (between two to 13 years), and none of them were found to move regularly among different kin families. Once caregivers decided to take care of the child, most of them aimed to keep the child until they were adults or could reunite with their parents.

5.2.2 Relationships

Along with children’s emotional and mental health needs, relationships were identified as another predominant theme from participants’ experiences. Significant people involved in children’s relationship needs ranged from core family to community, and included caregivers, peers, relatives, and teachers.

5.2.2.1 The need for relationships with caregivers

This section starts with caring relationships, because caregivers are the most approachable figures in children’s daily lives while parents are absent. Furthermore, since caregivers were primary participants in this study, their accounts provided the richest understanding of this subject.

Children’s need to have caring relationships can be best demonstrated by relatives’ significance as perceived by children themselves. Reportedly as a joke, some caregivers asked children to rank kin’s significance in their lives, and it was not uncommon that children ranked caregivers before parents:
I asked him who is best (to him). He said his grandfather is the best, and I ranked number
two…I’m strict with him. His grandfather is more easy-going. I restrict him. His
grandfather is top one. His parents are both behind us. (C06)

The accounts of three caregivers other caregivers further confirmed that children’s relationship
with caregivers could be closer than that of parents:

He has to be beside me when sleeping. He can’t sleep without being beside me. Even
when his parents come back, he still prefers to sleep with me. (C06)

I don’t know why, he just wouldn’t live with his dad or mum. His mum said he could live
with her and go to school there, but he refused. He said he won’t go anywhere and will
just be with me. I joked with him, “What if I died?” “I will be with grandpa if grandma
died.”(C22)

He has the closest relationship with me. If his parents buy any food for him, he would
give me some to try first. (C09)

Caregivers believed the caring relationships outlined above were based on daily contact with
children, as well as the long term stay together:

He is not so close to his parents. Not like other children who have grown up around
parents. He can’t bear being away from his grandma. When his grandma was in hospital,
he was always concerned. (C12)

When he comes back from teacher’s place on Friday night, he would firstly check if
anyone is not home…If I’m not home, he will ask his grandfather where I have
been…We are just like his parents. His mum only comes back to get some seasonal clothes and stays over one night. (C14)

According to caregivers, children’s need to be bonded with caregivers was normally addressed through spending time together. Most caregivers acknowledged that children needed them to be around, so they rarely left children alone for a long time:

If he doesn’t like to go out, then I can’t go. I need to be with him at home. (C22)

If I visit my kin during the weekend, then I have to take her with me. When she was younger, I always took her. Even now she has reached school-age, still the same. If it comes on her school day, I don’t need to take her. Otherwise, she follows me anywhere. (C02)

Sometimes I bring her to the farm. She just plays on the farm, and I bring some snacks and water for her. (C16)

Caregivers also described children’s reactions to temporary separation from them. Most children got anxious and kept looking for caregivers. They even used different methods, such as phone calls, to make contact with caregivers:

I told her, “Grandson, after school, you need to go to your aunt’s home and stay there tonight. Grandma won’t be home.” “You are always away. What about me?”…Then she cried. She wouldn’t like to go there. She just likes to stay at home. (C23)
He stayed with his (maternal) grandma for two month, and I called him quite often. It seemed that he also missed me. Sometimes he used his grandma’s mobile to call me.  

(C15)

It should be noted that the attachments were found to be two-way, which means caregivers also felt upset while children were away. Some caregivers even reported that they couldn’t imagine a life without the children being around:

Although it’s a bit laborious, I feel there is reason to live on. It’s a jolly time to have a child, even though he can make me mad. It’s like I have lost my life if he is not home. It’s like I lost something really important. (C05)

I’m always in a good mood while I take care of him. If he is not home, I feel flat. (C06)

I’m willing to take care of him. Sometimes I told my daughters and son, “It’s ok that you are not around, but I can’t take it if my grandson is away.” It’s like the old saying goes, “the youngest son and oldest grandson are the lifeblood of an older woman”, and it’s so true…If he stays with his mum for a few days, I will miss him so much. (C22)

Caregivers were children’s most approachable figures when their parents were away. Caregivers valued accompanying children, so they rarely left the children alone. After a long time staying together, some children reportedly developed a closer relationship with caregivers than their own parents. Children were apt to get upset and seek caregivers if they were not around. Caregivers, on the other hand, also reportedly had a need for maintaining this relationship.
The need for relationships with peers

The peers of children left behind included other children in the local community, kin, as well as classmates. Caregivers’ reports about peer relationships were focused on children’s interaction with others in local villages. The significance of peer relationships for children left behind was obvious throughout caregivers’ reports. First of all, peer relationships influenced children’s willingness to stay at a particular place:

He wouldn’t visit his (maternal) grandma even in holiday. He is not familiar with them, and it’s too boring for him as no one plays with him. ..Every time he goes there, he wants to come back…There are some kids here to play together. He doesn’t know any kids there, so he can only stay in the house… (C13)

Furthermore, some children left behind preferred to share experiences with other children rather than caregivers:

If other kids come, they can play together well. If she talks with me as an elder, there will be something that doesn’t click. Children have their own life style, and elders have elders’. (C16)

Through developing peer relationships, children left behind were able to have more people to care about them, and this care is based on their good friendship:

The child in the next street is always here. He has a close relationship with my grandson…If he buys a watermelon, he will cut half for my grandson…They are
emotionally attached. Last time he had a birthday party, he invited my grandson... My grandson does the same, he also invites that child on his own birthday. (C22)

According to caregivers, children left behind showed a strong need to maintain their relationships with peers. They spent a lot of time together. A few caregivers even found it was difficult to communicate with children left behind, as they were always with peers:

You see, she went out as soon as other girls came in. They went out because you are here today. Otherwise, they always play here in the house. (C02)

He is rarely home when he is in a good mood. He always plays with other kids. He starts homework as soon as he gets home, and goes out immediately after he finishes it. (C22)

Generally, peer relationships were built on common interests so they could play together:

(They) just have small talks or play toys. Anyway, what they do is all girls’ stuff. (C02)

(Younger kids) can easily cry when physical touched. He preferred to play with older ones. They don’t cry so easily. (C03)

She comes home from school, and looks for the girls in the same grade to play with. They have something in common. Children play with those who are around their own age. (C20)

As caregivers reported, children left behind were used to being accompanied by their peers. Once their regular contacts were temporarily broken, children left behind seemed a bit anxious and keen to meet their peers again:
On weekends, he called his aunts sometimes, “Aunt, please let my brother come here.” (C22)

Overall, school personnel’s attitudes on the significance of children’s peer relationships were consistent with those of caregivers. Most school personnel expressed the necessity of encouraging children left behind to interact with peers at school. One of the school personnel emphasised the unique benefit of peer relationships for children left behind:

As a teacher, I can give him some love. But the teacher can’t give him the love of classmates. He needs that kind of love from classmates. Actually, he wants to be with classmates in his heart. He just has that kind of personality, and it’s like he can’t get on with others. However, he really feels like involving in the circle of his classmates. Therefore, he needs classmate’s care. In other words, he is psychologically disadvantaged. Let him be with other children, and open his heart. Once his heart is opened, everything else will be easy to handle. (C04)

The important role of peer relationships in children left behind’s lives was identified by both school personnel and caregivers. Children left behind reportedly need this relationship to communicate with others who shared common interests with them. Furthermore, they reportedly spent a lot of time playing with their peers. These peers could even impact children left behind’s staying preferences, as they reportedly preferred to stay with kin where they had familiar playmates in the local community. One school personnel believed peer relationships were indispensable to children left behind compared with other relationship needs.
5.2.2.3 The need for relationships with biological parents

Participants acknowledged the unique roles of children’s biological parents in their development. Most caregivers believed that they had tried their best to take care of these children, but they could never replace the role of parents in children’s lives:

Whenever, mum is still the best, no matter how well grandma treats her. (C07)

It’s not so bad since she grew up with me, but I think she still needs to be with her parents. Being with parents is better than with us. (C02)

The following account from the same caregiver further illustrated children’s ties to their parents:

If her mum said she would come back, then she must come back. The child insisted it.

It’s not good for the child to separate from her parents, as she has grown up…I said, “Don’t ask your mum to come back, as it costs too much money to travel.” But it didn’t work. She insisted her mum visit her. Visit her first, and then the mum can leave afterward… (C02)

There were a few caregivers who looked after their grandchildren whose parents had divorced, and two of them complained that children’s mothers rarely visited the children. They both encouraged more contact between the child and his mother:

I want the child to make contact with her (the child’s mother). Why? We have been told at school that children should have mother’s love. I have thought about the reasons that the child is timid at school. It’s because there is no reliable support at home, and no one can help him, right? It’s like no one can back him up, so he is a bit timid himself. I guess
so. Also, if he can meet his mum and be familiar with her, then there will be more contacts between them, and he may become less timid. (C05)

Of course it’s good for the child to keep contact with her mum. How could she be close to her mum if her mum never calls like this? It’s impossible to be close if they can’t meet or make a call to communicate. (C23)

Similar expectations were also found among other caregivers, who cared for the children whose parents had not divorced. These caregivers made great efforts to encourage children’s contacts with parents. For example, one caregiver grabbed every chance to guide her grandson into spending time with his mother:

I joke with him sometimes. I said, “Would you like to go with your mum and stay with her for a bit?” He thought it over and said, “If I go, what should I do? It’s too cold on the motorbike.” “You can put on more clothes.” Finally he went and stayed there until Sunday night. (C22)

Another caregiver told me his daughter attempted to divorce a few times, but he always persuaded her to reconsider just for the good of the child. Finally, he chose to take care of his grandson, so the child’s parents could work in the city and earn enough money to maintain this family. As the caregiver described, he could not accept the child’s long term separation from his mother.

In addition to the emotional bond between children and their parents, caregivers also valued parents’ significance in communication with children. They pointed out that grandparents were
at a disadvantage compared with parents. For example, one caregiver identified girl’s unique preferences of communicating with mothers:

    Girls normally communicate more with mums. As grandfather, I’m not her direct guardian. There is something I can’t talk too much, since she is the younger generation. But if I don’t go that far, she wouldn’t listen to me. Girls are just like that. There are something deep inside that we can’t communicate. You see, her chat with mum and grandparents is different. (C16)

Caregivers frequently reported that children missed their parents from time to time, especially as they became more mature (nine years old and above). Some of them reported how children’s distress due to parents’ absence could influence their school performance:

    She misses her parents for sure, especially when she comes across something that might remind her of parents. Her teacher said sometimes she even missed her parents at class. The teacher asked her to answer a question, and she wasn’t paying attention. Why did her math score got worse last time? It seems it was because she missed her parents. (C07)

There was a couple, however, who reported that their eight year old grandson did not miss their parents so much. The couple said this child was a naughty boy and always made troubles around the house. His communication with parents was mainly asking for toys or snacks. Even so, the grandfather allowed the child to talk with his parents on the phone:

    He doesn’t looking for them (parents), because we agree to his entire request. He doesn’t look for them if he is happy with eating. Sometimes he misses them and just gives them a
We call his parents, and he chats a bit with them. That’s all. If he wants anything, he will tell his mum... (C09)

As caregiver, the grandfather explained to the child that his parents were away from home to make money. However, as this caregiver added, “He (the child) knows that his parents are away for work. He knows everything. Even if we haven’t told him as grandparents, he still knows about everything.” (C09)

Unsurprisingly, almost all the caregivers were aware of the significance of the parent-child relationship for children left behind, and they expressed positive attitudes towards maintaining regular contact between children and their parents. For example, as a grandfather reported:

> Of course it’s good (to keep the contact). It’s human nature. I mean the parent-child relationship. You can’t let them be unfamiliar. Lacking contact is not good for keeping this relationship. The child won’t be close to parents if they don’t have contact often. (C19)

However, due to the distance problem, most children could only talk to parents occasionally through phone rather than in person:

> Sometimes his mum calls us. If he is around, I will ask him to talk with her. They rarely meet. If you don’t let him talk with mum, there will be more distance between them. (C10)

> His dad calls and we ask him (the child) to pick up. He misses his dad sometimes and says, “When are you coming back?” (C05)
On the other hand, some caregivers seemed conflicted about keeping children’s contact with parents. They felt reluctant to let children call their parents as they wished, because long distance calling was too expensive. One of the caregivers reported as following:

They (the child’s parents) are too far way. It costs a lot to make a long distance call.

Normally, I don’t let him call them. (C10)

Besides expenditure, a few caregivers expressed their concern about the frequency of parental contact. They acknowledged the necessity of it, however, they also worried that too often contact may distract children, especially from their studies:

Back when he was in the first and second grade, I used to take his day off and take him to visit his father. I haven’t done this for two years. I thought he has more study to do, and it will take lot of time to catch up if he misses the class. I don’t want this to interfere with his study. (C03)

Too much contact makes him miss (parents). He misses his mum here and dad over there.5 How can he do well in study? It’s not good for him to have too much contact. (C15)

Normally, I don’t like them to contact with each other. I told her mum a few times, “You always contact this child, and then her study gets worse.” It has been a few times. She came and picked up the child, and after that the child’s grade got worse. The reason is that she talks too much, and it makes the child unable to focus on study...Then I told her to visit the child after this semester. (C16)

5 The child’s parents had divorced. His mother lived near the town, but his father lived far away in another province.
Generally, caregivers encouraged children left behind to keep contact with their parents, because they believed parent-child relationship was central to children’s development. No matter how well caregivers had been caring for the children, they were aware of the unique role of children’s parents. However, due to distance and finance limitations, children were not always provided with adequate opportunities to communicate with their parents. Children’s separation from their parents reportedly impacted their study performance. Thus, a few caregivers discouraged overly frequent contact between children and their parents.

5.2.2.4 The need for relationships with other relatives

Children’s relationships with their relatives were frequently mentioned by caregivers. According to caregivers’ experiences, the most accessible relatives to children left behind were grandparents, aunts, and uncles. As stated earlier, Chinese maternal and paternal grandparents’ motivations were different to some extent. And, furthermore, their roles in children’s lives were not seen as the same. In this study, different roles were also found among other relatives, such as aunts. To clarify caregivers’ accounts, the following section notes maternal or paternal status on each relative’s title.

Caregivers reported that as children’s parents were absent, relatives normally showed special sensitivity to these children. For example, one caregiver (07) recalled that her granddaughter was extremely upset after losing her mum in a car accident. In order to relieve her trauma, the woman took the child to relatives’ homes. These relatives lived either nearby or far away in cites. However, whoever they visited, the relatives all expressed special sensitivity to this child. As the woman said, “If they hadn’t treated her well, it would be more difficult for her to go through it.”
This caregiver also added that she wanted to make the child happy, and bringing her
granddaughter to visit relatives was seen as one of the ways to achieve this.

Another caregivers’ quote also demonstrates how relatives contribute to comfort children left
behind if they are missing parents:

    The child cried uncontrollably. His paternal aunt or whoever, no one could bear it...That
time he just couldn’t take any words. His grandpa, aunt, we all comforted him in turn...

    (C22)

One of the caregivers (C15) reported that even when playing, his grandson was well protected by
relatives. This caregiver noted that none of relatives’ children bullied this child. More
importantly, these relatives lived in the local community, so the child was even watched and
protected by them.

In some cases, relatives were found to be very active in supporting children left behind. For
example, a paternal grandmother shared a story about how a child’s paternal aunt forced the
mother to contact with her daughter:

    That was during Chinese spring festival, she (the child’s mother) came to pick up
clothes. ..I asked if she would like to wait for the child to come back from school. She
didn’t wait. My older daughter and I cried badly, but she didn’t even have any water in
the eyes. After she left, I told my younger daughter that her sister in law came back. “Did
she see the child?” “No. Your sister in law went to a motel in Siping.” My younger
daughter was angry about it. “How could she do this? I’m bringing the child to her since
she didn’t want to see the child.”… Then my younger daughter went there. Her sister in
law picked up the child at lobby. “You didn’t see her? Now I bring her. You are such a cruel woman!” My younger daughter left the child at motel for a night. Her mum bought some snacks for her. The following day, my younger daughter picked her up, because she had to go to school. (C07)

In addition to the emotional support outlined above, caregivers reported that relatives normally bought food and clothes for children left behind:

He is really happy. This child never lacks meals or clothing. Paternal aunt and other relatives all buy him clothes. His mum and maternal grandma also buy things for him. His unmarried maternal aunt always buys snacks when he visits her… (C22)

Along with caregivers’ understandings of relatives’ contribution to children’s lives, they also described children’s ties to their relatives. Unsurprisingly, children left behind had a close relationship with relatives who cared about them:

He is very close to his paternal aunt. His aunt buys whatever he likes to eat. (C16)

He is so attached to his paternal aunt. He misses her if they haven’t seen each other for a few days. She comes and gets him during weekend, and lets him stay there for two days. (C19)

He stays with his maternal grandma during the holidays. He likes staying there. (C15)

He listens to his maternal aunt. He is really close to her. He only has one maternal aunt. (C13)
However, family relationship, as a few caregivers reported, sometimes made children worried. These children reportedly valued their relationships with caregivers, and tried not to make caregivers jealous about children’s relationships with other kin. For example, one caregiver reported that her granddaughter asked if she minded the child visiting her maternal grandmother:

She likes to visit her maternal grandma. She once talked to me, as she was afraid that I wouldn’t let her go. She said, “(Paternal) grandma, if I visit my maternal grandma, please don’t be unhappy.” I said, “How could I not be happy? She is your maternal grandma. You can visit her whenever you like. I won’t interfere as long as you are free to go.”…She thinks a lot. (C07)

Children left behind reportedly need relatives’ support in their daily lives. As caregivers reported, relatives could protect, comfort and educate children left behind in many ways. Besides caregivers, some children reportedly developed close relationships with one or two relatives. It should be noted, however, that maternal and paternal relatives’ roles were found to be different. Children left behind, in this regard, themselves sometimes showed caution to balance their relationships with different relatives.

5.2.2.5 The need for relationships with teachers

This study was focused on school-age children’s needs, and most caregivers indicated children’s need to maintain good relationships with their teachers. Based on caregivers’ experiences, this relationship benefited children left behind in a variety of ways, ranging from their studies to health care:
Since living with her teacher, she doesn’t ask me (to tutor her) anymore… (When she is ill), her teacher calls me sometimes. (C16)

If he is in trouble at school, his teacher will call me to communicate. (C19)

If something happens… like she is ill… the teacher will call me. I will bring her some medicine as I work close to her school. (C20)

Considering teacher’s roles in children’s education, most caregivers showed great respect for them. Caregivers generally encouraged teachers to be strict with children, and a few said they would not complain even if the teacher physically disciplined their children. Rather, they would appreciate it because teachers were seen as being responsible for the children’s good. For example, one caregiver showed his attitude in the following way:

I told the teacher, “If he doesn’t obey you, you can slap him a bit. You supervise him (at school), and we do the same at home…As guardian, we won’t complain. This is for the child’s achievement.” There is no teacher who would slap your child for no reason, isn’t it? If the guardian\(^6\) complains with the teacher because the teacher has slapped the child a bit, then there is no way the child could be educated afterwards. As guardian, we can’t act like being mad, “Why did you slap our child?”… We can’t complain because the teacher has disciplined the child. What the teacher does is being responsible (for the child), and I’m more than happy with that. (C15)

\(^6\) The term of ‘guardian’ here refers to children’s kin who take care of them. Generally, guardian in Chinese means children’s parents, but it can be extended to children’s close kin, such as grandparents.
Along with caregivers’ high expectation of strict teachers, they also reported that children seemed more obedient to teachers than to them. Taking the two caregivers below as examples, they both found children more obedient with teachers than caregivers:

Generally speaking, nowadays children obey teachers more than their guardians. They are usually afraid of teachers rather than guardians. (C15)

(My grandson) is quite obedient at home. He will write if asked to. He does whatever you ask him to do. He is more obedient to his teacher. He follows his teacher’s instructions. (C08)

Another caregiver reported that her granddaughter’s teacher was also the child’s aunt. This child lived with her aunt in the week and was found to be very obedient to her:

The teacher [her aunt] told them whatever they eat at home, they should give some to grandparents first, followed by parents, and then they can eat themselves. She always says that when she comes back. “We should have the courtesy. We should respect the elder and take care of the younger.”…The child listens to her aunt. She is very afraid of her aunt. She doesn’t chit chat in front of her aunt... (C18)

Although children left behind were seen as obedient in front of teachers, caregivers also reported that it was not uncommon that children left behind got on well with teachers, especially if the children stayed with teachers during the week:

She always says it would be wonderful if this teacher could teach her forever. The teacher has a good relationship with her. (C07)
I need not to worry about him since I have put him at his teacher’s place for a while. His teacher treats him very well, and he also has an emotional bound with the teacher. The other day, I asked him to stay with his dad and go to school there. He wouldn’t go. “I will miss my teacher.” Then he cried. So I think he has really developed an emotional tie to the teacher. (C14)

Children’s close relationships with teachers were also reported by some school personnel. Repeatedly, the following two examples demonstrated how children left behind were attached to their teachers:

I joked with him. I said, “Are you the second child of your teacher?” She (the child’s teacher) brings him all the time… even when she visits kin or friends. When she visited her parents during the Chinese New Year, she also took this child… While staying at her place, the child feels like at his own home. If he sees someone do housework, such as mopping floor, he will help. He has gotten used to it. (S01)

I asked him, “Do you miss home?” “Teacher, I don’t miss home.” That was during the Labour Day holiday and I said, “Don’t come back, because you are supposed to go home. I need to visit my parents as well. I’m not sure when I’m going back, so you have to call me before you come back.” “Teacher, when are you coming back then? I was thinking staying at home for one night, and then I will be back.” (S03)

It should be noted that, however, children’s relationships with their teachers were associated with the environment kin caregivers created. Generally speaking, children left behind preferred to stay with their grandparents, they felt at home as part of the family. However, due to farm work or
other reasons, caregivers sometimes overlooked children’s emotional needs. In this case, children were more likely to prefer a social environment such as living with teachers, where they could interact with other children.

Children’s needs for relationships with teachers were identified by both caregivers and school personnel. According to participants, children left behind were more obedient to teachers than caregivers. Thus, some caregivers rest their hope on teachers to assist them in educating the children. Most caregivers showed full support for letting teachers discipline children left behind, as they believed it was for the good of the children. Although teachers tended to have an authoritative impression on caregivers, some children left behind reportedly develop good relationships with them.

5.2.3 Empowerment and agency

Empowerment and agency refers to children’s needs to be respected as human beings, which highlights children’s rights to control their own lives. This term was theme involves a variety of areas, such as children’s preferences and freedom, as well as adult’s recognition and support. The distinguishing feature of this theme lies in children’s own rights, however, it should be noted that these needs can only make sense and be further addressed through children’s relationship with others, especially caregivers and school personnel in this study. That is, children relied on adults to facilitate their participation in decisions.

