

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Listening to Children's Need to Matter in Skipped Generation Migrant Households: A Study in Rural Hunan, China

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of children who live in skipped generation households because of parental migration. Drawing on our matched interviews with 34 children and 20 grandparents from 19 skipped generation households in rural Hunan, central China, we examine what the children wanted significant adults to know about their care needs. We find that the children emphasised reciprocal caregiving; the caregivers' interactions in listening to and accompanying them; and the caregivers' understanding and valuing of their study efforts beyond grades, each of which assumed special significance in a context of socio-economic challenges and long-term parental migration. We reflect on the possibilities for translating these insights from our listening to the children into a social intervention to encourage reciprocal caregiver-child interactions that help children to feel that they 'matter'.

1 | Introduction

Worldwide, tens of millions of children live in the care of custodial grandparents, with parental labour migration being a major driver of the middle generation's physical absence in the Global South and Eastern Europe (e.g., Dossa and Coe 2017; Pantea 2012; Thomason 2021; Zimmer and Treleaven 2020). Literature for China observes that grandparents do their best to care for their grandchildren when the middle generation has migrated without them (Chen and Jiang 2019; Sun and Dutta 2022; Wang 2024). However, research also finds that left behind children experience worse psycho-emotional wellbeing compared to children who live with both parents, including heightened risks for loneliness, anxiety and suicide ideation (e.g., Fu and Zhou 2022; Lei et al. 2021; Wang and Mesman 2015). Given the 'dismal picture' of these children that prevails in policy and academic discourses both globally and in China (Guo and Spyros 2024; Parreñas 2005; Pissin 2013), some research examines left behind children's care needs as understood by

caregivers (Hu et al. 2014). However, research seldom considers children's needs as articulated by the children themselves, both globally and in China (Balsell et al. 2025).

In response to the afore-mentioned research gap this article addresses the question: *What do children who live in skipped generation households in China's rural areas want their grandparent caregivers and other adults to know about their care needs?* Exploring this question necessitates listening to children's voices. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that like adults' voices, children's voices are never purely unmediated but are always socially situated and relationally embedded (Punch 2002).

Our research question is important in part because with deepening marketisation in China after the late 1980s, rural-to-urban labour migration has physically removed growing numbers of mothers as well as fathers from children's daily lives, often making grandparents the custodial caregivers (Hu et al. 2014; Wang 2024). In 2020, official statistics put the number of rural

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children in China aged 17 years or under who had been left behind by at least one parent at 41.77 million, 27.1% of whom lived with grandparents, while figures for urban left behind children were 25.16 million and 16.9%, respectively (Lyu et al. 2024).

As in other contexts, in China's rural areas children seldom have a voice in the decisions affecting their lives (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 1999), including in decisions surrounding parental migration (Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Murphy 2020; Zhang 2018). Migrants in China leave their children in their hometowns largely because they cannot arrange for their care and education in the cities where they work. This is partly due to urban living costs and to a household registration or hukou system which ties individuals' access to social benefits, including school places for their children, to their place of registered residence. Many children of migrants therefore attend school in their registered hometowns while their parents work away (Hu et al. 2014; Gu 2021; Xiang 2007).

In recent years, though, public discourses have become more critical of migrant families that incorporate skipped generation households. The criticisms partially reflect an ascent globally and in China of urban middle-class childrearing ideals centred on assumptions about the importance of mother-child attachment and an intensification of education-oriented childrearing (Gu 2022; Guo and Spyros 2024; Parreñas 2005; Pissin 2013). These childrearing ideals shape policy, media and academic discourses about rural migrant families in China (Gu 2022; Huang and Zou 2023; Murphy 2020). Meanwhile, state family interventions reinforce these families' structural disadvantages by equating their difficulties with their attributes and choices instead of with hukou exclusions, regional inequalities, and a regressive family-based welfare system that gives the least state help to the poorest individuals, especially those in rural areas (Gu 2022; Guo and Spyros 2024).

However, as scholars observe for other societies (Datta et al. 2010; Herron and Skinner 2013), individuals in rural China have their own care ethics grounded in daily intimacies, local culture and relationships. Filial piety is a pivotal care ethic, which refers to a cultural expectation that younger generations will repay their parents for their lives and care through obedience, diligence in their studies and future old-age care (Gu 2021; Hu et al. 2020; Hu 2019; Sun and Dutta 2022). Simultaneously, a recalibration of filial piety in response to structural changes and shifting family needs emphasises altruistic childcare assistance from older parents within a wider expectation of intergenerational care circulation (Chen et al. 2011; Gu 2022). This forms the wider context of the skipped generation care of children in China's rural areas.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 explores the concept of listening, drawing on literature on child-centred research and on an ethics of care approach to understanding care needs. Section 3 outlines the research participants' characteristics and the research methods. Sections 4–7 examine the care needs that the children articulated. The final section considers the implications of children's needs for an expanded concept of listening while also considering social interventions to return the research findings to the interlocutors' daily lives.

2 | Listening

'Listening' is interpersonal interaction involving 'a devotion to co-exploring the Other with and for the Other' through attention not only to the Other's utterances, but also to visual gestures and cues (Carmichael and Mizrahi 2023; Kluger and Mizrahi 2023). Literature on child-centred research and on an ethics of care each offer insights into understanding and operationalising listening.

2.1 | Listening in Child-Centred Research

Child-centred research observes that adults seldom listen to children in ascertaining their needs. For instance, Cockburn (2005) notes that middle-class professional adults tend to dominate in framing children's needs. This is partly because children are defined largely by social constructions of childhood based on ideas about their age-related developmental stage, and a corresponding emphasis on their dependency (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 1999). Meanwhile, adults use these social constructions to justify their overriding authority in defining children's needs (Cockburn 2005; Holland 2010).

Child-centred research is an approach to understanding children which recognises that they are authoritative about their lives (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 1999; Christensen and Prout 2002; Tisdall and Punch 2012). Meanwhile, institutional frameworks have increasingly reflected and promoted more child-centredness. For instance, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises children's rights to a voice and to influence in matters that concern them. General comment No. 12 further asserts children's right to be heard in matters affecting them (Christensen and Prout 2002; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 1999; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009).

However, gaining access to children's authentic voices is not straightforward. One reason is that, as mentioned above, children's voices are seldom unmediated. Rather, children learn from the objectives, discipline and emotional expression of adults what is required of them (Mayall 2000: 248; Punch 2002). Relatedly, power relations likewise prevail in adults' research with children (Punch 2002). Christensen and Prout therefore recommend that researchers adhere to a principle of 'ethical symmetry' which acknowledges 'children's commonality with adults while honour[ing] difference' by ensuring that the research coheres with the 'children's experiences, interests, values and everyday routines' (Christensen and Prout 2002, 480–482).

2.2 | Listening in an Ethics of Care

An ethics of care literature offers a different set of insights into listening, especially with respect to understanding the Other's care needs. An ethics of care is an approach to ethical decision-making and to action that emphasises concrete situations, interdependencies and a caring orientation (Tronto 1993). Importantly, though, an ethics of care is distinct from care. Care is a 'practice aimed at maintaining, continuing or repairing the world' which involves 'taking the concerns or needs of others as the basis for action'. (Tronto 1993, 105). Meanwhile, ideally

researchers, policymakers and practitioners adopt an ethics of care approach to care (Tronto 1993).

Tronto (1993) argues that caregiving and care-receiving are integral to the practice of everyday care. Caregiving is the physical work of meeting needs that unfolds in daily routines and can involve cooking, cleaning, comforting, guiding and teaching. Care-receiving recognises that the objects of care respond to the care received, with Tronto arguing that if caregivers overlook the step of care-receiving in the care process, they risk ignoring the dilemmas that can arise when perceptions of needs are distorted, partial or addressed inadequately (Tronto 1993, 108). Caregivers must therefore 'listen to and include the care-receiver in determining the processes of care' (Tronto 1993, 172). Meanwhile, responsiveness necessitates that 'the caregiver considers the other's position as the other expresses it' (Tronto 1993, 136). Such an emphasis on responsiveness in listening is similarly highlighted in Brooker's (2010) research on early childhood care where she links care to listening by invoking Noddings's (2002) definition of care as 'receptive attention'.