5.2.3.1 The need to be respected regarding preference

This sub-theme was coded 54 times, which accounted for almost half of the total codes within empowerment and agency. From the experiences of caregivers as an elder generation, children
were expected to be more easy-going with regard to their acceptance of used clothes or basic meals. For instance, most caregivers believed that children should wear the clothes as long as they were in good condition. However, the diverse personal preference of children left behind challenged caregivers’ viewpoints. Some children reportedly stick to their preferences, and the following quotes demonstrated this character:

He only wears good clothes. He doesn’t like to wear second-hand clothes. Even if someone brings any good clothes from children around his age…he won’t take them.
(C22)

She is picky about food. If I want to make pork dumplings, she will say: “Grandma, don’t do it. The pig is alive and kicking, and then you eat it?”…You can’t buy anything that she doesn’t like. She won’t wear it even if you have bought it. This child is picky (C02)

He picks whatever he likes. If he doesn’t like, then don’t buy it. The point is he must like it. If he doesn’t like, he will take off (the clothes) even if you have put it on. (C12)

He knows neatness and asks for clean clothes. He won’t wear dirty ones. You see, he is OK to wear dirty clothes at home, but he will definitely change at school. (C08)

In response to children’s perceived stubborn attitudes above, caregivers were apt to compromise in most cases. This compromise reflected some caregivers’ relaxed control. And, more importantly, it illustrated most caregivers’ respect for children’s preferences:
Go to Siping\(^7\) (for shopping). Usually there are no clothes for her here. If she
doesn’t like them, we will go to Siping (to shop). (C07)

Sometimes we cook whatever he likes. He likes stir-fried eggs with rice. ‘Today I would
like to eat stir-fried eggs with rice’, and then we cook some fried eggs with rice. (C13)

I buy whatever she asks for. One day she wanted to eat apple, melon, or whatever. I
asked what else she would like to eat. (C16)

We shop here…Or sometimes I take her to Siping for shopping. I buy whatever she likes.
I have to take her. She picks up something, and then I buy them for her. (C18)

Another form of caregivers’ respect for children’s preferences was offering autonomy. Some
caregivers gave a certain amount of pocket money, so children could buy whatever they liked on
their own. For example, one caregiver explained why he didn’t let the teacher control her niece’s
pocket money, which was commonly found among other children who stayed with teachers
during the week:

If I let the teacher to have the money, then it won’t be convenient for her (the child). I
give her 10 yuan so she can buy whatever she likes…I just give 10 yuan (around $1.50),
because she spends as much as she can get. Plus, we don’t have extra money to give
her… (C20)

Caregivers’ recognition of children’s preferences, however, was not limited to meals and clothes.
For example, one caregiver explained that her son had not remarried, because he thought the
child might not like a new family:

\(^7\) Siping is a medium sized city near Shijiapu, and it was easy for participants to travel there by public transport.
Her dad hasn’t thought about it (remarriage). He doesn’t even date anyone introduced by others. He said the child is still too young. He can wait until she gets older. (C07)

Two caregivers reported that they arranged tutoring for children, because children requested it. As the tutor was in another village, one caregiver had to send the child there by bike every weekend. The travel sometimes cut into his working time on the farm, but he did not complain because it was for the good of the child.

Along with caregivers’ respect for children’s preferences, they also expressed the motivation to satisfy children in this regard. For example, some caregivers sympathised with the children because their parents were not around:

Generally speaking, I don’t offend him…I buy whatever he likes, so he has no reason to be unhappy. (C14)

He cried and I felt uncomfortable. You see, his dad has left and mum has remarried. Even relatives won’t bear his crying. It’s not good if they saw this. I do my best to meet his requests…I have to meet his requests. The requests of children like him have to be met. (C15)

One caregiver further described the child’s extra care while his parents were away:

To be honest, I’m quite generous to the child. I treat him as his parents could have done at home. His spending on meals and clothing is even more than that when his parents were at home. When his parents were at home, he could only spend what his mum gave to him. Sometimes he grabbed others’ things secretly, and we had to ask him to return
them. If he only gets a little bit pocket money, he will look at me. It’s not enough for a child… (C23)

Another caregiver reported that she did not mind respecting her granddaughter’s preferences, even though the child was a bit picky. Her motivation could be partly explained in terms of her role:

I often ask her, “What do you want to eat today, grandson?” I cook according to her answer, so she can eat some. Although she eats this time, she won’t eat again next time. What can I do with it? This is what we do as grandmothers.

Caregivers’ support for children’s preferences sometimes caused conflict between caregivers themselves, especially when caregivers’ understandings of children’s needs were different. The following story was shared by a grandmother, whose partner bought the child stationery without her knowledge:

That’s the pencil sharpener. You know how much it costs? She has already bought two for 15 yuan (around $2.00) each, and they were broken. This one costs 25 yuan. The other morning, his grandfather moved cement for others and got very dirty. He earned about 30 yuan, and then took the child to the town by motorbike. He (the child’s grandfather) spent 25 yuan (on the pencil sharpener) there. He told the child not to tell me when they got home, because I would scold her if I knew. I asked him how much he spent, but he didn’t tell me. It has been almost half a year, and now I know it cost 25 yuan. (C09)
In addition to sympathy and generous support for children left behind, a few caregivers were aware of spoiling children in the course of addressing children’s preference, but they could not help this because they loved the children so much. For example, one caregiver did not hesitate to buy his grandson’s preferred clothes, even though she knew she was spoiling the child:

He is my only grandson. To be honest, I do spoil him. Just buy whatever he likes. He asks for jeans, and I will buy jeans for him… (C13)

School personnel’s viewpoints confirmed caregivers’ spoiling behaviours, and they criticised caregivers for not being able to provide appropriate care:

They (caregivers) thought the children lack parents’ care. These children are like the apple of caregivers’ eyes. I have communicated with caregivers before. They sympathise with these children. If the child wants to watch TV, caregivers will allow them to watch…If the child wants some money, caregivers will give money. Children’s parents are far from home for work, and they don’t want their children to lack money. These parents send money home to support children’s living. This kind of spoiling makes children indolent. (S02)

Grandparents are another generation, and they don’t treat the children (left behind) like their own children. They spoil them (children left behind). There is little control of children’s spending. This is especially the case for some relatively rich families. They think children’s parents are not home, so they try to make the children happy. They don’t mind offering money as long as the children don’t make trouble or fight with others. It
would be difficult for poor families though, they can’t offer the money even though the children have the need. (S01)

School personnel’s respect for children’s preferences was found from their teaching experience. For example, one school personnel provided the children with options of whether they would like to be disciplined:

“If you haven’t learnt well or have developed bad habits, I’m concerned from my deep heart. I just kind of regret that you haven’t lived up to my expectations”… Sometimes I talk with them like this, “Do you want me to educate you? Do you want me to correct bad habits for you? If you are agreed, then I will do it…So what do you want me to do? Do you wish me to educate you or not?” They will choose… (S05)

Both caregivers and school personnel indicated children’s need to be respected regarding preference. Caregivers showed great tolerance and freedom toward children’s preferences, because they believed these children deserved extra care while their parents were away. However, caregivers’ support for children’s preferences sometimes could turn into spoiling. Some caregivers were aware of this risk, and their behaviours were criticised by school personnel.

5.2.3.2 The need for rational communication

Caregivers shared many stories about how they communicated with children left behind. Some were centred around caregivers’ insight into children’s thoughts and mood, which has been coded as part of children’s emotional needs and mental health above. Rational communication, on the other hand, emphasised caregivers’ understandings of children’s need to be respected
through communication. This need could be interpreted better in the context of education or discipline.

When caregivers tried to educate or persuade children, most of them preferred face-to-face communication. Caregivers neither just made decisions for children nor ignored them. Rather, caregivers explained their reasons in detail, so the children could truly accept their viewpoints:

Sometimes you talk to him and he will understand. Just talk with him patiently. (C19)

He always asks me to arrange tutoring for him. I said, “Now we don’t have much money, and your grandpa is ill in bed. At this stage, you can only rely on your teacher at school…When your dad has made enough money, I will let you get tutored next semester.” He will obey then. (C01)

I said, “Grandson, how can you be like this? Whatever you do, you have to be ambitious. How can we live without ambition?” He said, “You are right. We need ambition.” (C06)

I said, “You should study well, otherwise you will have to do the farming. How hard it is! If you study well and go to university, we will support you no matter how poor we are. You just listen to me and study well. Why you don’t study well?” Then he cried. (C22)

Most caregivers believed that children were mature enough to be communicated with, so they regarded open communication as a better way than discipline to educate children:

I have to talk with him. He is a child, and a child needs communication. He will be totally convinced through communication…He can speak out his reasons and see who is right…We both need to show our reasons, otherwise he won’t be convinced. If I say he is wrong,
then I have to point out the reasons. People are convinced by reasoning, so I have to show my reasons in every aspect. You can’t solve the problem by slapping him. At most, you can slap him. He may remember it for two hours, and then he will forget. That’s meaningless… We can’t rely on slapping. We need to educate (them). (C03)

Slapping is not necessary. We can only intimidate them. Nowadays, an eight years old child is different from that of the past. Children nowadays become matured at an earlier stage. They won’t remember if you repeatedly slap them… Just talk to and educate them. (C15)

It’s about education… Solely slapping doesn’t work, because there is no persuasion with it. He won’t be convinced by slapping. “Why did you slap me?” He thinks he is right and won’t change… (C05)

In addition to age consideration regarding children’s communication needs, caregivers also expressed their concern about carrying out discipline. They were not only cautious about the extent to which they could educate children, but were also mindful of the pressure of judgement by others:

You can’t control or scold too much. It’s not like his parents being at home. If you slap him, some people may see and understand. If they don’t understand, however, they will wonder how harsh I am as a grandmother… You have to think about everything. Generally, I just orally persuade him. (C13)

As grandpa, I’m aware that he is mature now. I can’t say too much. I can only educate and persuade. If I say too much, he will remember it. So when he grows up, he will think
that this grandpa is too harsh to him. He will always have this feeling, right? I mainly just educate and communicate with him… Negotiate with him. (C14)

Most caregivers preferred to communicate with children left behind rather than physically punishing them. They believed communication enabled children to understand the situation better, so children could learn what they should do afterwards. Only by communication, children left behind could be reportedly persuaded and obey adults from their hearts.

5.2.3.3 The need to be paid attention to

This sub-theme was identified from two caregivers’ accounts. As the title suggests, it refers to children’s need to be seen as existing as a human being, whose presence should draw adults’, especially caregivers’, attention.

As stated previously, children left behind were normally a bit timid even in front of their caregivers. One caregiver reported that his grandson seemed very passive and not able to advocate for his own needs. For example, this caregiver put some change in a saving box, and asked the child to take the pocket money whenever he wanted. However, this child rarely touched the box, and he always informed his grandparents when he used the money. This caregiver indicated that the child always needed his attention and encouragement. This attention, as the caregiver suggested, was more like a reminder which highlighted the child’s identity as a family member:

It doesn’t mean we are spoiling him…The child’s parents are working away and have left him at home. As grandparents, we can’t just put a piece of meat in our mouth without giving him some first. We can’t just let our grandson watch like that…You see, we are
eating stewed pork ribs with green bean now. Generally, other children will be rushing to eat. As you can see, he is hiding from behind. If his grandma picks some for him, he will eat. Otherwise he won’t eat himself… (C05)

The other caregivers’ experience indicated that his granddaughter had a need to be listened to. However, the child’s voice sometimes was ignored due to the caregivers’ busy life, and the lack of attention had been an obstacle to the child’s interaction with this caregiver:

We do chat. She starts to talk once she gets home, but sometimes I’m too busy to listen. I’m busy with my work, and meantime she keeps talking. I just murmured without attention. “Are you listening to me, grandpa?” There is nothing I can do about it. It’s said that girls prefer to talk with their mums. Grandfather is different. It would be better for a boy to talk with grandfather. (C16)

Two caregivers’ reports indicated children’s need to be paid attention to. This need partly resulted from children’s timidity due to their parents’ absence. Therefore, one of the caregivers actively watched and sensed the child’s needs. However, due to busy work, the other caregiver could not give enough attention to his granddaughter, which influenced the child’s desire to communicate.

5.2.3.4 The need to be recognised

Caregivers’ experiences revealed many cases where children were recognised and rewarded for their school performance. This sub-theme is more focused on the significance of recognising children’s viewpoints and its influence on adults.
One caregiver showed an extremely positive attitude towards her grandson’s viewpoint throughout their communication. According to her account, this child had been living with his teacher during the week, and had developed a good relationship with the teacher’s mother. When the child reminded her to send regard to the teacher’s mother during the Chinese New Year, the caregiver responded actively and showed wholehearted support for the child’s proposal:

He said, “That grandma, who is my teacher’s mum, is really kind to me. She even washes socks and face towel for me, and they were washed so clean. Grandma, you have to call her and say thank you. Otherwise she will think I don’t even know how to show appreciation at such an age. She will complain that you haven’t thanked her. I said, “Yes. You are right! Do you have her phone number?”… (C06)

This need was only coded once, but I chose to reserve it because it not only reflected the child’s autonomy as an individual, but also had an impact on the child’s emotional and psychological wellbeing.

5.2.4 Safety

The theme of children’s safety needs includes two sub-themes: physical safety and protecting from others. The first sub-theme is associated with children’s physical environment. Caregivers identified a variety of factors within or beyond the home surroundings, which could potentially harm children. They indicated that children need to be away from these physical hazards. Being protected from others, on the other hand, refers to children’s protection throughout their contact with people, such as peers or other family members.
5.2.4.1 The need for physical safety

Caregivers’ understandings of children’s physical safety were focused on two distinct levels. The first level concerned their household environment, and their common concerns were electricity and fire. Almost all the caregivers allowed children left behind to watch TV at home, especially after these children had finished homework. However, some caregivers worried about children’s usage of TV-related electricity. They indicated that children’s inappropriate touching of power points could be very dangerous. Therefore, caregivers rarely left children home alone, and they normally warned children about electricity if they had to be away. Actions were also taken by caregivers to avoid any potential harm. A strong sense of responsibility was found on one caregiver, who described how he prevented his grandson from being hurt by electricity:

He plugs in and unplugs the TV…I have to be really careful. Sometime I’m busy with farming, so I turn off the whole power system when I leave home. I lie to him and tell him we have a blackout. It’s not easy to take care of him….Fire, as well as electricity…I must attend to all the things. It’s a big issue. This is a heavy responsibility. (C14)

Similar to electricity, fire was another main home concern for caregivers. As we can see from this caregivers’ account above (C14), fire was most likely to be mentioned along with electricity. Caregivers forbade children from playing with the fire, as it was not only harmful for children themselves, but could also cause severe damage to the house.

Beyond the home environment, caregivers reported several concerns which were suited in a broader context. Road safety, for example, was repeatedly mentioned by most caregivers. According to caregivers’ experiences, children left behind spent a lot of time playing outside
home in the local villages. These children reportedly liked riding bikes and skating. However, as most villages’ roads were connected to the central community or other towns, the traffic sometimes could be fast-flowing. Thus, caregivers were extremely cautious about children’s safety if they played around the road. The following accounts illustrated their concerns:

There is too much traffic on the road. I’m afraid of letting him go. (C06)

I’m worried, and I can’t let her go across the railway track… There is so much traffic and she is still young. It will be better if she was older. (C02)

It seems like I’m worried once he is far away. The County road is just behind our house. The traffic concerns me. (C10)

In addition to oral warnings about the traffic, some caregivers chose to restrain children’s activities. For example, one caregiver lived in a village which was close to a busy road. The following quote explained her influence on her grandson’s shopping choice:

He doesn’t go near the road. We are so close to the road…I told him if he goes to shops, he should go to the one in the village rather than the one across the road. I said, “You spend the same money for the same item, and everything you need can be bought from the village shop. Don’t go across the road for shopping.” (C22)

Due to travel and safety considerations, another caregiver could not arrange tutoring for her granddaughter in another village:

It’s not convenient. Public transport is not accessible, and she can’t travel alone… I’m worried…If we let her go to tutoring class, then we have to accompany her on the way.
She is too young. Other older children are able to take public transport. There are some children in this village who go to tutoring class on weekend. They can take public transport without any problem, and they know how to keep them safe from traffic.  (C02)

Normally, children were not allowed to play outside the home if caregivers were not around. A relatively extreme case was found on one caregiver, whose partner only ever allowed their grandson to play at home, even when adults were present:

His grandma doesn’t like him to play outside home. Some children, to be honest, can go wherever they like without any restrictions. This child can’t do that. His grandma doesn’t allow him to go. His grandma tries her best to watch the child all the time… just in case of being hit by cars…She will look for him if he was found not at home…He is too young…plus his parents were not around (C05)

For safety considerations, another caregiver even forbade his grandson from skating, because she was afraid that the child might fall down and hurt himself. Most caregivers reported that they always watched children while they were playing outside, and caregivers checked the children from time to time:

He (eight years old) just plays near the neighbourhood, which is not far from our house. Sometime I go there and take a look. He was found to play happily. (C01)

I have never let my eyes away from this child (12 years old). This year I can let her go a bit, as she has grown up. I used to always keep an eye on her. (C07)
I need to warn her (nine years old) when she plays outside. I don’t go out with her, but I keep an eye on her… (C18)

Some caregivers preferred to accompany children left behind whenever they could, so the children would not be out of sight. This preference was not only applied in children’s activities on the road, but also found in other aspects of children’s daily lives, such as school travelling:

If he (10 years old) goes somewhere, his grandpa will be with him. His grandpa follows him by bike and watches him. We don’t let him go alone…The taxi picks him up (for school) and we walk him to the taxi. In the afternoon, his grandpa will be waiting him early and brings him back home. We are just afraid of cars… (C06)

I even accompany her (12 years old) when he visits our neighbours. Other children ride to school on their own, and they asked me to let her go. I said I’m worried and couldn’t do that. I have to send her to school and pick her up there. (C07)

I’m concerned about him (13 years old) getting hurt. Sometimes I’m even worried that he might fall down from the bike and hurting himself. There are so many cars on the road, otherwise we don’t need to send him to school…We don’t let him ride the bike on his own. We are afraid of the traffic… (C13)

When asked what the children’s safety meant to caregivers, they were most likely to mention school travelling. As there was no school bus or public transport available, some caregivers had to hire a taxi to send their children to school. The taxi was shared with other children in the same village, and therefore could be crowded. Caregivers expressed their concern about the reliability of the taxi. However, there was nothing they could do, as it was too far for them to send the
children to school on a daily basis. As caregivers described, they could only rely on taxi drivers and pray for the children.

Concern about children travelling to school was also found from school personnel’s accounts. One staff member reported that they could not afford operating a school bus due to financial restriction, but they were aware of the wide usage of taxis by caregivers and parents. The school reportedly organised a campus-wide safety meeting every year, and both taxi drivers and children’s guardians were invited to attend. This school staff member reported that sometimes they also invited guests from the Bureau of Transportation as well as the Railway Administration, who gave speeches about safety from different perspectives. The school’s emphasis on children’s safety was well described by another school staff member:

We do everything just for the children’s safety…Whether the children are good at studying, they can still survive. But they will lose everything without health or safety. Safety is our first priority. We specially pay attention to the safety of children left behind…Nowadays the first thing teachers do in the morning is to count students in each class…First of all, we have to make sure that children have come to school safely…Children left behind are normally those with problems…(S02)

In rural areas, a number of hazards raise caregivers’ alert, including pond, river, dog, and snake. Similar to caregivers’ fears of fire, they were extremely cautious about children’s contact with a pond or river, as the water might take their children’s lives. Moreover, children were not allowed to play around as they wished if caregivers had found any dogs in the local community. One caregiver mentioned the danger of snake since there was a mountain close to his village.
Besides the environmental considerations above, caregivers talked about risks associated with rural living. For example, two caregivers shared the experiences of bringing children to the farm, as they couldn’t spare time to take care of the children at home. Neither of them liked the children to play on the farm because it could be dangerous. The following quote was from one of these two caregivers:

She (the child) is obedient. She has to go to the farm even she wouldn’t like to, because no one is available at home. We can’t leave her home alone. If she is left at home alone, we would be worried that she might make some trouble. There are so many electric appliances at home...It’s all good when we hoe in the field, but we are a bit concerned if we husk corns. The sharp root of corns spread out in the field, and she might step on and get hurt. I have to warn her again and again, and buy some cracks (such as chips, dry instant noodles) for her. She plays and eats nearby... (C17)

Along with caregivers’ understandings of children’s safety needs, most of them felt obliged to protect these children. Furthermore, they expressed mixed feelings of doing this. As we see from the following quotes, a few caregivers were under the pressure of assuming this role:

I’m supposed to take care of this child... It’s not easy as you think...I’m doing this for the good of the child. But if anything bad happens to him, for example, he falls down and gets hurt, my kind heart will be meaningless... (C22)

As grandparents, we have to be extremely careful. He might knock himself and get hurt due to being naughty. If we can’t watch him appropriately, then we should be responsible for it. (C02)
Driven by the concern above, some caregivers seemed very sensitive to information relevant to children’s safety. For example, one caregiver used to take his grandson to the park in Siping on Children’s Day every year. However, he decided to cancel it after he knew there was a bridge collapse in the park.

Caregivers’ understandings of children’s physical safety were based on the rural context. They were alert to anything within or beyond the house that could potentially harm children left behind. To address this need, however, sometimes required the caregiver to sacrifice children’s other needs, such as education or recreation.