2.3 | Intersectionality and Understanding Children's Care Needs

Even as a caregiver may be attentive and responsive, though, determining care needs is never an individual matter. As Tronto explains, 'caring poses moral problems because of the particular location in which people find themselves in various processes of care' (Tronto 1993, 137). Hence, Hankivsky (2014) suggests that researchers approach individuals' locations through an 'intersectionality inspired ethics of care'. Intersectionality refers to the meanings and consequences of the interlocking social locations in which individuals are situated, such that any one dimension of an individual's identity and agency is produced and amplified through the others (Crenshaw 1991).

Thorne (2004) observes that age is an important axis of intersectionality. Specifically, adults often overlook that children have 'a specific set of interests that stand in relation to existing social actors' such as parents and teachers, which does not 'merely add to the complexity of the field but rather *multiplies* it' (Christensen and Prout 2002, 482). Indeed, the children we met experienced their status as children in articulation with their rurality, family structure, class, gender and grades, with implications for their experiences, perceptions and needs.

Age further structures the locations of caregivers, impacting the children. In China, a preoccupation with educating rural children for urban futures is such that older people are viewed as less competent than younger people (Ye and Pan 2011; Gu 2021). Age concurrently intersects with grandparents' rurality, class and gender in devaluing their care work, contributing to a pathologisation of their grandchildren. For instance, discourses about the 'low quality' of older rural caregivers sit alongside laments about the care deficits of left-behind children (Gu 2021; Guo and Spyros 2024; Huang and Zou 2023). This is even as China's state policies and institutions, discussed in the introduction, create the labour migration regimes that depend on this caregiving (Gu 2022; Murphy 2020; Ye and Pan 2011). An ethics of care approach requires researchers to listen to and value the

participants' situational knowledge while remaining mindful of the intersectional social locations that they occupy (Reich 2021, 576). This ethics of care emphasis on situated attentive listening is well-suited to exploring children's experiences and views about their care needs (Bath 2013; Brooker 2010; Cockburn 2005; Holland 2010; Wihstutz 2016).

3 | Research Methods

3.1 | Setting and Participants

We adopted in-depth qualitative interviews because this method prioritises researchers' responsive listening to their interlocutors (Rubin and Rubin 2012). We conducted interviews with 34 children and 20 grandparents from 19 skipped generation households, all of which had rural hukou designations and lived in a county in Hunan, central China.

Hunan ranks among China's top four provinces for its concentration of left behind children: In 2020, the province accounted for 7.1% of left behind children nationwide (Lyu et al. 2024). In the 2020s, rural-to-urban migrants in Hunan and other central provinces moved inter and intra-provincially in nearly equal measure (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2024). Regardless of their destinations, though, most migrants have continued to be prevented by spatial distance, family-unfriendly working hours, and financial constraints from visiting their children more than once or twice a year. We conducted the fieldwork in a town and several villages in Stone County, Hunan.

We concentrated on households with children aged 9–14 years because these children were old enough to handle our interview questions. Their median age was 11; 30 were aged 9–14 years, while four children aged 7 and 8 joined older siblings in our interviews with them. Conducting interviews with siblings and co-resident cousins generated revealing exchanges. Nevertheless, the presence of other children may have also suppressed some children's expressions of disagreements or negative sentiments. Additionally, six children talked to us without another child present.

We recruited the 19 skipped generation households via three 'entry points'. First, a trader in a town in Stone County, who purchased many grandmothers' honeysuckle, introduced us to eleven households (households 3–13). In six households, the children stayed with their grandparents in rented rooms near their school in the town on weekdays. On the weekends, the grandmothers and children walked 2–3 h back to their villages where they helped grandfathers with farming. However, in three households, the grandparents lived with their grandchildren in the town also on weekends. Meanwhile, in two households, grandmothers and grandchildren stayed during term time in rented accommodation near private schools in the county seat. Second, an acquaintance introduced us to two households in a mountain hamlet (Households 1 and 2). In one household, three children boarded at school in the town on weekdays and lived with their grandmother in the village on the weekends. In another household, a grandfather and grandson stayed in their rented apartment in the county seat during term time. Third, the principal of a village-based school providing both primary and

junior high education facilitated introductions to six households (14–19). In this school, younger children lived at home, though junior high school students boarded, returning home monthly for 4-day weekends. The migrant parents of the children from these aforementioned 19 households worked in construction, renovating, glass wall installation, and air-conditioner repairs, in electronics factories, shops and restaurants, and as delivery drivers.