5.2.4.2 The need to be protected from others

Caregivers and school personnel both reported that children left behind were timid in front of people, and some of them were found to be bullied by their peers. According to caregivers, bullying could happen to children left behind at any age, ranging from six to 14 years old. For example, one caregiver shared a story about her grandson’s pocket money when he was at kindergarten:

I called the teacher at kindergarten. I talked with the teacher because I was worried that he might be bullied there. When he was still young, I gave him two or three yuan each day. Sometimes his money was taken by other children at kindergarten. (C22)

A couple reported that their grandson had been bullied by other children in the village, even though the child was already 14 years old when the interview was conducted. The following quote described the grandmother’s reaction to the child’s suffering:
He came back and cried silently. I saw it. Back then XXX (another child in the village) always bullied him. He was jostled aside when they were in the taxi. I quarrelled with XXX, “Why do you always bully him?” … (C04)

Similar to the reaction above (C04), most caregivers showed their active support if the children were found to be bullied. Caregivers either talked with the bully or teachers to avoid further harm. For example, one caregiver noticed his grandson had an abscess on his ear, and turned out it was hurt by another student. This caregiver did not want to over react, so he asked the teacher to warn the student rather than visiting his parents:

I said, “We are not the kind of people who do blackmail, or see his parents. The ear is not a big deal, since it can recover. The point is avoiding further fighting between them. Please talk with him. If he doesn’t change, I will have to see his parents. It’s also about his parents’ education.” (C05)

Meantime, the caregiver (C05) also expressed his support for his grandson as following:

I did show my support. I said, “If anyone bullies you, you should just tell your teacher. If the teacher doesn’t intervene, I will call the teacher…That doesn’t work. He doesn’t have the courage…” (C05)

One caregiver chose to threaten the bully while she visited her granddaughter’s teacher at school:

I talked with her teacher. I said, “I haven’t been at home lately, and other students always bully our child. They slap her. She fell down and scratched her face. There was a deep cut on her face, which was so close to her eyeball.”…I saw the student and I said, “Don’t
bully our child again. You can’t do it! I will see your parents and kick your ass! Shame
on you! She is so vulnerable. How could you do that? ” I won’t be angry if they slap me a
bit, but I’m extremely upset when others bully her… This child is special, isn’t she? She
is different from others. (C09)

On the other hand, this caregiver (C09) discouraged the child to play with her peers in the local
community, so that the child could be protected from bullying:

Even in this village, I don’t let her go out and play with other kids. They don’t care about
her, and all bully her. (C09)

When sharing the experience, this caregiver (C09) expressed her expectation of the school’s role
in protecting children:

It doesn’t matter whether our child is good or not, right? I sent her to the school, so the
teachers should be responsible for what happened at school. It was within the school. It
happened at school during school time. (C09)

Although school personnel were aware of the timidity of children left behind, they did not report
any specific cases of children left behind being bullied. Rather, one staff member reported that
there was a child left behind in her class, who was apt to lead a ‘gang’ at school. This school
staff member described how she prevented the child from being involved in a fight:

I always kept an eye on him. I was worried that he could make some trouble…
Sometimes his grandparents spoiled him and allowed him to play around, and I often
watched his behaviour. In their sixth grade, children are apt to play as boss and gather a
gang. Back then, I asked other male students to watch him. If they found any sign of fighting, they would tell me in private. The other day, a student told me he went out with some other children, and seemed that he was going to fight. I immediately followed him at the school gate, and asked him if everything was OK. He said, “Teacher, don’t worry…” From then he learnt he shouldn’t make trouble, as I was worried… (S04)

For most caregivers, fighting was another big concern as children could get hurt from it. Generally, caregivers warned children left behind against fighting. A few caregivers even chose to reduce children’s interactions with peers to avoid potential conflicts. The following quote describes a caregiver’s response:

Even though he plays in the village, I’m still a bit worried. There are so many children in the village, including younger and older ones. He might slap down a younger kid. If he did that, we would have to take the child for medical treatment. It’s ok if we had money, but what could we do without money? Given this, I call him back after he has played a bit. (C10)

In addition to children’s safety considerations, some caregivers indicated another reason that they prevented children’s fighting with local peers. They reported that children’s fighting normally involved guardian’s intervention, and it was not good for maintaining a harmony between caregivers and other community members. However, this concern did apply to one caregiver, who stood up for her granddaughter’s grievance in a fight:

When she (the caregivers’ granddaughter) came back, I asked, “Did you hurt her?” “I didn’t.”…I can’t tolerate that she (another child’s mother) said our child slapped her child.
I told her, “You know what kind of child you have. I know every well about my child.” Then she went silent and said, “Whether she did slap or not, it’s ok.” I said, “Then you can’t just say our child slapped yours. It’s an insult.” … (C09)

When asked whether they slap children left behind, most caregivers reported that they rarely did that. Even those caregivers who slapped the children, clarified that they were mainly intimidating children to behave. For other family members, only one caregiver reported that the child was slapped badly by her parent, and this caregiver did not mind having an argument with her son:

If she wouldn’t like to get dressed and go to school, her dad will slap her badly. It’s like he wants to slap her to death. Because he slaps the child, my son and I argue often. (C09)

According to caregivers, children’s need to be protected from others mainly referred to their peers. It was not uncommon that children left behind were found to be bullied by other children around their age. In this case, caregivers showed their active support for these children. However, caregivers’ actions sometimes were constrained by the pressure of the local community, as they were apt to avoid conflicts with other guardians. In addition, few caregivers shared the experiences of protecting children left behind from adult’s harm.

5.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I presented some key findings from this study. I firstly presented caregivers’ motivations in assuming the role of caring for children left behind. They are: (1) supporting their own children; (2) Love for the third generation; (3) Family ties; and (4) Family obligation. These motivations not only reflect caregivers’ will to address children’s needs, but also influence the
way they construct children’s needs. Caregivers’ motivations, in this regard, are fundamental for obtaining in-depth understandings of children’s needs.

Children’s needs constructed by caregivers and school personnel were categorised into eight themes. The major portion of this chapter has been devoted to outlining these specific needs by using participants’ accounts, as they highlight children’s separation from their parents. Generally speaking, caregivers’ viewpoints are consistent with those of school personnel. However, some school personnel also critically commented on caregivers’ child rearing behaviours, and these comments were discussed accordingly. I will now outline the participants’ views of more general needs of children left behind.
6 THE GENERAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

The four themes in this chapter are more commonly recognised needs for Chinese rural children. Education is firstly presented, as it is seen as the most important need for children left behind. Following this, basic care and physical health are then discussed, and both of them are functional for children’s growth. The last theme presented in this chapter is personal development, which highlights the impact of Chinese culture on caregivers’ constructions. It is worth noting that accounts in this chapter particularly reflect the multiple possibilities of constructing meanings, indicating that caregivers’ constructions can only fully make sense in a Chinese context.

6.1 Education

Education is the most important need perceived by caregivers. The term of ‘education’ in this study mainly refers to children’s formal education, such as primary schooling and higher education. Although a need for tutoring was frequently reported by participants, it was seen as supplementary to children’s schooling. Children’s need for education was categorised into two sub-themes: formal education and educational support. The first one mainly captured participants’ understandings of formal education’s significance for children, as well as their endeavour to stimulate children. Educational support, on the other hand, focused on supportive resources children needed to promote their study performance.

6.1.1.1 The need to receive formal education

When asked to name the most important need for children left behind, most caregivers answered ‘education’. The following quotes illustrate how caregivers perceived study as children’s first priority:
I think study is the most important thing for her. I told her, “Grandson, don’t think too much. Just focus on study and it’s your mission.” (C07)

For the child, he needs to study well, and then I will be satisfied...The child’s general needs, basically speaking, tell him to be obedient and study well. After coming home, he should finish homework and sharpen pencil first. Then he can go out to play. (C08)

One caregiver particularly explained the importance of education for children, as well as its superior status compared with other needs:

I would say study. Nowadays technology has developed so well, and you can’t even use a computer if you don’t study well... Study is really important. It doesn’t matter what the child eats. He still has chance to eat better when he grows up. However, if he has been left behind in study since he is young, he won’t make it up in the future. Now study is his everything. (C15)

As we can see from the quote above, this caregiver indicated children’s need to be educated at an appropriate stage of their development. Similarly, most caregivers believed that primary schooling made fundamental contribution to children’s further achievements. Caregivers’ viewpoints were found to be consistent with those of school personnel. For example, one staff member emphasised that children’s development was a one-way process, so their educational needs should be addressed in a timely manner:

Children’s development cannot be reversed. Today they are attending primary school, and in the next stage they will be going to middle school. They can’t go back if they have passed the last stage. We can’t say like this: “We didn’t educate the child well, so let’s
start over again.” There is no chance like that. The Principal often tells us, “Children’s education can’t be reversed. We should cherish every day when we can educate them…” (S02)

Considering the significance of education for children left behind, caregivers made a lot of effort to persuade children to study hard. They set up the goal for the children, and hoped they could achieve satisfactory school performance. For example, some caregivers told children that education was a promising avenue to success, which could enable the children to live an urban life:

I told him to study hard, and go to university in the future. “You have seen the rural farm work. How tough it is! Plus, you will be exposed to the strong sun. If you study hard and go to university, then you could do something different.” (C22)

I talked to her. I can’t slap or scold her. “You need to study hard, so you can go to the university and drive to work like others. You know your uncle. He now owns a car and apartment. He wouldn’t have these if he didn’t study hard. You look at me, how tiring it is to work on the farm!”(C02)

He can understand. “You don’t have land, and you can’t do farming even if you wanted to. You can only make money here and there. But if you go to university, you will have a stable job.” I have to educate him like this since he was young. (C15)

One caregiver expressed his responsibility for guiding his grandson’s study while his parents were away. This caregiver told the child that he could not rely on the family all of his life, and education enabled him to live an independent life:
I told him, “You have to listen to me. Who else can guide you? Your dad is not at home, and your mum doesn’t guide you at all. If your grandma and I don’t guide you, what kind of person will you be in the future? If you don’t study well, you can’t make money and will be begging money.” “Now your dad can support your living. Your grandma and I can support you as well. However, when you grow up, can you still rely on others?” (C05)

A few caregivers even motivated children to study hard through children’s relationships with family. For example, one caregiver thought her grandson was mature enough to understand her hardship, and she persuaded the child as following:

“I have been caring for you so well, but your academic performance is still not good. As grandma, I feel like I don’t have any motivation anymore…No matter how poor we are, we borrowed money to support your study. However, you haven’t been studying hard…” Then he covered my mouth with his hand and said, “Granma, stop it… I understand.” (C22)

Two caregivers used family obligation to stimulate children to make greater efforts, and they also expressed expectations of children’s academic performance:

Before he left home for school in the morning, I said, “Concentrate on the lecture in class…The whole family relies on you. If you don’t study hard, you will be doing farming like me. How tiring and dirty it is! If you study hard and get a job, you can then spend your income in the ways you like.” (C03)

I educated her, “You ask for money every day. If your academic performance is not good enough, our support would be meaningless. Also, you haven’t got any land since you
were born, and you can only get some through marriage. Until then, you have to live on your own. If you study well, you can either be a teacher or worker… Then we don’t need to worry you in the future.” (C16)

Both caregivers and school personnel recognised children’s need for formal education. Caregivers particularly emphasised the significance of education for children’s future. They made efforts to persuade children to study well, so these children could secure a stable job and keep away from farming. For most caregivers, therefore, formal education was the most important need for children left behind.

6.1.1.2 The need to receive educational support

While describing the importance of education for children’s future, participants also revealed a variety of educational supports for children left behind. Some of the support was based on participants’ personal guidance, and the other refers to material resources. The section above illustrated how caregivers stimulated children to study hard. However, as one caregiver (C08) reported, sole oral communication with children could not achieve a satisfying result. Thus, adults reportedly should follow children’s progress and provide further guidance. This guidance first involved caregivers’ encouragement to children regarding their interactions with teachers. For example, one caregiver found her granddaughter was timid in front of the teacher, so she tried to encourage the child as following:

If she can’t follow the teacher at school, I talk with her sometimes: “You should listen to the teacher carefully in class. If there is anything you don’t understand, just ask your teacher after class…” (C02)
Most school personnel, on the other hand, showed an active attitude toward their interaction with caregivers and children left behind. One of the school personnel reported that she would like to cooperate with caregivers, so that they could find an optimal way to promote children’s study:

(Children’s) grandparents are not so old, and they are all open-minded. They know what we do is for the good of the children. They visit us whenever they are free, and enquire about children’s recent behaviours. They want to know how we communicate with children and help with their study…If we found children were behind in study or indolent with their homework, we would contact caregivers…If caregivers are too busy, we can ask nearby students to do homework with the children together. We (caregivers and school personnel) can come to an appropriate solution after communication. (S02)

As we can see, caregivers’ guidance was not limited to children themselves, but also involved broader community members who are relevant to children’s education. One caregiver complained that the pick up taxi was always late, which resulted in her grandson missing morning self-study at school⁸. This caregiver took the following action to meet the child’s study needs:

He (the child) couldn’t catch the morning self-study. I talked to the driver, “This is not acceptable. You need to be earlier. Our money could be spent on any taxi. If you are still late like this, I will find another taxi. ” From then he (the driver) made it earlier. (C08)

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⁸ In most Chinese primary schools, there is a self-study session arranged before the first class in the morning. Students are requested to attend the self-study session, and sometimes they are supervised by teachers.
Almost all the caregivers believed schooling should be children’s first priority. They preferred not to burden children with any housework, so children could have more time to concentrate on their studies:

I work on my own and don’t let her do anything for me. She is too young. I never ask her for any housework. She only needs to study. I hope my granddaughter studies well and makes some achievements in the future. Go to university or something. I only have this expectation, nothing else…I hope she studies well and can make a contribution to the country. (C07)

Along with high expectations of children’s school performance, some caregivers also recognised the onerous burden children confronted in their studies. Caregivers reported that children needed more rest because they were so tired from study. The following quote described a caregiver’s opinion of her granddaughter’s tutoring. This child lived with her aunt in central town and only came to her grandparent’s home on weekends.

Last year, she came back every two weeks. Today I said “the child is too tired and doesn’t have any time to rest.” This time I rearranged her tutoring to every Tuesday and Thursday night after class. (C18)

Although caregivers value children’s needs for breaks from study, a variety of restrictions were found on children’s behaviours. These restrictions sometimes could cause conflicts among children’s different needs. For example, one caregiver did not encourage his grandson to watch TV, and he expressed the reason as following:
Too much TV is not good for his eyes. Also, it’s not good for his study. I told him, “You can watch as much as you can if you make progress in your study. If you are still behind, I won’t let you watch.” Sometimes he got really angry, and he just stood outside. (C05)

Within the home environment, caregivers’ guidance for children’s education was centred on their homework. Children’s homework was seen as a big concern for caregivers, and most caregivers required children to finish homework as soon as they get home:

When he came back, I told him: “You need to finish your homework first, then sharpen your pencil and pack your school bag. After having done these, you can go out to play. The first thing after school is doing homework…” (C08)

I’m worried about her homework. Other children can finish quickly, but she can’t. She spreads her notebooks everywhere and makes the kang really messy. I always tell her, “You should do your homework on the desk. Be organised and do it quickly, and then you can go out to play.” (C09)

At school, children’s study was reportedly supervised by school personnel. Although children left behind were generally seen as indolent, they were most likely to be treated slightly different from other students. For example, one school staff member shared a story about an extroverted child left behind in her class. The child reportedly had some leadership ability, so the school staff member assigned her a few student leader roles. In addition, both the staff member and other students showed special care for this child, because her parents were not around. The school staff members never even scolded her as severely as other students. However, the child’s academic
performance turned very bad at the end of a semester. In this case, this school staff member expressed the child’s need to be guided, so she communicated with child to improve her study:

“I have been nice to you, and you developed the bad habit because I haven’t been strict with you? If so, I will treat you as strictly as other students. I can’t spoil you just because your parents are not around.” …In the following semester, I found her changed a bit. She seemed more focused on her study. When other students went out to play after class, she was able to sit down and concentrate on reading. (S05)

While describing homework concerns, caregivers also indicated children’s tutoring needs. Unsurprisingly, caregivers did their best to assist the children in homework. Some caregivers even emphasised the significance of showing children methods rather than just telling them answers. For example, one caregiver criticised his partner’s way of tutoring the child, and decided to assume the tutoring role himself:

At first his grandma tutored him, and she just told him the answers. I said, “You shouldn’t do that…He will be waiting for you to answer the question. He won’t succeed if you keep doing this…You leave his study to me and I will tutor him.” I told my grandson, “You just write whatever you know. It doesn’t matter whether the answer is correct or wrong. You write the ones you know the answers and enquiry the others that you are not sure. After you finish, I will check for you. I will ask you to rethink of the wrong ones, but I won’t correct them for you. I point out and you rethink yourself.” (C05)
Although caregivers were willing to tutor children at home, most of them complained of incapacity due to low level education. The following quote was a typical description from the caregiver:

We have spent a lot of money (on her education), but she is still left behind in study. If I could read, it would be much better... It’s so difficult for her grandpa. It even takes him a while to look up a word in the dictionary. His eyesight is poor, so he has to wear glasses. I know nothing so I can’t look up for her. (C02)

Most school personnel agreed about caregivers’ struggles in tutoring children. One school staff member reported that caregivers generally lacked authority compared with the children’s parent. And, moreover, caregivers could not guarantee the quality of children’s homework:

The point is the child can’t get appropriate tutoring at home. Also, parents are far away, and they rarely contact the child due to the high cost of phoning. His grandparents just cook for him and send him to school. He doesn’t finish his homework, though his grandma said he does the homework every day. She knows that he does the homework, but she doesn’t know whether he finishes it or finishes it correctly…He probably doesn’t listen to them (his grandparents). They tried hard to remind him of the homework, but he listens with half an ear. He might do the homework while watching TV. However, if his parents were around, he wouldn’t dare to do that. Since parents are away, the grandparents are not likely to be too strict with him… (S05)

Since caregivers were generally not able to provide quality tutoring with children left behind, some of them arranged for the children to live with their teachers. This was a common child care
arrangement for children left behind in Shijiapu Town. Caregivers paid teachers who were willing to provide daily care for children. These teachers normally lived close to the school, which also saved these rural families’ school travelling time. The teachers also supervised children’s studies during week days. On weekends, children were picked up by caregivers and stayed with them. Caregivers reported that they did not have other choices, and this arrangement was for the good of children:

I don’t know anything about his study, otherwise I won’t let him stay with his teacher. The teacher can tutor him, and I’m willing to pay more for this…He can learn more when living with the teacher. The teacher can assist with his homework. (C06)

I know nothing about her study, so I can’t tutor her. The teacher can tutor her homework in the evening, if she stays there. (C07)

I have to send her to stay with the teacher. I would rather she lived at home, which costs less. However, I can’t really help with her homework. (C20)

Two school personnel in this study had cared for children left behind as requested by parents or kin caregivers. One school staff member (S03) reported that she not only tutored the child’s homework, but also assigned him extra studies sometimes. The other explained how the child came to live with her. This school staff member believed that living with the teacher was only a temporary arrangement, and the child needed to learn self-study without an adult’s supervision:

Her parents proposed it because the child was behind in study…Her grandparents were around, and they had been taking care of her very well. However, after living with them for one semester, her study got worse…They couldn’t tutor her, as they didn’t know
about the knowledge of the fourth grade…After staying with me for one semester, her academic performance had improved. I persuaded her mum, “If she can keep on like this, you better let her back with her grandparents. If she gets used to relying on others, she will always need other’s supervision. It would be better if she learns to self-study, and then she can make stable progress in study.” Her mum totally accepted my suggestion…

(S05)

Although feeling reluctant, most caregivers indicated the benefits for children left behind of living with the teacher. One caregiver reported that living with the teacher had promoted his granddaughter’s study:

She asked me math questions when she was younger. Now she doesn’t ask me anymore. Since she stayed at the teacher’s home, she has made some progress in her study. (C16)

Generally, caregivers highly valued children’s tutoring, especially if the children’s school performance was seen as not good enough. Although caregivers preferred to put children in their teacher’s home for tutoring, they were most likely to respect children’s own choice. If the children insisted on not living with their teachers, caregivers normally compromised to avoid upsetting children:

I’m illiterate. His grandpa doesn’t know many words. I asked him to stay with the teacher, but he wouldn’t like to. He can’t leave home. The other day, I persuaded him, “Grandson, you are in the second grade this year. Go and stay with your teacher when you are in the fifth or sixth grade…Your study will be better there than being at home. The teacher can tutor you.” Plus, he listens to the teacher. Even though he does listen to grandparents, his
teacher’s influence is much better. I talked with him like this, but he still didn’t agree. (C22)

Caregivers’ valuing of children’s feelings was also reflected in their support for school activities. For example, one caregiver reported that although being busy with farming, she still attended a parents’ meeting upon her granddaughter’s request:

“I don’t have time. I need to hoe tomorrow, so I can’t make it.” On the following morning, she said, “Grandma, you are a kindly grandma. Please attend it…Our teacher said every guardian should bring their children to the playground and have a meeting there. The Principal will give a speech. ” I didn’t know what it was about…I thought it over and I had to go. It was in the course of hoeing, but I still attended the meeting. (C09)

In contrast with personal tutoring and support above, caregivers seemed more confident in providing material support for children. Furthermore, no matter how poor the family were, caregivers all showed their willingness to cover children’s stationery and other expenditure at school:

I said, “If you fancy anything, such as notebook or pencil, just tell me when you come back. I will certainly meet your needs. No matter how poor we are, trust me, you will be treated well.” (C06)

As a child, she doesn’t request that much. I buy anything that she needs for the study. Once she has asked, I will have to buy. I give her money as she requests. (C16)
School personnel also reported material support for children left behind at school. This support was found from different groups, including senior school staff members, teachers, as well as other students. Each school staff member was reportedly responsible for a few children left behind. They were supposed to be familiar with these children and provided necessary support if the children were in need. The support could cover children’s stationery as well as their clothing. One school staff member (S01) also indicated the needs of children left behind to be supported by other students. For example, other students could be encouraged to offer pencils when children left behind needed them.

In addition to commonly recognised material support for children’s education, a few caregivers indicated that children need an appropriate home environment for study. According to my interviews with caregivers and observations of their homes, almost half of the families had at least two bedrooms in the house. However, few children had their own rooms, as other rooms in the house were used to store sundries. One caregiver reported that he would provide his grandson with his own room when the child went to middle school:

> When he goes to middle school, I will let him sleep in that room alone. I will also buy him a desk. It’s quiet for him to be in that room. I don’t want him to watch TV anymore. To be honest, I think primary and middle schooling are fundamental to the child’s performance at junior high school. This is just my thought. It hasn’t been done yet. (C03)

Given the significance of education to children left behind, caregivers showed great passion to provide support for children’s study. They negotiated with different people to ensure children’s educational needs were being met. However, most caregivers complained that they were not capable of tutoring children at home. Some arranged for children to live with teachers in the
week, so their studies could be guided in time. In contrast with tutoring, caregivers seemed more confident in providing material support for children’s education.

6.2 Basic care

Basic care mainly refers to children’s needs for food, clothing, as well as personal hygiene. These needs were frequently mentioned by caregivers when asked what they could provide for children left behind. While describing this, some caregivers compared themselves to children’s parents in terms of providing sensitive care:

Other children have parents, so somehow grandmother doesn’t need to be so involved. It’s different here, so I have to take care of all the things. Because her dad is not around, and mum has passed away... Every aspect of her life needs to be attended... I’m like her mum and grandma as well. I take care of her like her mum. (C07)

Grandson is just like my own child. He needs delicate care as that. (C13)

Unlike some needs above, which were indentified from participants’ stories and feelings, most caregivers’ accounts of this theme were made explicit. Children’s food and clothing needs were coded together in terms of their material features. Personal hygiene was coded independently, as it more directly showed how caregivers’ understandings of children’s presence were constructed in a social environment.
6.2.1.1 The need for food and clothing

Food and clothing were generally seen as essential for children left behind by caregivers, which means these needs were reportedly more important than some others. For example, one caregiver compared the child’s need for food and clothing with toys:

These (toys) are waste of money. Toys are not must. You must buy food and clothing for her, as she goes to school. Nowadays children always eat, at school or after school, they all eat. No matter how frugal we adults are, we need to give her some money (for food).

(C02)

Caregivers’ understandings of children’s need for food were centred around two areas: providing basic meals and restricting ‘junk food’. Since school travelling was not convenient, most children left behind reportedly ate lunch at school. Some caregivers gave these children pocket money to buy lunch, and they expected the children to eat enough food. Besides keeping children away from hunger, most caregivers emphasised the nutritional importance for children’s physical development. They mentioned rice, vegetables, and meat, which were relatively common food for rural residents. And, moreover, they reported the children’s need for milk and fruits to achieve a balanced diet.

It should be noted that most caregivers distinguished children’s needs from their own. Caregivers reported that they did not mind what they ate as long as the food kept them full. However, for the children, they had to provide meat, fruits, and milk on a regular base, because children need these for body growth. Children’s need for appropriate food sometimes required caregivers’ extra support. For example, a few caregivers bought a fridge mainly for storing fruits and ice-
blocks for children left behind. By using the fridge, the children were reportedly able to eat fresh fruits whenever they liked.

In addition to regular food, a few caregivers bought supplements for children based on health considerations. For example, one caregiver (C06) was concerned about her grandson’s nutrition, because the child was found to lack appetite. Thus, she supplied calcium tablets for her grandson just in case. Along with their indications of children’s need for supplements, caregivers also reported that they could only afford the ones within their financial capacity.

While describing children’s need for food, most caregivers indicated that children’s own preferences should be taken into account. According to caregivers’ experiences, it was not uncommon that children left behind were picky about food. In this case, caregivers were most likely to cook meals based on their knowledge of children’s preferences. The following quotes illustrate two caregivers’ considerations of children’s special needs regarding meals:

Sometimes his grandma cooks something special for him (eight years old). To be honest, although he usually eats with us, we have to cook something special for him occasionally. Why? He is too young. Other children can eat some good food, and how can we make him suffer? (C05)

He (10 years old) doesn’t eat much. He can’t even finish one bowl of rice. He doesn’t like vegetables either. There are not many vegetables in this season, so I cook some special meals for him… (C22)

Although most caregivers showed their respect for children’s food preferences, they also set up relevant restrictions. Caregivers highly valued three meals in children’s daily lives, and they
discouraged children from consuming any junk food. One caregiver reported that a child would lack appetite for a meal if she had eaten some junk food, such as snacks:

She doesn’t eat dinner if she has had some snacks. I have forbidden her from eating snacks due to this. I don’t allow her to buy any snacks. She likes to buy instant noodles if I give her money. That is no good…The taste of the noodles is different from the rice, and she doesn’t like to eat rice afterwards. (C09)

Caregivers generally perceived snacks as junk food, and the following quote from one grandfather showed their common understanding:

Sometimes she buys snacks. I said, “Don’t buy that kind of stuff. It’s not good. You don’t need it anymore since you have grown up. It’s called junk. Why you always eat junk?” (C16)

Some caregivers also pointed out junk food’s negative impact on children’s health:

I don’t allow him to eat charcoal barbecue. That barbecue has some kind of pollution, and it’s not good for the child’s health. (C08)

There are food additives in snacks, which worsen children’s health they eat more and more. Some children are too slim and they don’t like to eat meals anymore. My grandson is ok. He is not so into crackers… (C14)

Snacks are not good for him. He only eats dried instant noodles….I said, “It’s ok if you only eat that. Don’t buy other crackers.” He has to buy ice-lolly if it’s too hot. (C15)
I don’t like him to eat sausage. I told him the sausage is made of low quality meat. Then he won’t eat anymore. I buy him sunflower seed, orange, or peach. I buy him this kind of stuff. (C22)

In addition to food being necessary for children’s growth, some caregivers also mentioned its role in comforting children. When children left behind missed their parents or got upset, caregivers sometimes bought them snacks to calm them down. These accounts had been supported by the viewpoints of some school personnel. When asked what were the needs of children left behind, one school staff member (S03) mentioned food, shelter, as well as play. Another school staff member believed that eating food alleviated children’s sadness from missing their parents:

Children normally don’t develop any bad habits if they are supplied with food and money. I asked them whether they missed their mums. A child said, “Teacher, I don’t miss my mum that much if I have money and food.” The child has seen his grandparent’s place as his own home…I think children have two important needs: food. If they see others eat anything but they haven’t tried yet, they would ask for it when they get home. The other need is play. If they see others have any toys, they will ask for them when they get home. They don’t have many needs except these two…In my opinion, if we can meet these two needs, they won’t miss their mum very much. (S05)

Another basic need constructed by caregivers is children’s clothing. Some caregivers emphasised children’s separation from their parents, and they wanted to make these children happy through buying them their preferred clothing. Furthermore, a few caregivers considered the feelings of
children left behind in front of people. They aimed to provide these children with decent clothing, so the children looked no different from their peers.

Some caregivers, however, were more realistic regarding children’s clothing. These caregivers did not lay much emphasis on this need. And, moreover, their views were directly associated with their purchasing capacity:

He (10 years old) is still young. Here is my opinion: there is no need to buy many clothes. After one year, the clothes won’t fit him anymore. (C19)

I buy her clothes. He doesn’t wear good brand clothes as other children. I just buy some cheap clothes for him. It’s all good as long as he has something to wear. I can’t afford expensive ones. (C10)

Children’s basic care was seen as a routine by most caregivers. They valued the nutrition in food, and tried to keep children away from junk food for health considerations. A few participants even reported children’s need for comfort, as they seemed happy after being offered food. Caregivers’ understandings of children’s need for clothes were not as consistent as those identified with food. Some caregivers emphasised clothing’s basic function, however, a few saw it as a way of enabling children to present themselves well in front of their peers.

6.2.1.2 The need for personal hygiene

Caregivers reported a variety of actions to address children’s personal hygiene, such as washing children’s clothes, helping children with bathing, hair brushing, and face washing.

Some caregivers reported that boys were generally ‘a bit naughty’, and they could easily get messy. Thus, taking care of boys’ personal hygiene, especially washing and changing their
clothes, was a daily routine for these caregivers. However, most caregivers felt obliged to do this. As one caregiver reported, the child needed to be kept clean, which should be the way he presented himself in front of his peers:

I wash his clothes...He plays with dozens of boys who are around his age at school…If he looks dirty, that would be a shame for him. (C06)

Girls were not seen as naughty as boys. And, therefore, they did not cost caregivers a tremendous amount of time regarding clothes washing. However, a few caregivers did indicate that they had to take special care of girl’s hair. For example, one caregiver mentioned that she must get up early to prepare her ten years old granddaughter’s schooling in the morning:

I brushed hair because she is still young. She doesn’t know how to brush if the hair grows too long. So I need to brush for her. Also, I wash her hair twice a week. You have to clean all of this stuff… (C09)

Like the grandmother above (C09), some caregivers could not let the children clean themselves, especially if they thought the children were still young. The following quotes illustrated this well. Both caregivers were talking about their grandchildren’s face washing. The child in the first quote was nine years old, and the other one was ten:

I wash his body and hair. Sometimes I let him wash face on his own…I usually wash his neck and head…He knows that he needs to be clean. The point is he can’t clean himself very well. (C10)

I have taught him how to wash face, but it didn’t work. He washes his face like a cat. He only reaches a small area of his face, and rest is not cleaned at all. (19)
Although all the caregivers were aware of children’s need for personal hygiene, their capacity was restricted by a variety of factors. One caregiver, for example, reported that she was too busy with farming sometimes, so she could not clean her grandson as needed:

   If I’m not so busy, I wash his clothes every three or four days. If I’m busy, it will be different. I then might do it every week. Sometimes I’m exhausted, then I just let him keep wearing it for a bit. (C10)

Another caregiver pointed out the difference between rural and urban lives. She complained about the hassle of bathing the child in the village as following:

   She can’t clean herself very well. It’s such a hassle to bath in the village, unless I take her to the central town for public shower. We use the homemade shower in the shed. The village is different from city. (C02)

For rural caregivers, children’s basic care had been inherited in their own daily lives. Therefore, providing such care with children left behind was taken for granted. While describing their experiences, caregivers also indicated the association between these basic needs and children’s physical health. This link was particularly apparent when caregivers shared their viewpoints about children’s food. Based on this link, the following section will address children’s physical health need in more detail.

6.3 Physical health

Participants’ views on children’s physical health covered a few areas, such as children’s eating habits, illness and medical treatment, as well as weather considerations. As we can see in the above section, caregivers were concerned about the importance of food consumption on
Almost all the caregivers indicated that they needed to guide children’s food selection. This guidance was reportedly applied to snacks in particular:

I don’t allow him to eat snacks… Nowadays children just like snacks so much…Some snacks have been found to be toxic. You never know how they made the snack. (C15)

Generally, I don’t let him buy snacks from the convenience shop. The point is some snacks contain hormones or odd things. Some hormone is good for health though, right? Sometimes he buys odd things. I told him he could buy the things he likes except the snacks. I told him to avoid eating candy as long as he could, because it’s not good for his teeth. (C08)

Caregivers believed that children need some certain food which provided them with nutrition, however, the children sometimes felt reluctant to eat these food. In this case, caregivers had to persuade or even force the children to eat:

I tell him how good it (vegetables) is, but he still wouldn’t eat. I said, “There is no vitamin if you don’t eat vegetables.” It doesn’t work. Sometimes I force him to eat, and then he ate a little bit. (C13)

Another caregiver reported that he was always cautious about his grandson’s eating behaviour, as he tried to prevent the child from catching disease:

You have to pay attention to the child, especially the child like him… If eat something bad with dirty hands, he will get diarrhoea… (C15)

Since caregivers frequently emphasised children’s physical health, their understanding of the term was further explored. Most caregivers’ interpretation of this need was centred on illness,
and they believed that health meant no illnesses. The following quotes from two caregivers showed the typical meanings that first came to their mind:

I think just keep her away from illness… She is healthy then. (C02)

Health, I can’t really think about it. Anyway, just treat him if he is ill. Normally, he doesn’t catch any disease though. (C15)

When asked their attitudes toward vaccines for children left behind, all the caregivers showed active support. According to caregivers, vaccines were available from both the school and local community clinics. The injection of vaccines must be based on children’s guardian’s agreement. Sometimes caregivers were not fully aware of the vaccine’s function. However, they still let the children take it, as it was seen as good for the children’s physical health:

I let her take any vaccine as long as it’s good for her health. (C07)

The vaccine, for blood poisoning or something, was not cheap. There were three injections in total. (08)

The teacher informs guardians before students take any vaccine. They don’t give children vaccine unless guardians agree to... It’s free and voluntary. Generally our granddaughter takes the vaccine. It’s good for the child… (C16)

In addition to vaccines, caregivers also shared other preventive ways in which they ensured the children’s good health. For instance, most caregivers seemed extremely cautious about weather change, as they perceived that cold weather might make the child sick:

I listen to weather forecast. I put more clothes on him if it’s getting cold, and take off one piece if it’s warm. I have to do this because I’m taking care of the child. (C22)
I don’t want him to catch a cold. Sometimes I put heavy clothes on him if it’s cold. (C12)

He just stood outside and wouldn’t come in. I had to comfort and persuade him to come inside. It’s ok if he stays outside at this season. However, it’s too cold during winter, and he might get a cold. (C05)

Although caregivers made efforts to keep children healthy as above, some children reportedly showed impatience with their care. Caregivers were aware of children’s reactions, however, they still guided children’s behaviours for health considerations. For instance, a caregiver (C17) and his partner both agreed to restrict his granddaughter’s TV watching. He insisted the child should watch TV appropriately, as too much contact with TV might damage the child’s eyes.

Caregivers’ caution about children’s health was based on their familiarity with the children. This was especially the case when the children already had some health problems:

Her throat is a bit...I’m not sure…It’s just like laryngitis, so I don’t allow her to eat spicy food. (C02)

He has throat problem. He is infirm, so he has this problem often. I have to pay special attention to him. Watch him either in hot or cold days… (C08)

The need for children to be sensitively cared for was particularly apparent when they had health problems. Again, this need was perceived based on caregivers’ familiarity with children:

Now I don’t want him to stay with his teacher. Why? This child has a weak constitution, and can get ill easily. At school, the teacher won’t take care of him as we do at home. He always has fever during the night, and I need to give him medicine immediately. (C13)
My grandson, to be honest, he is always on my mind. If he has flu at school, I will call his teacher. I call the teacher every noon to see if he still has a high temperature... (C06)

How dare you to sleep? The child had fever. (I) gave her some medicine, and touched her every a few minutes. Then gave her some boiled water...How can you sleep? What if the child’s fever got much worse? After I woke up the following morning, I quickly prepared breakfast and then brought her to the hospital. (C04)

A few caregivers also spoke about how children’s health conditions affected their living arrangements. These caregivers preferred to care for children on their own rather than sending them to teachers. They indicated that teacher’s care was not as delicate as their own:

- I didn’t let him stay with the teacher these days. He had an operation on his arm. He needs someone to take the stitches out and redress the wound. I would be worried if he lived with the teacher... (C06)

- I haven’t arranged him to live with his teacher, because he is infirm. He gets ill easily. At school, the teacher doesn’t care for him as well as us. He has fever during midnight often, and we need to give him medicine immediately. (C13)

School personnel, on the other hand, shared several stories about how children’s health problems were addressed. One school staff member particularly reported that a child left behind perceived better care from her than his parent. The following case happened while the child’s mother was staying with him temporarily:

- He was ill and went home. He told his mum he didn’t feel well. His mum did nothing and said he would be fine...He said his mum was not as good as me. “My teacher would have
given me a glass of honey water and touch my head if I’m ill. She then would give me a peeled pear.”…His mum called me the other day and said, “Teacher XXX, my son said you have treated him better than what I have done.”… (S05)

This school staff member (S05) also added that while taking care of sick children, she normally took the children’s temperature first. If the children were found to have fever, she would decide whether to give medicine or let caregivers pick them up. Like some other school personnel, she expressed the concern about teacher’s role in this situation:

As a teacher, I can’t just give children medicine. If children are ill, their guardians should take them home. In highly exceptional circumstance, if their guardians are too busy to come over, I could give them some hot water and medicine. The school request us to inform children’s guardian and take them home. (S05)

In contrast with school personnel, caregivers responded to children’s illness with more confidence. It was part of caregivers’ daily lives to provide support for children when they were in need of medical care. Moreover, it was not uncommon that caregivers covered the cost of the treatment:

A few days ago, I saw a birthmark on his arm. I was told that the birthmark is not good for him, so I arranged an operation for him to remove it, which cost a lot of money. (C06)

She got this laryngitis last year. Now she feels much better. I always let her take the medicine, which cost around 1,000 yuan (around $620) in total. I have to do this. (C02)

It should be noted that two caregivers mentioned children’s dental health during the interviews. After children’s teeth problems were identified, both of them took the children to hospital for
treatment, as there was no such service available in the community clinic. Several other caregivers also indicated that they preferred to take the children to big hospitals rather than a local clinic. They believed children could receive better treatment in a larger hospital. In addition, one caregiver complained about the difficulty of accessing medical treatment in a rural area. This difficulty was compounded because it was not easy to move around at her age (56), and she couldn’t read. Thus, she found it inconvenient to take her grandson for medical treatment.

In addition to formal medical treatment, caregivers also indicated children’s need for personal care in the home. Most caregivers were extremely concerned about sick children, so they spared no effort to provide children with sensitive care. As several caregivers reported, caring for the sick children was not easy:

If he has a headache or flu, I will be worried a lot. Sometimes I woke up in the midnight and fed him with medicine… I was worried that he might get a fever… I concern myself about his illness so much. (C06)

When he was ill, he had an intravenous drip at home after school. In the following day, I prepared all the medicine and water for him, as he needed them at noon…He was fed with powdered milk to grow up, so he is a bit infirm. (C13)

As stated previously, caregivers’ understandings of children’s physical health were not limited to illness itself, rather, they were linked to children’s need for basic care as well as guidance. In other words, caregivers not only responded to children’s health problems that occurred, but also took action to prevent potential health risks through guidance. This guidance, which could turn into restrictions, was seen as essential for children’s growth. The next section will explore this need in-depth as part of children’s need for personal development.
6.4 Personal development

Personal development refers to children’s growth in a social environment. It includes all the needs that enable the children to socialise and achieve based on a general moral code. Most needs under this theme are based on adult’s guidance and supervision, such as for children’s personality, goals, and courtesy. Activities, on the other hand, are more focused on, and conducted by, children themselves. It is worthy to note that participants’ understandings in this section clearly reflect their personal experiences as members of Chinese society.

6.4.1.1 The need for discipline and restriction

According to participants’ viewpoints, children’s need for discipline and restriction had been addressed throughout their daily lives, ranging from children’s money spending to their play. A few caregivers emphasised the necessity of restricting children during their childhood. For example, one grandmother described why she had restricted her 12 years old grandson:

I have to guide the child. Children are like saplings, and they need to be trimmed. It would be too late if you restrict children after they have grown up. If children turn 18 years old, they cannot be restricted anymore. (C06)

Another caregiver reported that he did not agree with his partner regarding the way of educating their eight year old grandson. He believed the child needed to be restricted rather than spoiled.

If you spoil him like that, what kind of person he will be after he grows up? (C05)

Most caregivers believed that appropriate discipline and restriction benefited children in the long run. Thus, caregivers not only set up rules and guided children’s behaviour at home, but also
encouraged teachers to be strict with the children. They even did not mind teachers physically disciplining the children as long as it was perceived to be for the children’s good:

I told the teacher, “Be strict with him. Boys always play around. If he doesn’t study well due to play, you just slap him. I won’t complain.” I have entrusted the child to his teacher, so I have to let her educate him… (C06)

The teacher is a bit strict with students. I said, “Don’t have any misgivings. Just discipline him if needed. He won’t be obedient if you don’t discipline him. Unlike girls, boys are naughty.” (C13)

Such caregivers’ attitudes were confirmed by a few school personnel, who reported that caregivers generally accepted children’s discipline at school. However, none of the school personnel had reported any case where they physically disciplined the children. Rather, they preferred to communicate with and educate children verbally. For example, one child left behind was found to steal his classmate’s drink. The teacher talked to him as following:

I said, “Did you feel thirsty? You can just tell him that you want to drink a bit. Otherwise, you can tell me that you don’t have money and feel thirsty, so I can buy you some drink. That is ok, but you can’t drink others’ without informing them.” (S05)

Although some caregivers shared their own experiences of disciplining children left behind, they also emphasised that physical discipline was used to warn children rather than severely hurt them. Caregivers believed children need such discipline to learn a lesson, so they behave next time:

If he makes trouble and makes us mad, his grandma will slap him. We say slap, but can we really slap him? We just intimidate him. (C08)
I do slap her, but it’s just intimidation. How can I really slap her? Her mum is not around, and she will think about this… (C11)

Some caregivers, however, reported that they never physically discipline the children. These caregivers perceived communication as a more effective way to guide children. More importantly, they believed the children were too vulnerable to be physically disciplined, as their parents were not around. One caregiver (C05) reported that the child was most likely to be spoiled by grandparents. After discipline, grandparents were apt to comfort the child, which could spoil the child more. Therefore, he chose not to slap his grandson to avoid spoiling the child. The following quote was about his understanding of physical discipline:

For children, it's a matter of education…Solely physical discipline doesn’t work, as he won’t be persuaded. He would be wondering why he has been disciplined. He thought he was right… (C05)

Only one caregiver (C19) explicitly described physical disciplining as a crime. This caregiver had been very kind to his grandson. He insisted that slapping a child was not right, and reported he had never done that to his grandson. As he reported, the child’s relationship with him was closer than that of his partner, as his partner placed more restrictions on the child. A few other caregivers also reported similar experiences, who found children tended to develop a closer relationship with kind and easygoing caregivers.

No matter how kind the caregivers were, almost all of them showed strict attitudes toward children’s study. For example, there was a couple who took care of their granddaughter. The grandmother was a Christian, and she always had warm smile in her eyes while doing the interviews. The grandfather was a kind man with great courtesy. Both of these participants
showed their love for the child, and they reported they had never even scolded her for any reason. When asked if they always treated their granddaughter kindly, one of them answered as following:

It depends. If she does homework in a slipshod manner, we will be strict with her. We have to educate her if she is careless in study. (C17)

Another caregiver expressed a similar attitude regarding the child’s study:

I give him whatever he likes. However, study is different. I said, “You have to finish your homework first.” (C15)

If children’s other needs, such as play, were seen as conflicting with their study, caregivers normally sacrificed other needs. For example, one caregiver (C07) reported that she had a computer at home, however, she did not set up the internet connection. She was worried that her granddaughter might become addicted to the internet and not focus on study anymore. If the child was really keen to play computer, she was allowed to play at their neighbour’s home occasionally.

In addition to study, most caregivers also indicated children’s need to be restricted when they played in the local community. Some expressed their concern about children’s safety, as it might be dangerous to let children play around without any restrictions or discipline:

He is really naughty! When he was six or seven, he tried to cut a tree in front of our gate. He then cut his leg by accident. I was so angry! If I don’t intimidate him, he may do it again. (C13)
I have to tell him not to damage neighbour’s trees or fence…It’s a heavy duty for me…If he plays with other kids, I ask him to play nearby. (C08)

As stated earlier, caregivers normally worried about children’s interactions with other children, as children might become involved in a fight and get hurt. A few caregivers chose to avoid fighting through restricting children’s contact with their peers. For example, one caregivers’ granddaughter had been bullied by other children in the local community. To protect the child, this grandmother had been restricting her granddaughter’s interactions with playmates:

I will lock the gate if other children come to play with her. I won’t let them in. She can play around my house herself. I don’t allow other children to play with her. (C09)

Besides play, children’s money spending was another predominant area that attracted caregivers’ restrictions. Although some caregivers expressed their willingness to meet children’s material needs, they still believed children’s money spending needed to be restricted. Some caregivers preferred to buy things for children rather than letting them spend money on their own:

I told him, “Don’t waste money at school. If you see other students eat anything and you would like to try, come home and tell us. You are not allowed to buy on your own at school.” …He shouldn’t buy himself. (C06)

One caregiver particularly described the conflicting feelings of loving her granddaughter through restriction. She said the child was a bit afraid of her. To avoid spoiling the child, she always gave less money than the child had asked. This caregiver compared her way of loving the child with that of her partner:
Her grandpa sometimes plays with the child. I never do that. I can sacrifice myself and reserve the food for the child... However, she is not allowed to waste the food that I give her. If I know she likes anything, I will keep it in mind and buy her some. However, I won’t buy if she asks for it…I spoil her deeply in my heart. I’m not like others who really spoil children, and buy whatever the children asked for. (C09)

The caregiver above (C09) was not the only one who criticised other family members’ way of caring for children. For example, one grandfather complained that the child’s father had been spoiling the child:

I won’t complain if he buys the child something occasionally. I’m not happy because he buys whatever the child asks for. We shouldn’t always meet his demands. To be honest, I have never spoiled my own child…I mean the child’s dad. (C05)

Since some children lived with their teachers in the week, a few caregivers asked the teachers to keep children’s pocket money. As one of the school personnel reported, she had been helping to restrict children’s expenditure:

I don’t allow them to buy anything not necessary. Children nowadays all like snacks. Snacks are forbidden. I buy them some fruit and milk if they ask for. (S03)

Children’s need for discipline and restriction, as stated previously, were addressed by both caregivers and school personnel. Caregivers highlighted the role of school personnel in educating children, and they also encouraged the school personnel to restrict and discipline children when necessary. In contrast with restriction, caregivers rarely used physical discipline to guide children left behind. It should be noted that children’s need for restriction was seen as particularly essential while being linked to study. Although caregivers had set up restrictions on children’s
play, they did indicate children’s need for activities, which will be addressed in the following section.