In nine households, children lived mostly with their grandmothers because grandfathers did not join them in town on weekdays or did itinerant migrant work, while one boy lived with a widowed grandfather. Children in five households had lost a parent through death or incarceration or suffered the departure of the mother from the patrilineal family following divorce, affecting their own and their grandparents' access to material and emotional support. Primary grandparent caregivers ranged in age from 58 to 73. Table 1 describes the demographic and family characteristics of the children we interviewed.

The recruitment of the participants through three sets of convenience networks may have led to the exclusion of certain kinds of households, for example more conflictual households, highly isolated children or children with caregivers less connected to trusted intermediaries. However, the above description of our set of cases also indicates our inclusion of a range of household circumstances. While not representative, this set of cases nevertheless provides a basis for our conceptual extrapolation about children's expression of their care needs (Small 2009).

3.2 | Data Collection

We interviewed the children and grandparents separately in matched sets (Clark 2011; Gu 2021; Murphy 2020). The authors, accompanied by two 'big sister' research assistants, conducted the interviews as a team in February 2025 after the Chinese New Year celebrations. This period was opportune because the children were still off school and the grandparents did not need to do farm tasks. We were assisted in our efforts to build an intimate conversational small-group atmosphere by the freezing temperatures: Often the research team and interviewees piled together into customary bed-like heating boxes with benches around the edges, coals under the floorboards, and a quilt covering us all. Conversely, though, the presence of five adults may also have increased some children's performance of politeness, reducing our access to the children's 'authentic' voices so important for our research objective.

We explained to the adult and child research participants that based on their experiences, we would write academic papers about changing family care practices. Our questions to the children covered their favourite and least favourite aspects of living with their grandparents, daily life during the week and on weekends, feelings about life at home and at school, how their grandparents helped them, how they helped their grandparents, contact with their parents, what the children did when they encountered difficulties or felt sad, when they felt happiest and cared for, and what adults in general did not understand about children's lives and needs. Our questions to grandparents covered their family's migration history, their

caregiving history, family living arrangements, children's education, pleasures and challenges of raising grandchildren, social support and their advice to others taking on custodial grandparenting.

As a methodological innovation, we further explained that we would co-develop a calendar to communicate what the children and adults shared with us about children's care needs as a resource for a wider set of adults and families (Figure 1). Admittedly, asking children what they thought we should include in the planned calendar may have nudged them toward 'helpful', actionable or normatively desirable responses. Nevertheless, even as tailored research elicitation methods are never neutral, they still potentially offer useful ways of learning from both child and adult research participants (Punch 2002; Wang et al. 2024). Meanwhile, we note the recurring responses from the children and their linking of their suggestions to concrete examples from their experiences, giving us confidence that we were hearing their considered views.

During our interviews, we tried to ensure the children's ongoing assent to participation by reading their bodily cues and emotions (Clark 2011; Herron and Skinner 2013). We further followed their lead by exploring topics in more depth where they were responsive or initiated content and touching only lightly on topics where we discerned reticence. We also consciously ended each interview on a happy note, giving each participant a small gift of thanks. With one exception where we wrote notes, we audio-recorded all interviews. We use pseudonyms for the county and research participants to protect confidentiality.

3.3 | Data Analysis

We began coding the transcripts of our interviews with the children by highlighting sections where they talked about what they most liked about their grandparents' care and their suggestions for what they wished their grandparents, migrant parents and teachers would do more or less of. We then analysed the transcripts of the interviews with grandparents to situate the children's accounts relationally.