6.4.1.2 The need for play activities

Both caregivers and school personnel identified children’s need for play activities. These play activities were mainly for entertainment purposes, including travelling, TV watching, playing in the local community, birthday celebrations, and school activities.

Most caregivers believed children shouldn’t always stay at home, which means they need a space beyond the home environment:

It’s not good for him to stay at home all the time. (C01)

I ask him to walk around on the road. You can’t always restrict him at home. (C10)

As one caregiver (C19) reported, there were not many places to go in rural areas. Thus, caregivers normally just took children to the convenience shop or on the roads where villagers gathered. A few caregivers reported that they took children to parks in the city nearby on special occasions, such as children’s birthdays or Children’s day holiday.

Some caregivers reported that children themselves liked to walk around, so they provided support for this:

She likes to go out. She rides her own bike with me…Sometimes I used to take her to walk around. I don’t do this anymore, because it takes too much time. (C16)

Besides entertainment, some caregivers also regarded walking around as a way of comforting children left behind, especially when they missed parents and got upset.
At first he cried after his parents left. I carried him on the back, and just walked around outside. (C14)

One caregiver even took her granddaughter to different cities after the child lost her mother. This grandmother thought the child might get more upset if she always stayed at home. Going out and travelling around reportedly helped to alleviate the child’s distress.

According to both caregivers and school personnel, TV watching was a big part of children’s daily activities. One school staff member emphasised the child’s need for TV watching as following:

What does he miss about home? I think he likes to go home because he can watch TV there. (C03)

One caregiver (C22) considered TV watching as relatively safe, because it kept the child from making trouble outside. Another caregiver (C16) reported that his granddaughter had been living in next door alone for a few years. Normally, she only came to her grandfather’s house to eat a meal. The child reportedly felt relaxed without her grandfather’s close supervision, and she relied on TV to entertain herself. As the caregiver reported, TV was like the child’s company, who kept it on even when she was not watching it.

Most children reportedly showed passionate interests in cartoons or children’s programs. If conflicts about program preferences existed, caregivers sometimes had to compromise to meet children’s needs. However, as stated previously, children’s TV watching was still restricted to some extent, as study was seen as their first priority.
Besides TV watching, caregivers reported a variety of play activities that children left behind had been involved in the rural context. The most common activities included riding bikes, roller skating, playing water pistol, shooting marbles, kicking shuttlecock, playing hopscotch, playing hula hooping, raising pets, rope skipping, and playing with toys. Most caregivers reported that children left behind had no difficulties finding playmates in the local communities. However, as stated previously, a few caregivers had been restricting children’s interactions with their peers as a safety consideration. One caregiver (C05), for example, cared for two children left behind from his two sons. He only allowed the eight year old grandson to play within their yard, because the child was seen as young and might get hurt while playing with other children. Thus, the boy had been playing with his older sister at home, and sometimes he even got tutored by the girl.

Since home activities were just part of children’s daily lives, participants also indicated children’s need for school activities. Several caregivers showed their support for children’s participation in the activities at school. For example, one caregiver reported that she had attended her granddaughter’s sports competition:

> The guardians usually attend school sports competition. As her grandma, I was voluntary and more than happy to attend. I thought I could buy her some drinks or food during the day. (C11)

Most school personnel reported the benefits of school activities for children left behind. For example, some believed that interaction with students after class alleviated the impact of parents’ absence on children left behind:

> Generally speaking, they do miss their parents when their parents are away to make money. However, they don’t just sit there and miss their parents all the time. They have
play time, and they spend time with classmates. While they are with their classmates and teachers, they don’t miss their parents…Generally, I haven’t found them miss parents at school. They have class at school, and go out to play after class. (S03)

Several school personnel also reported that being involved in school activities changed these children’s personalities to some extent. Children left behind were found to be more happy and extroverted if they actively participated in group activities:

I organised class meeting, and encouraged other students to play with him. I found he gradually interacted more with his classmates. He didn’t get angry easily anymore. He used to sit there still and seemed always against others…These children’s basic needs can be addressed well. They don’t seem lack anything. As their parents are away to make money, I think we can create some group activities and get these children involved. In other words, offer these children a relaxed environment. Create an environment based on their preference…so they could have their own interests. (S04)

Given the significance of activities for children left behind, school staff members generally encouraged them to participate in activities at the school level:

If we have any school activities, such as sports competition or stage show, we will ask these children to participate in…We can’t discriminate these children…Let them attend different activities, and they will be happy. (S01)

A few school staff members particularly shared experiences that they encouraged students to celebrate the birthday of children left behind, which reportedly increased these children’s sense of belonging. Unsurprisingly, most caregivers also indicated the need to celebrate the important days for children left behind, such as birthday or Children’s Day. However, some caregivers’
understandings of these activities were different from those of school personnel. As one caregiver reported, she had to celebrate her granddaughter’s birthday, partly because other parents normally did that:

Other parents celebrate their children’s birthday, and we do the same…Considering her parents are not around, we have to celebrate her birthday for sure. We can’t ignore this, especially when her parents are away. (C18)

Children’s need for play activities were understood in the both home and school environments. Caregivers reported a variety of play activities which were well located in the rural context. School personnel’s perceptions, on the other hand, were more focused on group activities as well as their impact on children’s development. While describing children’s need for activities, one caregiver reported that he would not let the child do anything against the law. The next section will reveal more information in this area, namely children’s need for moral guidance.

6.4.1.3 The need for moral guidance

Moral guidance refers to adult’s guidance on children’s moral development. Participants, especially caregivers, indentified this need through their expectations of children left behind. Some caregivers expressed the pressure of the upbringing of children left behind, and they expected the children to be a good person in the future. Considering parents’ absence, one caregiver believed personality was even more important than education for his grandson, although the latter need was seen as vital for the child’s development:

I have been thinking about this since he was young. It’s ok if he doesn’t study well, but he has to be a good person. I have to guide him to make sure he won’t become a bad person. If I start to guide him after he has grown up, it would be too late. (C05)
The most common concern reported by caregivers in this area was stealing, though a few caregivers preferred to use the term “grabbing” as “stealing” were seen too severe for children. According to the caregiver above, stealing should be forbidden since children were still young, because it might cause more behaviour problems:

I have to be strict with stealing. If he does whatever he likes without our control, it will be terrible. He will get worse and there is no way we can guide him anymore. Thus, we have to guide him since he is young. (C05)

Most caregivers warned children that no matter how much they liked other children’s things, they should never grab without informing the owners. Caregivers encouraged children to speak out their needs, so they could obtain support from caregivers:

I said, “As a child, you can’t grab other’s things just because you like them. That’s really bad for you. You are a girl. Boys are not allowed to do it either. If you need anything, let me know. I will buy it for you. ” (C11)

“Don’t grab anything if you visit someone’s home…” I have been telling her about this since she was young… (C02)

To avoid the child’s potential stealing behaviour, one caregiver even forbade her grandson picking up things on the ground:

If he gets used to picking up things, he might develop a habit of stealing. This is what children normally do. When he was four at kindergarten, he brought back an eraser. I asked him where he got the eraser, and he told me he picked it up on the ground. “Throw
it away. Don’t pick up things on the ground. We can buy things that you need, but you can’t take other children’s things.” (C06)

In addition to these common experiences, participants also shared various stories about how they supervised children’s potential bad behaviours. For example, one caregiver (C19) reported that he even checked his grandson’s school bag from time to time. He wanted to see if the child had any pencil or notebook that did not belong to him. Similar sensitivity was also found among other caregivers, who had been extremely cautious about children’s various behaviours and expecting them to develop well.

Caregivers’ concerns about stealing were also found from school personnel’s experiences. For example, one school staff member reported that a girl left behind was found to steal other student’s belongings, and the school staff member had made great efforts to guide the child. This school staff member compared this girl with other children whose parents were around:

We have to think about it. Why did she grab other student’s belongings? Do her guardians give her enough money? Lots of children, especially junior students, drop their pencils on the ground, but no one wants to pick them up. This doesn’t mean their parents have been spoiling them. However, at least they don’t lack the things they need …This child is not young anymore. And, moreover, she is a girl. She still grabs others’ things though… (S02)

Besides stealing, caregivers also reported other concerns about children’s moral development. These concerns indicated what kind of person caregivers expected the child to be in the future. For example, one caregiver believed a girl should not dissipate money, as she will be married as
a wife and maintain a family someday. Thus, she had been guiding her granddaughter’s money spending:

If she spends all the money I give her, she will develop a habit of dissipation. If so, how is she supposed to live well with her husband? She can’t be like that if she is married with someone…I guide her because it’s necessary. It depends though, so I spoil her as well…I only spoil her in my heart. She won’t feel my spoiling. (C09)

Similar viewpoints were also found from other caregivers, who indicated children’s need for frugality guidance. These caregivers believed children should be guided so they knew how to save money:

I told him, “Your parents have left home to make money for you, and it’s really hard for them. They don’t make much money at all. You should be frugal…” (C10)

I don’t give him that much as he asks for. Sometimes I explain to him, “You spend so much money. Your grandpa and I are both old. This is too much. It’s not easy for your mum to make money away from home. You need to be frugal. You can’t compete this with other children. You don’t need to spend as much as they do. Study is your first priority. It’s useless to compete on spending money. If you can study well, that’s better than anything.” (C11)

I educate her often. I say, “You have to consider how your parents have been making money for you. They don’t have much time to come home and have to stay far away.” (C14)
Another caregiver made efforts to guide his granddaughter to be civilised. For example, he did not allow the child to eat a meal at their neighbour’s home, because he thought the child might be overindulged and become too wild to guide:

If she eats often at other’s home, she will get used to it and wouldn’t eat at home anymore. Children shouldn’t be too wild…It’s not like visiting kin…We shouldn’t eat at other’s home in the village…If she is used to it, it will be really hard to guide her anymore…(C16)

Similar to the account above (C16), most caregivers valued courtesy. They guided children left behind so these children could present themselves in a decent way. For example, some reported that children were a bit shy and timid, so they taught the children how to welcome guests at home:

For example, If you come to visit us and he doesn’t know you, I will introduce you to him and ask him to call you uncle. Next time when you come again, he might not say hi. I won’t educate him while you are here. However, I will talk to him afterwards, “Do you know him? Why you didn’t say hi?”… (C06)

I tell her to welcome guests, and say goodbye when the guests leave. “You should have courtesy, as you have been attending school. Plus, you are 10 years old now. ” I always tell her about this. She is a child, and she doesn’t know sometimes unless you tell her… (C02)

One caregiver reported that she was alert to other children’s impact on her granddaughter’s moral development. This caregiver shared a story about the child’s reaction to another girl’s viewpoint regarding individual endeavour:
Sometimes she talks about her classmates. Last week when she came back, she said, “Grandma, one of my classmates said girls don’t need to study well, as we can just find a rich man to marry when we grow up.” These children are just eight or nine years old… I said, “You can’t do that. You have to study. No rich man would like to pick you if you don’t study well… What she said is not right.” (C18)

Similar to their actions of discouraging children from crime, most caregivers valued good behaviour that was morally accepted by the society. They expected the children steadily grow up on their own rather than being an opportunist. Like the grandmother above (C18), caregivers had been providing guidance on children’s interactions with their peers. Along with this guidance, participants also revealed another need of children left behind, namely relationship and social skills, which will be addressed in the following section.

6.4.1.4 The need for relationship and social skills

Relationship and social skills refer to the skills that enable children to socialise and mature in an appropriate way in the society. Children’s need for relationship and social skills was mainly reflected through their interactions with others, especially peers. One caregiver pointed out the necessity of providing the child with these skills:

I chat with him about everything. He is a child. I have to show him the adult’s world, otherwise he won’t learn. (C06)

Most caregivers valued the harmony between children and their peers. Thus, they encouraged the children to suffer and tolerate if necessary, so these children could maintain good relationships with others. For example, the caregiver above (C06) asked his grandson to be easygoing and avoid conflicts with younger children.
I always tell him, “Get the short end of the stick for anything…You shouldn’t take advantage of others.”… I told him at school, “Be easygoing with your classmates. Don’t get angry because anyone has touched you. That’s not good. There are so many children at school, so it’s normal to have physical touch. Among the students who have been staying with the teacher, you are the oldest one. You are ten now, and they are like your younger brothers and sisters. You should go easy on them. ” (C06)

Similarly, two other caregivers emphasised the child’s solidarity with his classmates:

I have to guide him, such as the solidarity with his classmates. He has been doing well. Unlike some other children, he has never fought with others since he involved the school. It’s less possible in the village. (C10)

I told him to be in solidarity with others and avoid fight. “If someone bullies you, talk with him with patience. Don’t fight.” (C04)

For most caregivers, fighting was a big concern when they considered children’s peer relationships. Almost all the caregivers asked the children to be peaceful with others:

I tell him not to fight. This child doesn’t really fight with others. (C22)

I teach him how to get on with others. “Don’t bully others. If anyone bullies you, you need to tell the teacher, or you can let us know.” I have to tell him all of this…I usually watch him privately. When he plays on the road, I watch him to see if he grabs or rob other children’s stuff…If he doesn’t rob, I won’t warn him. Warning may provoke his curiosity. (C15)
I said, “Be nice with your playmates and don’t fight. Some children split hairs. You should be polite.” (C18)

A few school personnel also reported their guidance regarding the relationship between children left behind and other students. Besides discouraging fighting, school personnel emphasised the necessity of encouraging children left behind to participate in group activities. As stated earlier, active interaction with peers reportedly made children left behind more extrovert.

6.4.1.5 The need to be guided to be independent

Only a few participants reported children’s need to be guided to be independent. However, their accounts were still reserved and coded as a sub-theme, because this need particularly reflected participants’ expectations of children left behind due to their parents’ absence.

As stated earlier, most caregivers preferred the children to avoid tiredness, so they rarely let the children do any physical work. However, one caregiver reported that she arranged her grandson to live with the teacher, partly because the child could learn to be independent:

I thought I have been caring for him at home, and he has got used to rely on me. Staying with the teacher can make him more independent. (C06)

Another caregiver made it explicit that the child needs to learn to be independent:

I have to teach her to be independent. For example, she organises her own stuff, and takes the school bag with her on Monday. I don’t need to take care of this. It saves my time. (C16)
In contrast with caregivers, school personnel showed firmer attitudes towards the independence of children left behind. One school staff member reported the change of a child left behind who had been living with her during the week:

When she comes home, she doesn’t need to do anything. However, she learns to be independent here. For example, she washes small pieces of her clothes…Children nowadays lack independence. She used to cry a lot when she firstly stayed with me. Now she has become more mature. She can do the things within her ability and be independent. She can organise her own stuff well. (S05)

Similarly, another school staff member reported how she had been teaching the children left behind to be independent:

I meet their basic needs and teach them some living skills…I don’t normally wash clothes for them. They can wash some small clothes. I teach them how to wash…such as underwear or socks… (S03)

In addition to these school personnel who cared for children left behind in the week, one school staff member also expressed his expectation of guiding the children to be independent at home:

Caregivers should let the children do some work within their abilities. If children are competent, just let them do it. Caregivers shouldn’t spoil them. Children should wash their own dirty clothes or socks. They have to teach the children to be independent. Children’s parents are not around, caregivers should let them to be independent…. (S01)

Children’s need to be guided to be independent was both reported by caregivers and school personnel. However, it was clear that school personnel were more active in addressing this need.
In addition, school personnel were aware of caregivers’ passiveness, as most of them reportedly spoiled the children left behind. School personnel also believed that parents’ absence should not increase children’s dependence on caregivers. Rather, these children reportedly need to learn to be independent within their own abilities.

6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the general needs that can be applied to a large population of rural children in China. It outlined participants’ constructions of education, and also explained the reasons behind education’s importance for children left behind. These reasons reflect caregivers’ deep love and expectations of these children, and also shed light on the social environment that caused children to be left behind. Social environment, together with Chinese culture, underpin participants’ understandings and experiences. Even functional needs, such as basic care, were found to be closely attached to local culture. Children’s personal development further justified cultural and social impact on adult caregivers’ constructions, which have a direct impact on children’s future.
7 DISCUSSION: CHILDREN’S NEEDS ARE PRIORITISED

This chapter presents the identified key themes that emerged from the study data and examines them through the lens of the ARACY needs identification mechanism and Attachment Theory. As outlined in Chapter 5 and 6, in view of the needs of children left behind have been clustered into eight themes: (1) emotional needs and mental health, (2) relationships, (3) empowerment and agency, (4) safety, (5) education, (6) basic care, (7) physical health, and (8) personal development. These needs are developed from the Chinese participants’ accounts, and therefore are different to those of the ARACY needs identification mechanism to some extent. However, there are some similarities. The needs of children left behind in this study are not discrete, rather, they connect to each other. The relationships between these themes not only highlight children’s specific needs due to separation from their parents, but also explain the elevated value placed upon education in rural communities.

7.1 A needs model based on the Chinese context

As stated previously, the ARACY needs identification mechanism developed for child and family services in Australia covers six different domains (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2010). In contrast, the needs model developed in this study involves eight themes. Putting aside the differences of nomenclature, the similar themes found are: emotional needs and mental health, relationships, safety, basic care, physical health, and personal development. Besides these ones, this study also developed two new themes which particularly captured Chinese participants’ understandings, namely empowerment and agency, as well as education. The comparison between these two models is shown as following (see Table 7.1):
The ARACY needs identification mechanism | The needs model of Chinese rural children left behind
---|---
Common themes | 
Mental health and emotional wellbeing | Emotional needs and mental health
Relationships | Relationships
Safety | Safety
Material wellbeing | Basic care
Physical health | Physical health
Learning and development | Personal development
New themes | 
Empowerment and agency
Education

Table 7.1 A comparison between the ARACY needs identification mechanism and the needs model of Chinese rural children left behind

Generally speaking, the six domains of the ARACY needs identification mechanism are similar to those in this study. However, it is notable that the detailed sub-themes are different to some extent. For instance, the mental health and emotional wellbeing in the ARACY needs identification mechanism is focused on children and other family members’ emotions and mental health. The indicators are mostly concerned with whether the children are happy (or calm). The sub-themes found in this study, on the other hand, were more associated with children’s inner worlds. These inner worlds are reflected through children’s mood and cognition, which differ across different ages. Some of these sub-themes revealed caregivers’ understandings of children’s positions, which highlighted children’s specific needs due to their parents’ absence.
Children’s need for relationships was found to be very similar across the two models. These relationships mainly involve caregivers, children’s parents, other relatives, peers, and teachers. A notable difference in caregivers’ accounts is children’s need for a strong sense of belonging. This need is located within the relationship needs domain in the ARACY needs identification mechanism, while it is considered as part of children’s emotional needs and mental health in this study. The reasons that children left behind came into kinship care are different from those of Western countries, with the latter usually involving parents’ abuse or neglect of the children. Many children in this study had already lived with their kin caregivers before they were left behind. And, therefore, their sense of belonging was naturally developed through an extended family environment. The concept of belonging, in this regard, extends beyond children’s relationships with the two groups, namely children’s parents and kin caregivers.

In the ARACY needs identification mechanism, children’s safety needs involve both children’s behaviours and the environments they encounter. Similar needs have been also found in this study, as participants reported a variety of safety considerations. These protective considerations not only involved physical environments where children resided, but also involved children’s interactions with others, especially their peers.

Unsurprisingly, children’s need for basics of life such as clothes and food are found in both models. However, the ARACY needs identification mechanism uses the term ‘material wellbeing’. This term is slightly different from basic care, as it also involves children’s physical space and housing. Children’s need for basic care developed in this study, on the other hand, specifically includes the need for personal hygiene. As some participants indicated, addressing this need not only ensures children are clean and tidy, but also avoids children being teased by
others. As stated previously, this consideration arises from a strong Chinese culture, namely, saving face.

Both models address children’s physical health needs at different levels, ranging from children’s personal care to health services. Some of these needs are also related to children’s needs for food, in terms of nutrition. Most participants in this study equated ‘being healthy’ with ‘no illness’. Therefore, they reported children’s need for immunisations, which can be also found in physical health in the ARACY needs identification mechanism.

In the ARACY model, there is a need named ‘learning and development’. It is a broad concept, which mainly involves children’s schooling, but also relates to their social development. Within the ARACY model, education is an important part of children’s learning and development. In addition to children’s need for activities which can be found in both models, the model developed in this study also captured some needs specific to the Chinese context, such as guidance for moral development. I used personal development in this study rather than learning and development, because it better reflects Chinese participants’ expectations of children left behind based on local norms and values. Children’s personal development needs have been seen differently across the two models.

Empowerment and agency mainly refers to adults’ respect and entitlement for children’s preferences and choices in their own lives. It is not explicit in the ARACY needs identification mechanism, although it is implied in children’s relationships with adults. This need has been reported by most Chinese participants and is seen as essential for children whose parents are not immediately available to advocate for them. Most caregivers emphasised children’s vulnerability due to the separation from their parents. And, therefore, they had great respect for children’s
individual preferences and voices. According to these caregivers, respecting children’s individual preferences even contributed to emotional wellbeing by relieving children’s anxiety and making them happy. Most participants also valued rational communication, through which children were able to express their viewpoints and be treated with respect. Most caregivers believed children need to be informed and persuaded rather than punished and controlled.