We used points of divergence between the children and their grandparents to try to better understand the situatedness of the children's experiences, the relational dynamics in their households, and pressures on grandparents. For instance, several grandparents complained to us that their grandchildren spent too much time on their mobile phones instead of studying. However, for the children, the mobile phone served not merely as a tool to 'kill time', but also as a conduit through which they sought emotional connection, interaction, refuge from loneliness and even access to academic support (see also Zhang 2018). As another example, the grandmother in Household 1 told us that she seldom let her grandchildren help with chores because they needed to study. However, her three grandchildren complained to us that on weekends, they had to climb the mountain to collect fuel and do other chores. These examples reveal strong normative expectations that grandparents prioritise their grandchildren's education, as well as pressures on grandparents that reduce their possibilities to interact with their grandchildren or that increase their need for the children's labour.

TABLE 1 | Demographic and family characteristics of the child research participants.

Hhd no.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Wkday residence	Wkend residence	Adult interviewee	Main carer	Main carers' age	Age since child is with grandparent	Parents' location	No. other kids in hhd.
1 ^b		14	F	Town school	Village	Both grandparents	Grandma	60	B	Hunan	
1 ^b		13	F	Town school	Village		Grandma		B		
1 ^b	Mingyao	11	M	Town school	Village		Grandma		B		
2	Weilin	11	M	County	County	Grandpa	Grandpa	60	6	Shanghai	
3	Pingyi	9	M	Town	Village	Grandma	Grandma	60	B	Guizhou	
3	Pinger	8	M	Town	Village		Grandma		B		
4		13	F	Town	Village	Grandma	Grandma	60 ⁺	12	Shenzhen	2
4		7	M	Town	Village		Grandma		6		
5	Yili	11	F	Town	Village	Grandpa	Grandma	60	9		1
6	Baoyi	9	M	County	County	Grandma	Grandma	60	4	Hunan	
6	Baoer	7	M	County	County		Grandma		2		
7	Songsong	11	M	County	County	Grandma	Grandma	59	9	Shenzhen	
8 ^b	Zhenna	14	F	Town School	Town	Grandpa	Grandma	60 ⁺	B		
8 ^b		12	F	Town	Town		Grandma		B		
9 ^a	Liangliang	10	F	Town	Town	Maternal grandma	Maternal Grandma	60 ⁺	9		
10 ^a	Wenwen	13	F	Town	Village	Grandma	Grandma	65	2	Nantong	
10 ^a		12	M	Town	Village		Grandma		1		
10 ^b		11	F	Town	Village	Grandma	Grandma		<1	Jiangsu	
11	Shuangxi	11	M	Town	Town	Grandpa	Grandma	70	10	Hunan	2
12		14	M	Town	Village	Grandma	Grandma	70	5		
12	Qianli	11	F	Town	Village		Grandma		2		
13	Dongwei	13	M	Town	Sometimes village	Grandma	Grandma	65	1	Hunan	1
14	Lanlan	13	F	Village school	Village	Grandpa	Grandma	65	4	Hunan	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Hhd no.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Wkday residence	Wkend residence	Adult interviewee	Main carer	Main carers' age	Age since child is with grandparent	Parents' location	No. other kids in hhd.
14	Honghong	10	F	Village	Village		Maternal Grandma	65	4	Zhejiang	
15	Lulu	13	F	Village school	Village	Grandma	Grandma	58	10	Guangzhou	
	Luping	11	M	Village	Village		Grandma		8		
16		14	F	Village school	Village	Grandma	Grandma	70	3	Guangzhou	
		13	M	Village school	Village		Maternal grandma		4		
17 ^b	Zanzan	13	M	Village school	Village	Grandma	Grandma	73	2	Hunan	
18		13	F	Town school	Village	Grandpa	Grandma	70	3	Guangzhou	
	Yingchi	10	F	Village	Village		Grandma		3		
		8	M	Village	Village		Grandma		2		
19	Chenchen	12	M	Village school	Village	Grandpa	Maternal grandma	59	8	Fujian	
	Anlin	11	M	Village	Village		Maternal grandma		2		

Note: B means 'since Birth'.

^aThe child is impacted by the loss of a parent because of death or incarceration.