Education is found in both needs models. In the ARACY needs identification mechanism as stated previously, education is part of children’s learning and development. However, it was developed as a key theme and separated from personal development in this study because of the prominence that participants gave it. Most Chinese caregivers described the hardship of rural life, and they hoped children left behind could avoid being subsistence farmers when they grew up. Almost all the caregivers highly valued education, because it was seen as enabling the children to live an urban life that was better than that offered locally. In this regard, education was seen as the first priority for children left behind. As some caregivers indicated, some of children’s other needs could be compromised to guarantee educational achievement. For instance, children’s need for education was found to influence their living arrangements, which further affected their need for relationships. Some caregivers let the children live with their teachers in the week, because they were not always capable of tutoring children at home. These caregivers felt reluctant to make this arrangement, but it was seen as beneficial for children’s academic achievement.

Generally, the needs in the two models were found to be similar, with most of these being rooted in children’s fundamental needs as human beings, ranging from physical care to emotional wellbeing. These needs not only involve children as individuals, but also relate to their family
and local communities. In addition to these similarities, however, the model developed in this study also offers new knowledge, particularly about the specific needs of children left behind.

First of all, the ARACY needs identification mechanism aims to help any professional who works in Australian children and families who need support. This study, however, has been focused on the children left behind, so participants’ understandings inevitably captured the specific aspects of the informal kinship care situation. For example, along with deep love for children left behind, caregivers also expressed their sympathy. Thus, some caregivers were less strict with the children in order to avoid making them upset or anxious.

Being separated from their parents also brings some safety problems for children left behind. Most participants were particularly cautious about children left behind’s interactions with their peers, as they were seen as timid and lacking confidence. To avoid potential bullying or harm by their peers, some caregivers even chose to keep children left behind at home, which led to them being isolated. However, this was a reluctant choice as caregivers were aware of the children’s need for peer relationships. Indeed, most caregivers expressed their supportive attitudes toward these relationships, but they had to balance these benefits with children’s need for safety and relationships.

Another notable finding from this study is the impact of Chinese culture and social-political context on participants’ understandings. Chinese people are known as extremely sensitive to face saving compared with people from other cultures (Gilbert & Tsao, 2000). In Chinese culture, ‘face’ presents an individual’s moral character which is supposed to be recognised by the society. A sense of guilt emerges once someone has lost his/her face (Jin, 1992). Caregivers’ accounts demonstrate the value placed on children left behind’s honour and prestige. In this regard, their
understandings of children’s needs are not only limited to home environment, but also involve children’s relationships with others, especially their peers.

Most caregivers acknowledge the special situation of children left behind, and they believe these children need specific care. However, they also wish for the children to be treated the same as other children. This conflicting feeling arises from caregivers’ respect for children’s self-esteem. For caregivers, part of their responsibility is to keep children away from potential negative judgments, and make sure these children’s self-esteem is well protected. This is especially the case when the children’s parents are divorced. The living arrangement of children left behind is undoubtedly different from other children, but caregivers try to avoid discrimination due to the difference. Although caregivers in this study confront resource constraints, they strive to provide children left behind with decent clothing and food, so they at least look the same as their peers who are from a ‘normal’ family caregiving situation.

In addition to shaping caregivers’ perceptions of children left behind, the term ‘face’ also influenced the way caregivers perceived themselves. Rural caregivers in this study valued harmony, and most of them cared about other community members’ judgement of their parenting ability. They had to cope with the pressure from outsiders, such as neighbours, relatives, or even children’s parents, which indicates the impact of social interactions and culture on their constructions and understandings. Thus, most caregivers tried to provide delicate care in line with community expectations of parents. The ARACY needs identification mechanism does include the impact of context on children’s needs, however, it fails to specifically consider cultural impact, which is fundamental to fully understanding both caregivers and children’s inner worlds (Burr, 2003). This shortcoming has been addressed in the needs model developed in this study, as all the needs are considered at four different levels, namely individual, family,
community, and cultural and social context in China. For example, children’s needs for relationships with their teachers are vital for their study as well as their moral development, and these relationships are rooted in a strong Chinese culture which values teachers and education.

Although cultural impact on children’s needs was acknowledged, it was not the focus of this small scale study to compare the impact of local cultures across different regions in China. For example, there was only one participant who was religious, and therefore no religious influence on caregivers’ constructions can be concluded accordingly. The cultural viewpoints regarding family and child care in Northeast China were generally consistent with southern regions, which were more underpinned by Confucianism as discussed previously.

The needs model developed in this study sheds light on the relationships among children’s diverse needs. As seen in Figure 4.2 (p. 85), the needs of children left behind were found to interact with each other. There are two general needs at the bottom of this model, namely basic care and physical health. These needs are essential for all Chinese children, and cover a variety of living conditions. These conditions are mostly physical in terms of their functions to children’s survival as human beings (Doyal & Gough, 1991). However, the functional aspects of these needs do not necessarily mean they are objective; Rather, children’s needs are subjective. For example, personal hygiene, as part of children’s basic care in this study, is closely associated with ‘saving face’ culture in China (Thompson, 2009).

In Figure 4.2 (p. 85), two major sections of children’s needs are highlighted. The first one centres around relationships, which also includes emotional needs and mental health, empowerment and agency, and safety. These needs are placed within the same box, because they all capture children’s specific situations due to separation from their parents. Children’s relationships with
different groups, especially with their parents, influences their other needs in the green box (refer to Figure 4.2, p. 85). For example, since children left behind are not cared for by their parents, they can be adversely affected and present as being timid and emotionally vulnerable. In this case, children left behind not only need alternative attachment figures to address their emotional loss, but they also need appropriate understanding and encouragement from adults. These emotional needs result from the interruption of children’s immediate ties to their parents (Bowlby, 1980). Similarly, this interruption underpins the perceived needs for caregivers’ extra care and love, which can be found in their agency and safety considerations. It should be noted that the interactions between relationships and the other three needs go two ways. When children’s emotional needs and mental health are addressed well, they are apt to develop close relationships with their alternative attachment figure, namely kin caregivers in this study. Moreover, children’s development of close relationships extends to other groups, such as children’s parents and peers.

The other part of the major box regarding children’s needs is education (refer to Figure 4.2, p. 85), which is highly valued by all the participants. Along with children’s other needs above, it underpins children’s personal development. Education is seen as the first priority for most children in China (A. Wang, 2008), including children in this study. Although children left behind have diverse needs, their education is seen as superior to other needs. In some cases, children’s needs reportedly conflict with each other, and other needs are compromised to meet children’s need for education.
7.2 Specific needs of children left behind

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the needs of children left behind can be categorised into two groups: specific needs and general needs. Specific needs mainly arise from children’s separation from their parents. This separation not only influences participants’ perceptions of these children, but also has an impact on children’s relationships with adults and their peers. Participants’ actions toward children left behind, especially caregivers’ child rearing practice, were found to be associated with their understandings of these specific needs. General needs, as the title suggests, included the needs that can be applied to most children in rural China. These needs are general in terms of their fundamental meanings to children as human beings. However, it should be noted that general needs in this study are based on the Chinese culture, which reflects participants’ rural living experiences. The following sections will address these two themes in more detail.

7.2.1 A special group: children left behind

Both caregivers and school personnel believed children left behind are different from their peers in some key aspects. These children were generally seen as timid and reserved, as they felt reluctant to openly express their feelings or defend themselves. Surprisingly, even when being with caregivers, who were the closest kin while children’s parents were away, the children were still found to be reserved. Some children were even considered introverted, and they had limited communication or interaction with other people. These typical characteristics perhaps indicate children’s reactions to the separation from their parents, as reported in some Western studies (Drury-Hudson, 1994; Porter, 2009).
As Attachment Theory suggests, children’s ties to others is a natural need for their physical and psychological functions (Kerr, Goldberg, & Muir, 1995; Osmond & Darlington, 2001). The attachment relationship with parents provides children with a secure sense (Yeo, 2003), and children rely on this affectional bond to build self-worth and explore the world (Fahlberg, 1988; Howe, 2003). The disruption of the attachment, however, can cause a variety of problems. As found in this study, children may become fearful and withdrawn (Connor, 2006). Moreover, these emotional reactions can last through these children’s whole lifespan (Bowlby, et al., 1965). To reduce children’s psychological pressure, caregivers closely observed children’s moods and facial expressions, and these key indicators allowed them to recognise children’s inner worlds. Their insight into children’s feelings was also obtained by thinking from children’s position.

Children left behind in this study have a particular need for a sense of belonging. When these children’s attachments to their parents were disrupted, they reportedly showed negative emotions. This study suggests that children’s attachment behaviours to seek care and protection can be well responded in love-based kinship care (Howes & Spieker, 2008). As stated earlier, almost all the caregivers in this study were children’s grandparents, whose love for these children can be even more than for their own children. While they did report family obligation, caregivers’ roles were more motivated by their love for the ‘third generation’. This love stimulates them to protect the children from emotional suffering, such as loneliness or depression. These findings are consistent with those of Western studies of kinship care, which generally conclude that caregiving is not a selfish behaviour of caregivers, rather, it addresses children’s needs through sensitive and responsive parenting (Shaver & Fraley, 2000). Therefore, it can be argued that love and obligation-based kinship care maximise caregivers’ commitment, which also contributes significantly to reducing children’s trauma due to the disruption in the parent-child relationship.
While children’s biological parents are away, caregivers have to play roles similar to that of children’s parents. Caregivers’ understandings of this role, notably, are influenced by their construction of the children as vulnerable. Western studies have shown that children in kinship care have notable emotional and social problems, which mainly result from their high risk backgrounds, such as abuse or neglect (Dunne & Kettler, 2006). In this study, children left behind did not experience these safety risks, and their emotional issues are more associated with the separation from their parents. Yet, no matter how sensitive the care is, children left behind still miss their biological parents from time to time (Ye, et al., 2010). This is seen as a big emotional concern for most caregivers, so they try to create a pressure-free environment for children left behind. Caregivers make efforts to comfort children and also encourage them when necessary. In addition, they are apt to meet children’s requests in every way they can to keep the child calm and happy. Caregivers’ sensitive care based on this consideration, however, was criticised by some school personnel, who believe it has sometimes turned into spoiling.

To sum up, participants’ emphasis on children’s separation from their parents have influenced the way they interact with these children. For example, both caregivers and school personnel are sensitive to children’s emotional worlds. They prefer to communicate with children rather than physically disciplining them. They see communicatory reasoning contributing to a stable mood for the children. Children left behind are generally seen as different from their peers, and needing extra love and care to some extent. This generally leads to more tolerance and patience from adults, especially for younger children.

7.2.2 Multiple figures: their roles in addressing the needs of children left behind

Generally speaking, children older than one can have more than one attachment figure who is familiar to them (Bowlby, 1980). Participants in this study spoke about several figures who are
actively involved in children’s lives, notably children’s parents, caregivers, peers, teachers, and other relatives. Children’s relationships with these figures are fundamental to meeting their emotional and mental health needs. However, it should be noted that children left behind do need primary attachment figures to develop their secure base (Bowlby, 1989), and these roles are normally assumed by children’s parents or caregivers in this study. With the support of primary attachment figures, children feel sufficiently secure to explore the world around them. Besides these, children left behind also need multiple relationships with different adults, who are vital for their survival and development.

Unsurprisingly, the attachments of children left behind mainly exist within the family environment. However, their attachments can also develop through their interactions within local communities. Community resources, especially informal support found in this study is widely used by caregivers and children left behind. These resources include individual assistance from kin or community members, as well as institutional support from their schools. Utilising these resources has been part of rural residents’ everyday lives, and it is especially the case when governmental support is inadequate (Shang, 2008). However, a sense that rural residents assign to receiving governmental support as found in previous Western studies (M. E. Edwards, et al., 2009; Owens, et al., 2008) has not been found in this study, as most caregivers expect more support from the government. This section will present children left behind’s relationship needs at both home and community levels.

Seeking attachment to their parents, especially mothers, is an instinctive behaviour for children (Bowlby, et al., 1965). In this study, children’s relationships with their parents are highly valued by both caregivers and school personnel. These relationships are seen as natural needs for children and connections for them as human beings. Most caregivers are aware their role is
different from children’s parents, even though they have been providing sensitive care for these children. According to participants’ experiences, children who live with parents are more confident during their interactions with others. Moreover, children’s own perceptions of caregivers’ support are reportedly different from that of their parents. Most children reportedly feel more secure and confident with parents than caregivers. Thus, it can be concluded that the attachment of children left behind to their parents is irreplaceable, even if they have developed close relationships with other attachment figures, such as caregivers (Schuengel & van Ijzendoorn, 2001).

Children’s need for secure parent-child relationships can be also found from their daily behaviours. For example, it is common for children left behind to miss their parents. The disruption of children’s attachments to their mothers can bring several negative impacts on children’s mental health (Bowlby, et al., 1965). Some children in this study reportedly became isolated from social interaction and felt lonely. This finding has confirmed Porter’s (2009) research on attachment in children’s daily lives. She argued that inconsistent care can cause psychological problems for insecure children. In this regard, healthy and regular contact between children and their parents contributes to addressing children’s attachment needs. This contact, either through telephone or in person reported by caregivers, is necessary for maintaining children’s relationships with their parents. Given that caregivers do not want the children to forget their parents, the contact is also seen as a way to maintain their identity. Although a few parents are reportedly indifferent to the children, all the caregivers still encourage them to establish and maintain regular contacts with the children.

There have been some Western kinship care studies addressing children’s connections and reunification with their parents. Compared with foster care, kinship care promotes closer
relationships between children and their parents (Berrick, 1997), and children in kinship care generally stay longer than those placed in foster care (Maria, et al., 1997). However, kin caregivers are reluctant to be involved in children’s permanency planning, because they prefer children staying with their parents eventually (C. J. Smith, Rudolph, & Swords, 2002). In this study, caregivers generally did not worry about children’s reunification with their parents. The separation of children left behind from their parents is seen as temporary, and caregivers’ love for children make their caring roles well suit this temporary arrangement.

Children’s attachment behaviours toward their attachment figures differ, and they generally rely on a principal figure (Bowlby, 1980; Howes & Spieker, 2008). As children left behind’s most accessible attachment figure, caregivers play a significant role in these children’s daily lives. The quality of children’s relationships with caregivers is partly determined by the time they have lived together. Moreover, older children are less likely to be affected by their parents’ absence (Bowlby, 1980). Some children in this study have been living with caregivers in the same household since they were born, so their reactions to parental absence are not as seemingly strong as others. The longer they live together, the closer relationships are likely to be developed between children and caregivers. This finding is also consistent with a previously reviewed study by Jordan and Graham (2012), who found that children are apt to adapt themselves better as they stay longer with kin caregivers.

Children’s primary attachment figure is not always assumed by their mothers (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1995). If appropriate care is received, children in this study can even develop a closer relationship with caregivers than that with their parents. The affectional bond between children and their caregivers is particularly evident if caregivers are away. For example, some children reportedly became anxious or distracted when separated from caregivers for a long time, and
were keen for caregivers’ return. It should be noted, however, that these reactions have not been commonly found in children’s parent-child relationships. Most children in this research were reported to miss their parents from time to time, but they, over time, became more used to being separated from the parents. Therefore, these children rely heavily on caregivers rather than their own parents.

Attachment Theory proposes that familiar companions can provide children with a relatively safe environment, where children encounter little intense distress and fear (Bowlby, 1980). Children in this study benefit from the close relationships with caregivers, which are built through caregivers’ sensitive care and timely support. Most caregivers rarely leave children on their own, so they can be always there when children need them. When children seem depressed or upset, caregivers are there to provide comfort and care. Thus, children left behind can find a secure sense of care and support from caregivers, which alleviates their emotional distress due to the parents’ absence (Ainsworth, 1989). It is worth noting that children’s relationships with caregivers are also based on caregivers’ attitudes toward these children. For example, within the same household, children left behind were more likely to develop a closer relationship with the caregiver who exercises a looser control of the children. This is particularly the case for grandfathers, who usually allow more freedom and are less strict compared to children’s grandmothers.

Beyond the home environment, children left behind also have a need for relationships with teachers. Influenced by Confucianism, teachers have been highly respected in Chinese society (Su, et al., 1994). Unsurprisingly, both children and caregivers in this study recognise teachers’ authority in education. For the children who stay with teachers in the week, their teachers not only guide them in studies, but also care for them on a daily basis. Therefore, some children have
developed close relationships with their teachers. This relationship is particularly important for children left behind, as they are seen as more obedient to teachers than caregivers and parents. Moreover, most caregivers acknowledge teacher’s authority in children’s education. In this regard, a common social understanding has been achieved between caregivers and teachers. Strict control at school is encouraged by caregivers for the children’s good, and this will be further discussed later.

As outlined in Chapter 2, peer relationships are also highly valued by Confucianism as one of the five interpersonal relationships. This relationship is humanity oriented, and it meets the need of children for personal and transpersonal transformation (Dallmayr, 2003). Children’s communication with caregivers is restricted by a variety of factors, such as a generational gap. When children cannot find appropriate adults to communicate with at home, they normally seek available peers. In rural areas, it is relatively easy for children left behind to have playmates around their own age. They grow up in the same village and share similar customs as well as interests, which contributes to smooth communication. Furthermore, frequent contact among adults in the local communities also facilitates interaction. For most children left behind, playing with peers occupies most of their time outside of school. Healthy peer relationships not only provide children with an avenue to communicate, but also improve their emotional wellbeing (D. Zhang, 2006). Being and playing with peers perhaps distracts children left behind from missing their parents, and also makes them happier and calmer. Similar conclusions can also be applied to the school environment as well, where school personnel reported children left behind look ‘normal’ when they play with classmates.

In spite of the advantages of having peer relationships as above, there are also some risk factors for children left behind. The biggest concern for caregivers is bullying, and their reactions have
been influenced by Confucianism. As stated previously, children left behind are most likely to be timid and lack confidence, and some have been found to be bullied by their peers. Several cases were identified in both school and local community environments. Confucianism encourages harmonious human relationship, which also emphasises common good (D. B. Wong, 2004). This traditional value has been found on most caregivers. To protect children left behind and avoid conflicts at the same time, some caregivers even chose to discourage these children’s interactions with their peers. This protective action does decrease the risk for children left behind, however, it also blocks the way in which the children benefit from peer relationships. To date, there has been no comparative local research on bullying between children left behind and their peers at school. Moreover, bullying and relevant safety issues of children in kinship care have not been well addressed in Western literature, so it would be a valuable contribution to explore this area.

In addition to the several groups above, other relatives’ roles cannot be overlooked in children left behind’s lives. Chinese society is well known for valuing family bonds. According to Confucianism, an individual should always care for his/her family members as a moral obligation and part of personal integrity (T. K. Wong & Pang, 2000). In rural communities, most families heavily rely on their relatives, and this extended family network is especially important if they confront difficulties (Chan & Chan, 2005). It is common that children left behind have developed good relationships with relatives other than grandparents, such as aunts or uncles. Generally speaking, these relatives visit the children regularly, and provide both material and emotional support for them. The bonds between children and their relatives are likely to be stronger if they live close to each other and visit each other often.

It should be noted that relative support not only addresses the needs of children left behind, but also benefits the whole family, including the caregivers. Caregivers in this study expressed a
variety of unmet support needs, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8. Similar to the findings of Western research, most caregivers in this study were older grandparents with low education (Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Holtan, et al., 2005). These caregivers typically had to confront the sometimes heavy burden of addressing children’s needs (Farmer & Moyers, 2008), as little formal support is received. In this regard, children’s relatives played an important role in supporting caregivers’ parenting. The relatives not only assist with finance and labour, but also provide emotional support for caregivers. They share the broad family responsibility of caring for children, which further enhances caregivers’ commitment in caregiving.

To sum up, the needs of children left behind can be best addressed by multiple groups in their daily lives. Some are can be relied on, such as kin caregivers. Children’s parents, on the other hand, are only available in time limited ways. Far less contact with parents does not mean that the parent-child relationship is less important for children left behind. Rather, it is essential for children left behind as developing human beings. Even caregivers who have the most contact with children left behind, cannot fully replace the role of children’s parents. However, kinship care provides children with affective attachments to their caregivers, which do promote children’s emotional needs and mental health (Rees, 2010). In addition to parents and caregivers, children left behind also need other people, notably teachers, peers, and relatives, to meet their diverse needs.

7.2.3 Empowerment or spoiling: caregivers’ endeavours

As stated earlier, caregivers expressed mixed feelings about looking after children left behind. Their primary motivation is based on their love as a family member. In addition, caregivers also showed great sympathy, given that these children are not able to live with their parents. This love and sympathy reflects Confucianism’s impact on caregivers’ attitudes, which considers benevolence
(love and care) as a fundamental virtue for human beings. In this regard, caregivers’ humanity is fulfilled through their kindness and care for children (Johnson, 1988). Taken together, these attitudes make caregivers highly value the children’s preferences. These children, therefore, are given a variety of choices in their daily lives. They not only have a say in selecting clothes and food, but also have certain autonomy in their studies, such as tutoring. Furthermore, these children’s choice is respected within the whole family. For example, some divorced parents chose not to remarry, because they believed the children would not like a new family.

In addition to love and sympathy, Confucianism also values personal dignity and free speech (C. Gu, 2004). In this study, both children’s parents and community members influence the way in which caregivers address children’s need for agency and empowerment. Caregivers sometimes are under the pressure of being judged on how well they control the children. However, the process of enabling agency and empowerment is mainly based on negotiation between caregivers and children. During this process, caregivers sometimes have to compromise to meet children’s needs. This compromise is a reflection of caregivers’ respect for the preferences of children as their younger generation. And, more importantly, they see this as a way of making up for children’s emotional distress. Thus, some caregivers even buy whatever children ask for. It should be noted that this negotiation is achieved through two-way rational and respectful communication. This means children are given rights to speak out, and their viewpoints are recognised and respected by caregivers. Caregivers prefer communication rather than physical discipline, because they acknowledge children’s ability to reason and understand adults. In addition, in contrast with physical discipline, communication minimises the possibility of making children upset or miss their parents. In other words, children’s need for agency and empowerment is addressed along with caregivers’ extra love and sensitivity. This finding is
inconsistent with authoritarian parenting of Chinese parents found in most studies. The authoritative parenting revealed in this study is positively associated with children’s social functioning and school performance (Chen Qi & Hong Zhou, 1997).

Children’s agency and empowerment is a contested need at the community level, and caregivers’ perception of such a need has been criticised by most school personnel who participated in this research. Caregivers’ generous support for children’s preferences is even interpreted as spoiling by some school personnel. They believed caregivers’ care usually overlooked children’s emotional needs and mental health. This viewpoint is also confirmed by several caregivers, who reported not feeling competent enough to educate or communicate with children due to the age gap and their own low education. Apart from these limitations, caregivers’ have been endeavouring to provide children with agency and empowerment in every way they can. Moreover, caregivers’ love and sympathy is so strong that they sometimes cannot stop themselves from ‘spoiling’ the children.

It is apparent that school personnel encourage more and clearer boundaries. They often critically judge caregivers’ ‘spoiling’ behaviour, possibly because they see children as a group rather than individuals. This, particularly, results in them overlooking children’s individual personal experiences. These personal experiences, however, are better understood by children’s caregivers who are more familiar with the home environment. These caregivers, therefore, pay more attention to children’s emotional grief of loss due to being left behind.
7.3 Children’s general needs

7.3.1 Education: the best avenue to live an urban life for children left behind

Education has always been highly valued in Chinese society. It not only provides knowledge and skills, but also cultivates individuals who contribute to harmonious social order (Tu, 1990). Unsurprisingly, almost all caregivers reported that education was the most important need for children left behind. This consideration is undoubtedly influenced by Confucianism, which emphasises its function on moral cultivation (F. Y. Wang, 2004). It should be noted, however, that caregivers’ constructions of children’s education are more associated with these children’s chance to change their status through getting good jobs (M. Gu, 2006). These constructions indicate caregivers’ reflection of contemporary rural lives in China.

Caregivers generally do not see rural life as pleasant. Rather, most of them have shared the hardships of being a farmer. For caregivers, farming involves messy and strenuous physical work. However, the hard work cannot even provide them with sufficient income. On the other hand, caregivers have witnessed the advantages of urban lives through media such as TV. They prefer urban residents’ comparatively stable jobs as well as good living conditions. More importantly, children’s parents’ migrating experiences make caregivers believe it is easier to make money in cities, where children can live more comfortably. These children assumed the hopes of caregivers and the whole family, so they are expected to study hard to have a decent life in cities. However, due to the household registration (hukou) system in China, rural residents’ access to urban social services is constrained to a great extent. Caregivers expect these children to obtain an urban hukou when they grow up, so they can fully enjoy the benefits of urban lives. Thus, caregivers highly value education, as it provides children with knowledge and skills, which increase the children’s chance of finding a secure job in cities.
Confucianism suggests that a child’s educational level potentially affects his/her social class in the future (Huang & Gove, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that almost all the caregivers see education as children’s most important need. As an older generation, caregivers’ motivations and hopes for life have been attached to the children’s wellbeing. They spare no effort in promoting the children’s education, so these children can have a bright future. As stated earlier, most caregivers in this study are children’s grandparents who usually have low education. Caregivers’ own experiences make them particularly cherish children’s educational opportunity, which they believe must be grasped while children are young. Needs that do not have direct or visible impact on children’s success are seen as inferior. Caregivers’ own rankings of children’s needs undoubtedly influence children’s wellbeing in many ways. For example, most caregivers are strict with children’s studies. They do discipline children to do homework if necessary, even though it might temporarily hurt children’s feelings. Some caregivers chose to send children to live with teachers during the week, so that children can be better tutored. This living arrangement is a compromised decision for caregivers, as they are aware of children’s preference for living at home.

Caregivers’ concern about children’s education is consistent with most Chinese studies, which reveal the relatively poor condition of the schooling of children left behind (Liang, et al., 2008). It should be noted that, besides their own experiences, caregivers’ viewpoints of education are influenced by several groups. For instance, caregivers’ unqualified support for children’s tutoring is partly based on their observations of other children. Caregivers themselves may be uncertain about children’s need for tutoring. However, if caregivers see other children are being tutored, they are most likely to arrange it for the children they are caring for. On the other hand, caregivers have shown great trust in teachers, whom they believe play a vital role in children’s
education. For the good of children left behind, caregivers are willing to cooperate with teachers regarding children’s performance at school.

### 7.3.2 Growing up in a Chinese context: personal development of children left behind

In Chinese society which features Confucianism, children are expected to obey their parents, who have unquestioned authority and control of the children’s lives (Yunus, 2005). Caregivers have played this role in their own children’s lives, and they believe it is still necessary for children left behind. Therefore, these children’s growth has been involved with discipline and restriction established by caregivers. Generally speaking, this authoritative role is caregivers’ perceptions of themselves as guardians, and sometimes even conflicts with their love-based ‘spoiling’ actions.

Confucianism particularly values guardians’ roles in children’s moral development (Cheng, 2004). As part of the society, an individual is expected to present him/herself in a morally acceptable way (Lai, 2008). Therefore, caregivers’ love and sympathy for children has to compromise with discipline and restriction, as the latter guides children to develop into adults who are accepted by Chinese society. In this regard, the discipline and restriction also reflects caregivers’ developmental expectations of the children. Caregivers set up rules and boundaries according to their own understandings of children’ needs, and insist on certain principles in children’s development. For example, they have been alert for stealing, which is strictly forbidden.

Caregivers feel obligated to guide the children, so that they can adjust to Chinese society in the future. It should be noted, however, that caregivers’ guidance is rooted in local convention. For example, caregivers have different expectations of boys and girls, who are expected to play different roles in a family. While being guided, children left behind are mostly in a passive
position. They have to follow caregivers’ principles, even though some guidance may not fit the modern urban lives.

Although caregivers have been maintaining their authoritative impression on children left behind, their child rearing attitudes and practices have changed with this younger generation. Caregivers acknowledged the social change as well as these children’s viewpoints, so they do not use the same standards to address children’s behaviours as they did with their own children. Specifically, caregivers are more tolerant and patient with children left behind. This attitude also partly resulted from caregivers’ own perceptions as children’s guardians. Caregivers assume multiple roles in children’s lives. They are children’s closest kin other than children’s parents, so they are emotionally attached to the children to a great extent. Most caregivers take care of the children as they expected their own parents would, however, caregivers are also aware of their identities as grandparents. As grandparents, they cannot discipline children left behind in the same ways as their own children. As the children’s guardians, caregivers are also concerned about the judgments from children’s parents and local community members. Therefore, caregivers have been adjusting themselves to guide children’s developmental behaviours.

Caregivers’ adjusted attitudes can be also found in children’s need for play activities. Although caregivers see study as children’s first priority, they have also accepted a variety of new play activities. For example, caregivers celebrate children’s birthdays, and even take them to the parks in cities. Caregivers did not tend to do this when they reared their own children. According to caregivers’ experiences, play used to be seen as children’s own issue, and adults were rarely involved. Another reason that caregivers value children’s activities is because they have significant benefits for children left behind. For example, play activities keep the children busy and relieve their distress due to the separation from their parents. This benefit has been also
confirmed by school personnel, since group activities at school can keep children away from missing their parents.

7.4 Chapter summary

This chapter provided my interpretations and analysis of participants’ constructions of children’s needs. I firstly compared the needs model developed in this study with the ARACY needs identification mechanism, and highlighted my model’s original contribution based on a Chinese context. I then selected some key findings from the data to illustrate children’s specific and general needs. I argued that children left behind are special in terms of the specific needs that arise due to separation from their parents. Therefore, these children need multiple groups to address their emotional needs. The general needs of children left behind can be applied to most Chinese children, which are underpinned by traditional Chinese culture. For example, education is seen as the most important need for children, and caregivers have made great efforts to address this need.
8 CONCLUSION: PROTECTIVE INFORMAL KINSHIP CARE NEED SUPPORTS TO BETTER ADDRESS CHILDREN’S NEEDS

This chapter provides key conclusions drawn from the findings and prior discussion. I firstly argue that children left behind are a vulnerable group with special needs, then outline the protective factors of informal kinship care in addressing these children’s needs. Following this, I discuss the capacity of caregivers and their families for meeting children’s needs, including both positive and negative aspects. Acknowledging caregivers’ limited capacity and resources, I present the implications of this study in the context of rural China, and explore the future role of government, social service, as well as local community. Finally, the limitations and the directions for further study are outlined.

8.1 Children left behind and their needs in rural China

Children’s vulnerability has been addressed in both academic studies and political agendas across the world. UNICEF (1989) especially emphasises children’s vulnerable position in society, as they rely on adults and government support for their sustenance and development. Although each state’s political considerations are different in terms of service provision, there has been little dispute regarding children’s vulnerability.

Children left behind are a special group in contemporary China and were recognised as such by study participants. As discussed in Chapter 3, rural migrants contribute to China’s economic boom by being actively involved in non-agricultural work in cities. However, a variety of institutional barriers such as hukou system prevent them from being entitled to urban social
services. The discrimination in education makes it extremely difficult for migrant parents to bring children with them. In this regard, leaving children left behind in rural communities is not merely migrant parents’ personal choice. Rather, it is a reluctant compromise due to institutional discrepancies in rural and urban development.

There has been limited governmental support specially developed for rural children left behind, although they are a huge population who have been suffering from parents’ absence. These children and their rural families have to confront worse medical and educational conditions compared with their urban counterparts. Consequently, education and relevant support is a big concern for kin caregivers, given that most of them are not competent to tutor children left behind.

The findings of this study suggest that most children left behind are timid, and some get upset or offended easily. These characteristics are consistent with those found in existing studies, which draw attention to the impact of parental migration on children left behind (see for example, Jia & Tian, 2010). Although kinship care provides a sense of belonging for children left behind, they still need parental contact which is essential for children’s development. The emotional needs and mental health of these children needs to be further explored by adults, especially when kin caregivers lack skills to communicate with them.

This study has been focused in exploring the diverse needs of children left behind in an informal kinship setting in Jilin Province in China. Although this was done through the lens of caregivers and school personnel, the core of the study is the children. The term ‘need’ has been widely used in the Western child study. However, Chinese caregivers cannot fully understand the term, as it is far too formal and normally used in documents rather than in the popular lexicon. Caregivers’
understandings of children’s needs, therefore, are examined by applying my interpretation as a researcher. To maximise participants’ original constructions, efforts have been made to focus on the things caregivers reported as important for children left behind to develop and succeed in Chinese society.

In Western countries, views on children’s needs can be found in both the academic and broad communities. However, when we try to identify children’s needs, it seems most work is based on theoretical exploration. As an empirical study, this research has been able to address the ‘what’ question: What are the needs of children in informal kinship care in rural Jilin Province, China? The needs of children left behind have been found to be extensive. Some of these needs are relatively general and can be applied to most children. They are basic care, physical health, and moral development. Other needs, however, are more specific to this group, notably the broad themes of emotional needs and mental health, relationships, empowerment and agency, and safety.

As discussed in Chapter 2, even fundamental needs are relative (Goodin, 1990). The general needs of children left behind are constructed in a Chinese context, which reflect the impact of Chinese culture on participants’ understandings. Most of these needs demonstrate participants, especially caregivers’ expectations of children’s development. In other words, meeting these needs contributes to children fitting into the contemporary and emerging society. It should be noted that other general needs, such as physical health, are not limited to rural China. Rather, they can be understood in a broader context. These needs are fundamental for children’s survival and development as human beings and to keep them free from harm. However, the fundamental traits of these needs do not mean they are objective. Taking dental health as an example, it is
common for advantaged Western children to receive regular dental checks, which are seen as essential for children’s physical health. Chinese caregivers in this study, nevertheless, do not take it seriously and they rarely take the children to the dentist. Indeed, caregivers only take actions if severe dental problems are identified. Another example is personal hygiene. For Chinese caregivers, children’s personal hygiene is more than just basic care. It has been linked to the children’s presence in social interactions. In this regard, personal hygiene not only fundamentally benefits children’s physical health, but also avoids children and family’s shame due to untidy dressing. Hence, ensuring personal hygiene is a preventative action to avoid social stigma.

The specific needs reveal the vulnerability of children left behind in Chinese society (Q. Wang, 2008). Participants’ attitudes toward these needs are sometimes conflicting, as they play different roles in children’s lives. For example, caregivers’ love and sympathy for the children makes them extremely sensitive to children’s emotional wellbeing. Thus, it is not surprising, generally speaking that caregivers often try to buy whatever children ask for to keep them calm. However, caregivers’ attempts to address children’s empowerment and agency are critically judged by some school personnel, who interpret it as spoiling. In addition to caregivers, school personnel, parents, peers, and relatives all contribute to addressing the diverse needs of children left behind. Children need to establish multiple relationships with these groups, notably caregivers, who are the most approachable attachment figures. Caregivers not only provide the children with comfort, but also protect them from hazards. The hazards include both physical and social harms, and the latter mostly exists in children’s interactions with their peers.

The needs of children left behind interact with each other, and they even conflict to some extent. The understandings and preferences of adults, especially caregivers, have a direct impact on how children’s needs are being met. As discussed previously, the constitution of the needs model in
this study is different from the ARACY needs identification mechanism. Within the latter one, children’s needs are equally distributed across a wheel, and there is no priority given to a certain needs. In this study, however, education is constructed as the most important need for children left behind. The participants’ decision to give education this central position is based on its significant impact on children left behind’s future from caregivers’ perspectives. Other needs, which are located around education, sometimes can be sacrificed to ensure children’s central need. For example, some children are placed with their teachers during the week, so they can be better tutored. This arrangement has been made by caregivers based on educational consideration, however, it conflicts with children’s emotional needs, especially their need for a home environment and their sense of belonging.

Although children’s needs have been systematically categorised into different themes in this study, it is worth noting that a child-focused study should acknowledge children as individuals. This means in addition to children’s common needs as human beings, their personal needs and surroundings should be also considered. Taking this study as an example, both general and specific needs have been identified. The specific needs, as its title suggests, are closely associated with the particular situation that children left behind have to face in their daily lives. These needs can be only fully understood with a consideration of the impact of their separation from their parents.

8.2 The role of kinship care in addressing rural children’s needs

Children’s needs in this study are mostly addressed through their families, especially caregivers. Family not only provides children with basic care for their survival, but also offers a secure environment which features and builds a sense of belonging and identity critical to their
development. This is especially vital for children left behind after they suffer emotional grief and loss due to their parents’ absence (Gleeson, et al., 2008). Theoretically, children left behind can be cared for by any adults when their parents are not around. However, these children have been found to have preferences for kin caregivers. They are reportedly keen to come back on weekends, because they feel more comfortable with caregivers in a home environment. This finding is supported by Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1980; McLewin & Muller, 2006), which suggests that children prefer familiar caregivers who usually alleviate children’s distress and fear.

Although children have to confront the separation from their parents, maintaining a healthy parent-child relationship is still necessary for them. Children have a natural need for attaching to their mothers, and this relationship even influences young children’s future mental health. Therefore, long term disruption of the parent-child relationship should be avoid, since it causes a variety of psychological problems for children (Bowlby, et al., 1965). In the present study, children’s need for ongoing relationships with their parents has been confirmed by both caregivers and children’s own reactions. This relationship provides children with confidence, and they feel insecure and confront difficulties in expressing themselves if their parents are not around (Porter, 2009).

Besides parents and caregivers, children left behind also have a need for interacting with other family members. Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler (2002) suggest that kin network provides maltreated children with stability and security, and this finding is also identified among children left behind in this study. As part of the big extended family network, relatives such as aunts or uncles provide extensive support for the children, and their caregivers. This support can be either material or emotional. The latter one is more important, as it makes children feel cared for and loved, as well as connected to their family.
Rural children’s lives are not limited to their home environment. Instead, they have been actively involved in local communities, such as the village and school. Growing up in rural communities brings several benefits for children left behind. For example, community members are familiar with the children, and they usually keep an eye on the children when they play in the village. In this regard, the village is a relatively safe environment for children left behind, since their safety is considered by the whole community. Moreover, frequent interactions in the village also create a lot of social opportunities for these children, with which they can develop effective and supportive peer relationships. These relationships are one of the most important emotional supports for children left behind (K. Zhang & Jingzhong, 2010). They not only distract children left behind from missing their parents, but also relieve and support caregivers’ child rearing responsibilities to some extent. When caregivers are too busy to take care of children, they can even temporarily place the children at a neighbour’s home. Hence, the community role in caring for children is important. These arrangements generally depend on caregivers’ relationships with other community members, but do indicate a community-based sharing of child rearing responsibilities.

School is another community environment for children left behind. At school, children left behind are able to build their peer relationships, and be involved in more group play activities beneficial for their emotional and social wellbeing. Children are likely to be happy if they have developed satisfactory relationships with their classmates and teachers. As a public institution for formal education, school also plays a serious role for children left behind. Influenced by Confucianism, the traditional value of respecting teachers has existed in Chinese society for thousands of years. In front of teachers, students are generally passive recipients (Pratt, 1992). They value teacher’s formal role and respect teacher’s authority without any questions (Su, et al.,
1994). Some children in this study reportedly even obey teachers more than their caregivers. This situation has been acknowledged by caregivers, who expect teachers to assist with educating the children. Most caregivers encourage teachers to be strict with the children, so that they can be well educated. It should be noted that caregivers themselves also highly value teacher’s viewpoints, and their understandings of children’s needs are therefore influenced by teachers. In this regard, school plays an ‘agency’ role between children and caregivers, which guides and affects both sides. It directly addresses children’s needs by providing a quality educational and social environment. On the other hand, it can be also actively involved in caregivers’ rearing practice, and provide them with guidance through cooperation and support.

8.3 The capacity of caregivers to meet children’s needs

Caregivers’ parenting capacity has a direct impact on children’s wellbeing, since their needs are mostly addressed through caregivers’ child rearing practice. This capacity needs to be carefully examined in the context of rural China. This study shows that some capacity for caregivers underpins the advantages of kinship care in meeting children’s needs. The others, however, indicates unmet resources needed to better support for caregivers and their families.

8.3.1 Develop close emotional bonds between children and their families

As stated previously, most caregivers in this study are elderly, and this characteristic is consistent with that of Western kinship care studies reviewed in Chapter 2. Apparently, caregivers’ age affects their capacity for meeting children’s needs.

Older age may promote kin caregivers’ wellbeing, and further facilitate their relationship with children (Hayslip, et al., 2006). Most caregivers in this study are children’s grandparents, and their child rearing practice is based on their deep love for the third generation. Notably,
caregivers’ love is rooted in Confucianism, which advocates moral integrity through love and family bonds (T. K. Wong & Pang, 2000). Therefore, although this role has brought caregivers some burdens, they see it as fulfilling their lives and feel highly rewarded. These motivations are similar to those found in Western countries, which also emphasise family obligation and children’s needs (Beeman & Boisen, 1999; Gleeson, et al., 2008; Harris & Skyles, 2008). Generally speaking, caregivers have developed close relationships with children left behind, and these relationships sometimes even surpass children’s relationships with their own parents. In the Western studies, kin caregivers are more likely to be single. However, this is not the case in this study, since almost all the caregivers of children left behind are partnered. The Chinese kin family structure, in this regard, facilitates a better home environment where children are able to develop bonds to both caregivers. The love-motivated kinship care provides children with a strong sense of belonging, which is critically important during their parents’ absence. The advantages of kin caregivers’ age and commitment, which are believed to promote successful child care, have been also addressed in Western studies, (Coakley, et al., 2007).

8.3.2 Provide experienced basic care

Most caregivers have applied their own child rearing experiences to children left behind, and this advantage is especially apparent in addressing children’s basic care. Children’s basic care mainly involves food, clothing, and personal hygiene, and these needs are understood at two levels. The first level focuses on children’s need for survival. This means children are kept from hunger and harsh conditions that threaten their wellbeing and lives. Compared with other needs, caregivers are more experienced and confident in providing basic care at this level. They have little confusion, as they are familiar with children and know what is good for them. The advantage of
kinship care regarding this can also be found in an Australian study, in which children who live with grandparents are happy with their material needs being met (Downie, et al., 2010).

In addition to fundamental functions, children’s basic care also involves developmental and psychological considerations. For example, caregivers’ sensitivity to children’s dressing and personal hygiene reveals their insight into these children’s presence in a social environment. Besides this, children’s nutrition is another big concern for caregivers. They make efforts to provide appropriate nutrition for children. Unsurprisingly, these children are treated with special meals based on their own preferences.

8.3.3 Promote children’s health through sensitive care

Caregivers’ love and commitment brings considerable benefits to children’s health, especially when they are ill and need delicate care. Several cases in this study show that these caregivers spare no effort to make sure ill children are well cared for. Since caregivers’ understandings of children’s health are centred on illness or rather its absence, they try to prevent children from becoming ill. Strategies to keep children healthy are based on caregivers’ past child rearing experiences, as well as their familiarity with the children. Some Western studies suggest that children in care usually have poor health (Dania & Dimitra, 2007), but this has not been widely found from caregivers’ accounts in this study. It should be noted, however, that caregiver’s individual efforts to ensure children’s health are limited by local conditions. Some caregivers doubt the quality of local health services, even though there is a hospital in the town and clinic doctors who provide home treatment.
8.3.4 Lacked skill: tutoring children

Along with age, caregivers’ own educational background limits their child rearing capacity to a great extent. Consistent with Western research findings, most caregivers in this study have little formal education. When they are not capable of tutoring children, they use alternative strategies such as sending children to live with teachers. Such arrangements contribute to children’s academic performance, however, it is perhaps at the cost of sacrificing children’s emotional needs and mental health in the long run. Children reportedly crave rejoin with caregivers at the weekend, even though teachers can meet their need for basic care. Some caregivers arrange private tutoring for children, but long distance travel and expenditure prevent most families from making this arrangement. In addition to this, most rural families rely on limited taxi services for children’s school travel, which leaves little flexibility for caregivers to ensure children’s safety and attend school on time.

8.3.5 Struggled endeavour: safeguarding children

In addition to tutoring, children’s safety is another big concern for caregivers. Rural environments provide a wide range of spaces for children left behind, whereby they interact with their peers. However, this also brings some potential hazards, especially when children have access to ponds or busy roads. Caregivers’ special attention toward children’s safety is based on the responsibility when they have accepted children’s parents are not available. Influenced by Confucianism, caregivers highly value their roles in caring for children. This responsibility stimulates caregivers’ protective sensitivity, as they face social pressure from family as well as local communities to ensure children’s safety. Besides physical harm, children’s safety concerns also exist in their peer relationships, since children left behind are often found to be timid. Caregivers’ capacity for keeping children from being bullied is limited. In this regard, children’s
need for play activities sometimes is compromised, as they can be isolated by caregivers within their home environment. However, caregivers’ interventions can hardly reach school, and they rely on school personnel to create a harmonious environment for these children while they are being educated.

8.3.6 More barriers: generation gap, caregivers’ own health status and rural life style

Although caregivers are dedicated to meeting children’s emotional needs through intimate bond, their capacity is restricted by the generation gap that exists. This gap can result in communication barriers between these two groups. Caregivers can feel powerless and may rely on their own assumptions regarding children’s thoughts. In this regard, children’s inner world is yet to be explored by their closest relatives, namely caregivers, and this is especially the case if children are introverted.

Besides the generation gap, busy life styles also prevent some caregivers from understanding children’s unspoken thoughts. Rural caregivers generally have little time to interact with children during farming season. Children’s emotional needs and mental health, in this case, can potentially be neglected and compromised to their basic care to some extent.

The rural environment is a double-edged sword for children left behind and their families. It does enhance children’s peer relationships and create a relatively safe community, however, it can also limit caregivers’ capacity such as ensuring children’s nutrition. Living in rural areas means most caregivers rely on their own gardens and farms to supply food for the family. When it is not in season, caregivers have to travel to the town to buy food, especially fresh vegetables and fruits. The travel can be a heavy burden for rural residents if they do not have their own transport or are in poor health (Pullmann, et al., 2010).
8.4 Implications of the study

Although kinship care has many significant advantages for meeting children’s needs, generally speaking, rural caregivers and their families have limited capacity for addressing some needs. This has caused several risks for children left behind.

Emotionally, these children’s inner worlds were not well explored and understood by adults, especially their kin caregivers. Children left behind were perceived as inhibited, and this situation could be worse if appropriate communication was lacking. Children’s emotional needs sometimes were even sacrificed, especially when caregivers struggled to balance children’s study and contact with their parents.

Most caregivers in this study were not competent to tutor children left behind. Therefore, children’s educational needs are at the risk of not being abandoned. Since kin caregivers reported high expectations of these children’s academic achievements, it stressed both caregivers and children left behind. Besides tutoring, school travelling was also a big concern for these rural families. Due to geographic distance, many of these children relied on taxi for picking them up for school. Within this arrangement, caregivers had little control of children’s safety on the road.

As almost all the caregivers reported their deep love for children left behind, there was no child maltreatment related risk found in these families. Instead, most caregivers even felt reluctant with corporal punishment, since they treated this third generation differently from their own children.
Based on the discussions above, there is an imperative need to assist these vulnerable families and promote their wellbeing, and thereby ensure that these children reach their potential and development goals.

8.4.1 An agenda for governmental provision

It is commonly agreed that the emergence of children left behind results from the unbalanced development between rural and urban areas in China, and it has become a widely recognised social problem (Ye, et al., 2010; Ye & Pan, 2011). Yet, to date, there has been little governmental support for this group at a national level. Although some local authorities have implemented policies to meet these children’s needs, a national policy document and response is still lacking. ACWF has a close relationship with the government and usually advocates to government departments to pay more attention to children left behind (All-China Women's Federation, 2012). However, most of their work has been done through schools. This includes establishing profiles of children left behind, organising social donations, encouraging children’s regular contact with their parents, arranging training programs for caregivers. During this process, however, the position of children left behind and their caregivers are extremely passive. They cannot appeal for governmental support, because there is no legislative regulation to follow. In effect, they have little if any avenue to seek help to address their individual and collective plight.

In China, family contributes enormously to social protection, even though the government is expected to play a paramount role. There has been an unbalanced development between formal and informal care provision (Saunders & Shang, 2001), and this is especially the case for children left behind. Compared with the advanced development in child welfare service in Western countries, much more work is needed in China. As Qiao and Chan (2005) comment on child protection in China, pressing problems are more likely to be at the forefront of thinking by
the Chinese government. The government’s role, in this regard, is still minimal in the whole child welfare system (Shang, 2008). Given the considerable number of children left behind, it is imperative for the government to have these children’s needs on its agenda. Although most children left behind in China are cared for by their kin privately, the government’s responsibility should not be overlooked or minimised, especially regarding the provision of a broad system of support and assistance to those in need.

The usage of kinship care should be based on a better understanding of children’s needs (Dunne & Kettler, 2006), which is essential to improve the wellbeing of disadvantaged and vulnerable children (2000). This present study has outlined the vulnerability of children left behind, so it is reasonable to suggest needs focused policies in China are required. The needs of children left behind are extensive, and cover a variety of aspects of their daily lives. These aspects strongly indicate a need for inclusive policies that value and promote cooperation among different government departments. To date, the Ministry of Education has been actively supporting the school system to address these children’s needs. However, participants’ experiences reveal that far more work needs to be done beyond the school environment. For example, some caregivers have highlighted that their poor health and financial burden is due to caring for the children.

Undoubtedly, the school system’s role is limited in strengthening caregivers’ child rearing capacity. More government departments are required to work collaboratively to support for the whole family, which further benefits children left behind. For instance, in view of the significant role of the Ministry of Health in promoting rural and community health, more health services should be provided for children left behind and their families. Since caregivers’ own health affects their capacity for meeting children’s needs, specific programs should be developed to promote caregivers’ health. These services request a broader network of village clinics as well as
high quality treatment, which builds caregivers’ confidence in using local services for children. With regard to children’s basic care, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security should take the responsibility by providing material resources, such as food subsidies. This is especially important for these rural children, as their caregivers have difficulties in providing nutritious foods.

8.4.2 Fill the gap: introducing social services for children left behind

The findings of this study suggest that specialised services would benefit for children left behind. Although increasing attention has been drawn to intervention in rural communities, there is a dearth of social services in rural China (Bin, 2009). In particular, there are no social work services available to address these children’s needs.

In addition to general needs, children left behind have specific needs due to the separation from their parents. As children’s extended families members, kin caregivers are able to alleviate at least to some extent, these children’s emotional loss (Gleeson, et al., 2008), however, they are often frustrated or overwhelmed by children’s complicated needs. In this regard, specialised services are vital for caregivers to better understand and meet children’s needs. By involving social workers, both children and family can be enabled to voice their needs and obtain professional assistance. This is especially important for children’s emotional needs and mental health, since well trained social workers are able to assist caregivers with entering children’s inner worlds.

Practical assistance is also required. For example, in view of caregivers’ limited capacity for meeting children’s educational needs, specialised tutoring services could also be provided for children left behind. This program can be developed along with travel assistance for rural
families, given that local public transport is not convenient. In this regard, specialised educational services can facilitate the cooperation among government departments as discussed above. The role of school in improving these children’s studies, therefore, can be further enhanced.

The needs model in this study can be used as a theoretical base for understanding these children’s diverse needs and for developing specialised services for children left behind. This model not only outlines eight themes of children’s needs, but also presents the relationships among them. By utilising the integrated model, children’s needs can be related to each other and further linked to relevant government departments. This is especially useful for policymakers, since there is no specific child welfare department in China. Moreover, the needs model sheds light on children left behind’s specific needs due to their parents’ absence, and these needs are fundamental for considering specialised services for this disadvantaged group. As part of the findings from an empirical study, the needs model reflects the social constructions of caregivers, who are also potential service receivers. Caregivers’ constructions are mainly based on their personal experiences in a rural context. And, therefore, provide valuable insight into service receiver’s worlds.

8.4.3 Utilise community resources

This study has reported rural residents’ strong connection with local community, the needs focused policies for children left behind, therefore, should be community based. Community resources benefit children left behind in many ways. For example, they enhance caregivers’ child rearing capacity through informal provisions, such as temporary or respite care. Moreover, rural communities generally create a relatively safe and beneficial environment for children left behind, where they can be well protected from harm and emotional distress and have

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opportunities to play. This advantage must be valued and made consistent with policy development, as it especially meets the children’s need for multiple relationships.

Besides extended family and neighbours, there are also accessible institutional resources in community, such as the school, police station, hospital, clinics, transportation bureau, etc. If these organizations are mobilised along with individuals, both children left behind and their families can benefit from the strong relationships built up within the local community. Compared with strictly governmental support, the community-based one is more natural because of its valuing of neighbourhood (Haski-Leventhal, Ben-Arieh, & Melton, 2008).

8.5 Limitations of the study

This study used a qualitative approach to examine subjective constructions of children’s needs in rural China. The semi-structured interviews conveyed participants, especially caregivers’ rich descriptions, in their own words. These descriptions were valuable data, and they underpinned the needs model developed in this study. However, the qualitative approach has several limitations that need to be acknowledged.

First, the sample consists of a small group of 23 caregivers and five school personnel. Compared with a wider distribution, I was more interested in participants’ interpretative process of constructing children’s needs (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009). Thus, purposive sampling was adopted to explore participants’ inner worlds in depth. Due to the small sample size, the findings of this study may not be generalised to the broader context. The reasons that children live with their kin without parents’ presence are diverse. Since this study is focused on children left behind in rural China, some specific needs are not applied to other groups in informal kinship care.
Another concern about qualitative research has to do with trustworthiness. I have discussed this in Chapter 4, and noted how appropriate approaches have been used to ensure trustworthiness. Although I tried to minimise bias, it was not realistic to fully eliminate my personal experiences and pre-existing values. For example, the use of the ARACY needs identification mechanism is a double-edged sword. It did contribute to broadening my understandings of children’s needs from a Western perspective, especially developing interview guides. However, I found it sometimes worked against the exploratory nature of this study. Some probe questions during interviews had been affected by the use of the ARACY needs identification mechanism, which means that I may have unconsciously influenced the directions of participants’ sense making process. In this regard, reported meanings were not solely constructed by participants. Rather, these meanings inevitably involved my interpretations as a researcher (Maxwell, 2002). The original meanings from participants’ accounts may potentially be misinterpreted to some extent. As participants’ accounts were analysed in Mandarin and reported in English, the translation might also have caused some misinterpretation.

Third, exploring children’s needs was primarily based on caregivers’ voices. This was my intent, yet, the relatively small sample size of school personnel has restrained multiple constructions in this study. It is apparent that school personnel’s viewpoints sometimes conflict with those of caregivers. However, due to limited voices of school personnel, I could not make fully valid comparisons on each theme of children’s needs. Even though school personnel’s understandings were considered throughout data analysis, the conclusions drawn from their experiences may still lack adequate evidence. This limitation can be only addressed through recruiting more school personnel. However, I was not able to do this within the short timeframe allowed for data collection, under the term of my scholarship.
8.6 Directions for further study

While this study has generated valuable insight into children’s needs, it has also raised many questions worthy of additional research. In view of the considerable number of children left behind in China, there needs to be more quantitative research which permits a larger data base of information. Compared with this study, quantitative research is able to explore a specific area of children’s needs on a more generalised and broadly representative scale.

Future qualitative study should examine children’s own constructions of their needs, and their experiences of growing up away from their parents. Caregivers were chosen as primary participants in this study, because they are seen as one of the most significant groups in children’s daily lives. Caregivers’ understandings have a direct impact on how children’s needs are being addressed. Involving the voices of a small group of school personnel has demonstrated the multiple possibilities of constructing meanings and, undoubtedly, children’s viewpoints are different from adults, including caregivers. Children’s needs are complicated, and gaining insight from their own perspectives is valuable for any child-focused study (S. Holland, 2009). Caregivers’ experiences show that diverse needs of children left behind cannot by fully understood by adults, especially if children are timid to express their feelings. In this regard, direct communication with children is essential for exploring the hidden needs that have not yet been revealed to adults.

This study has explored the needs of children left behind though semi-structured interviews. However, more qualitative research methods should also be considered in future studies. According to caregivers’ reports, the needs of children tend to change as they grow, and therefore differ across different age groups. This study has been focused on the needs of school-
age children, and findings suggest that it would be a valuable attempt to conduct a longitudinal study. Longitudinal research design not only probes children’s needs at different stages of being separated from their parents, but also examines separation’s long-term effect on children’s wellbeing. In addition to interviews, other qualitative research methods, such as participant observation, could be used to capture information in children’s daily lives. Most of children’s needs, especially emotional needs, are addressed through their interactions with caregivers in a home environment, and participant observation is useful for exploring these needs in a natural way. By adopting different research methods, researchers are able to witness participants’ meanings-making processes, which further deepens our understandings of children’s needs.

Needless to say, more studies are needed on caregivers who play significant roles in addressing children’s needs. Caring for kin’s children has completely changed caregivers’ lives, and they have to assume roles that are different from those traditional kin. Caregivers’ caring experiences involve both challenges and rewards, and their motivations are closely associated with the extent to which children’s needs are being met. Similar to children left behind, caregivers also have a variety of needs to be addressed. This study has revealed some of Chinese caregivers’ needs, however, there needs to be more specific studies in this area. Future studies will benefit both caregivers and children in the long run, as caregivers’ needs indicate their capacity for addressing children’s needs.

8.7 Concluding remarks

This study aimed to explore informal kinship care. I purposely selected research subjects in rural China to obtain in-depth understandings of children’s needs. Consistent with social constructionism, my study shows that children’s needs are relative and socioculturally grounded
in a given context. The needs of children left behind in China are diverse, however, these needs are not equally constructed as suggested in the ARACY needs identification mechanism. Instead, children’s needs are prioritised by kin caregivers based on their own understandings.

Confucianism underpins caregivers’ constructions and child rearing attitudes, and they see education as the most important need for children left behind. Education not only contributes to rural children’s moral development, but also provides them with an avenue to live an urban life. Other needs, as caregivers reported, sometimes have to be compromised to guarantee children’s educational achievement.

Children’s needs are not discrete. Rather, they interact with each other. As a vulnerable group, children left behind have specific needs which differ them from other Chinese children. The disruptions of children left behind’s attachments to their parents have negative impacts on children’s emotional needs and mental health. To address this, children left behind need multiple attachment figures in their daily life. In other words, children’s emotional needs and mental health are addressed through their relationships with different people. Generally speaking, these relationships are beneficial for children left behind, however, they also bring some safety risks. For example, children left behind are easily to be bullied when they interact with their peers, and this could cause mental health issues for children left behind.

Based on caregivers’ love for children left behind, informal kinship care has many advantages of meeting these children’s needs. It promotes good relationships between children and their parents, which are essential for children’s mental health development. Moreover, informal kinship care provides children with a strong sense of belonging, which alleviates their emotional grief and loss due to their parents’ absence. This study also found that kin caregivers’ sympathy for children contributes to addressing their need for empowerment and agency. Since children
left behind are separated from their parents, their personal preferences and views are highly respected by caregivers. It can be argued that this need is especially important for children whose parents are not around, however, it has not been well addressed in the ARACY needs identification mechanism and kinship care studies.

Given that most studies have been conducted in Western countries, the findings of this study advance the current knowledge of kinship care. As an explorative study, it provides a systematic needs model based on a Chinese context, which can be used in cross-cultural studies. Although some of the findings may not be applied to Western societies, this study has identified some natural needs of children as human beings. These needs, especially emotional needs and children’s relationships with others, should be paid extra attentions when children are not cared for by their parents. A good understanding of children’s needs should also take needs’ relationships into account. These relationships indicate how children’s needs are prioritised by adults, especially kin caregivers whose sociocultural constructions have a direct impact on children’s wellbeing.

Children left behind are a vulnerable group who have specific needs that are not currently adequately addressed. The unmet needs of this huge population have become a significant social problem in contemporary China. Although kin caregivers are able to provide protective care for children left behind, their capacities for meeting children’s diverse needs are limited. In view of institutional reasons that these rural children are left behind, it is imperative for the government to take responsibilities to promote their wellbeing. The needs model developed in this study also suggests that these children’s needs should be addressed by several groups. Therefore, an inclusive network is required, which involves family, the government, social work services, as
well as community. In the long run, addressing the needs above not only benefits the children and their families, but also contributes to China’s economic and social development.
### APPENDIX A: PROFILE OF CAREGIVERS AND THE CHILDREN IN THEIR CARE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caregivers' code</th>
<th>Caregivers' gender</th>
<th>Caregivers' age</th>
<th>Caregivers' role</th>
<th>Information about caregivers and their partners</th>
<th>Child's gender</th>
<th>Child's age</th>
<th>Length of stay (year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant works on her land, and her husband is disabled and confined to bed.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant works on her land, and her husband temporarily works in another province.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Paternal grandfather</td>
<td>Both participants work on their land.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Paternal grandfather</td>
<td>Both participant and his partner work on their land.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant works on her land, and also works full-time for a local company; Her husband temporarily works in a city near home.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant has retired, and her husband works temporarily in a city.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant works on her land.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX A: PROFILE OF CAREGIVERS AND THE CHILDREN IN THEIR CARE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caregivers’ code</th>
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<th>Caregivers’ age</th>
<th>Caregivers’ role</th>
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<th>Child’s gender</th>
<th>Child’s age</th>
<th>Length of stay (year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Paternal grandfather</td>
<td>Participant temporarily works in another province.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant works on her land, and her husband temporarily works in a town near home.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant works on her land, and her husband temporarily works in a city near home.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Maternal grandfather</td>
<td>Both participants work on their land.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Paternal grandfather</td>
<td>Both participant and his partner work on their land.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Paternal grandfather</td>
<td>Participant works on his land, and his wife works in the local community.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Paternal grandfather</td>
<td>Participant has a job in his village, and also works on his land with his partner.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Paternal grandfather</td>
<td>Both participants work on their land.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Caregivers’ code</th>
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<th>Child’s gender</th>
<th>Child’s age</th>
<th>Length of stay (year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Paternal grandfather</td>
<td>Both participant and his partner work on their land.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Maternal uncle</td>
<td>Participant works part-time around the central town.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant stays at home and takes care of the child.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant works on her land, and her husband temporarily works out of the town.</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Participant works on her land, and her husband temporarily works in another province.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: There are some couples in this table, and they care for the same child. These couple are 03 and 04, 08 and 09, 12 and 13, 17 and 18. Caregivers 20 and 21 live in the same household, so they care for the same child as well.
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CAREGIVERS

For first interview:

Family background

Could you please tell me a little about yourself?

Caregivers’ gender;

Caregivers’ age;

Caregivers’ marital status;

Caregivers’ employment status, and the source of the family income;

Caregivers’ educational level;

Caregivers’ religion (if applicable);

Could you please tell me about your family?

Family members in the household, and number of children in your care;

How long you have lived in the community? Where do your own children live? And are there any close relatives live nearby?

Are you the primary caregiver, or is care shared equally with a partner/other(s)?
Circumstance of children came into care

Now I would like to ask some questions about the child (ren).

The child (ren)’s age and gender.

How long has/have the child (ren) lived with you?

Why did you decide to take care of the child (ren)?

For Second interview:

Children’s needs:

What comes to your mind when I say children’s needs?

Among the needs you have mentioned, do you think there are any needs more important than others?

Health

How do you think understand children’s health?

How do you describe the child’s overall health condition?
To what extent the child’s health needs are being met? (For example, does he/she receive regular health check? Is proper treatment available when he/she is ill?)

What does mental health mean to you? Who should be responsible for the child’s mental health?

What about the health condition of other family members? Does that affect the child’s physical health?

**Emotional wellbeing**

How do you describe the child’s personality?

How did the child respond when he/she came into your care? What about now?

Can you tell if there is anything distressing the child? How does he/she usually deal with stress or happiness?

**Safety**

What does children’s safety mean to you? Do you think the child is safely cared in the local community?

How do you ensure the safety of the child? Who else do you think should share the responsibility with you?

How do you discipline the child if necessary?

**Material wellbeing**
What should be provided to meet children’s material needs?

Is there any support to help you with this?

**Learning and development**

What do you think the child should learn in order to grow and develop well?

How do you think of the child’s education?

Do you help with the child’s schooling? Who should be responsible for his/her schooling?

What activities the child can engage in other than schooling?

**Relationships**

How does the child get along with you and other family members?

Who do you think is the most important person that the child relies on?

Does the family have a social network to support this child (consider friends, neighbors, relatives, people with same cultural or religious interests)?

**Closing comments**

You have been very helpful for answering the questions above, and is there anything I have missed that you think is important to share?
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Please tell me about your background and training.

Please tell me about your work role, and what experience have you had with left-behind children in your class?

How do you understand the needs of left-behind children?

How would you describe your relationship with left-behind children, their parents, and children’s kin caregivers?

Is there any difference between the needs of left-behind children and other children? How do you think the academic performance of left-behind children compared to other children?

What kinds of school services are available to these children and their kin caregivers? Are you familiar with other community services or support?

What other support do you think might be useful for these children and their caregivers? Please explain.

Closing comments

You have been very helpful for answering the questions above, and is there anything I have missed that you think is important to share?
APPENDIX D THE PROCESS OF CODING THE DATA FROM CAREGIVERS

1813 Quotations

I have determined to raise him until he grows up…(C01)
How can paternal and maternal grandparents be the same?…(C17)
I have to consider his parents’ absence…(C11)
He has to learn slowly on his own…(C19)
Children need to be praised…(C15)
If he studies well, I will buy him some toys…(C06)
At first, he cried. I carried him on back and walk around outside…(C14)
Being with me and this is her home…(C07)
He is very close to his paternal aunt…(C16)
Etc……

217 Codes

Family ties
Be free from pressure or anxiety
Be treated as age-appropriate
Encouragement and reward
Body touch
Sense of belongings
Relationships with relatives
Etc……

16 Themes

Caregivers’ motivations
Emotional needs and mental health
Children’s needs
Relationships
Etc……
APPENDIX E: THEMES COMPARED BY NUMBER OF CODING REFERENCES
APPENDIX F: HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

University Human Research Ethics Committee

HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

NHMRC Registered Committee Number EC00171

Date of Issue: 28/4/11 (supersedes all previously issued certificates)

Dear Mr Yang Hu,

A UHREC should clearly communicate its decisions about a research proposal to the researcher and the final decision to approve or reject a proposal should be communicated to the researcher in writing. This Approval Certificate serves as your written notice that the proposal has met the requirements of the National Statement on Research involving Human Participation and has been approved on that basis. You are therefore authorised to commence activities as outlined in your proposal application, subject to any specific and standard conditions detailed in this document.

Within this Approval Certificate are:

* Project Details
* Participant Details
* Conditions of Approval (Specific and Standard)

Researchers should report to the UHREC, via the Research Ethics Coordinator, events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project, including, but not limited to:

(a) serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants; and
(b) proposed significant changes in the conduct, the participant profile or the risks of the proposed research.

Further information regarding your ongoing obligations regarding human based research can be found via the Research Ethics website http://www.research.qut.edu.au/ethics/ or by contacting the Research Ethics Coordinator on 07 3138 2091 or ethicscontact@qut.edu.au

If any details within this Approval Certificate are incorrect please advise the Research Ethics Unit within 10 days of receipt of this certificate.

### Project Details

**Category of Approval:** Human non-HREC

**Approved From:** 24/03/2011

**Approved Until:** 24/03/2014 (subject to annual reports)

**Approval Number:** 1100000207

**Project Title:** Meeting children’s needs in informal kinship care in rural China

**Chief Investigator:** Mr Yang Hu

**Other Staff/Students:** Prof Robert Lonne, Dr Judith Burton

**Experiment Summary:**
Gain an in-depth understanding of the needs of children who are placed in informal kinship care.

### Participant Details

**Participants:** Approximately 30

**Location/s of the Work:** Lishui, northeast China

### Conditions of Approval

**Specific Conditions of Approval:**
No special conditions placed on approval by the UHREC. Standard conditions apply.

RM Report No. E801 Version 3

Page 1 of 2
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Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. (2010). Working together to prevent child abuse and neglect: A common approach for identifying and responding early to indicators of need.


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National Health and Medical Research Council. (2009). *National statement on ethical conduct in human research*