^bThe mother has left the family.



FIGURE 1 | Page of the Calendar by Dali Tao and Xiao-ou Zhou. The Chinese characters in the centre read 'active listening'. The entire calendar can be downloaded at: <https://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/article/helping-children-in-rural-china-feel-heard-one-day-at-a-time>.

In coding, we were sensitised by a professional literature demonstrating that children enjoy better psycho-emotional wellbeing when adult care is attentive, warm and responsive (Chen and Liu 2012), and by an ethics of care literature highlighting gaps in the perceptions of caregivers and care-recipients (Tronto 1993),

and care interdependency between adults and children (Cockburn 2005; Gu 2021; Holland 2010; Wihstutz 2016). Simultaneously, we compared cases to inductively identify recurring themes in our data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Like Balsell et al. (2025), we observed that children's articulation of

their needs resonates with findings in the aforementioned professional child development literature, especially regarding the implications of parenting styles for children's emotions and resilience. However, children expressed their needs in their own way deriving from their situated experiences. Chiefly, the children felt the most cared for when their caregivers undertook attentive caregiving, listened to and interacted with them, and understood and encouraged them in their studies irrespective of their school grades.

We acknowledge that we as the researchers have been constrained by our positionality in analysing the data (Punch 2002). We are all middle-class academic researchers and mothers from urban areas, while one of us is not Chinese. Adults with our positionality commonly emphasise interaction in childrearing. At the same time, though, the recurring themes discussed here were readily identifiable in our data, with strong researcher consensus in interpretation.

4 | Adult-Child Reciprocal Caregiving

Caregiving work is a principal means through which children most directly perceive adults' care for them, with receipt of daily caregiving being a salient way in which children learn that they and their needs matter to someone (Smith et al. 2017; Warming 2015, 251). For instance, 11-year-old Yili from Household 5 said: 'Grandmother cares about me a lot, she puts a lot of attention on my daily life.' The children we met especially noted the meals their grandparents cooked for them, with food assuming special significance as an expression of care in Chinese culture (Guo 2025; Murphy 2020; Wang et al. 2024). For instance, 13-year-old Yingchi from household 18 said: 'Grandma cooks for us every morning and gets up early and works late.' Her 10-year-old sister added: 'Grandpa also loves to cook delicious meals for us.' Children further appreciated the tonics such as egg soup that their grandparents made for them when they fell ill. For their part, like other caregivers of lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Dossa and Coe 2017; Raffety 2017; Thomason 2021), the grandparents derived self-worth from such caregiving. For instance, Grandma 16 beamed. 'My granddaughters love to eat the vegetables I've grown. They prefer my food to their mother's.'

Some children's gratitude for their grandparents' practical caregiving gave them emotional reserves that they could draw on in their forbearance of certain unwelcome aspects of their grandparents' childrearing such as 'interfering' or 'nagging'. For instance, 13-year-old Zanzan from household 17, who was especially reliant on his grandmother's caregiving because of his mother's departure following divorce, said:

The good thing is grandma visits me and brings things for me at school. The bad thing is if I haven't returned home by 4 or 5, she comes looking for me with a stick.

Meanwhile, as scholars observe of left behind children elsewhere in China (Gu 2021; Guo 2025), Zanzan's awareness of his grandmother's caregiving work prompted him to reciprocate

with practical work contributions of his own. His grandmother explained:

He cuts the harvest very fast. I say, 'well done and find a good wife,' and he feels very happy saying, 'Grandma, I'll find a good wife to take care of you.' If I tell him I'm tired, he'll say, 'you rest and I'll do it.'

Three grandchildren aged 11–13 years in household 10 likewise reciprocated their grandmother's caregiving with housework contributions. Grandma 10, whose eldest son had died the previous year, explained:

I've looked after them since they were one. Now they already say to me, 'Grandma, we've grown up; we can do chores; you can enjoy happiness now.'

Younger children similarly tried to reciprocate grandparental care. For instance, 9-year-old Baoyi from Household 6 told us: 'I feel happy living with grandma. She takes good care of us. Sometimes I steady her hand as she walks downstairs.'

Children felt especially happy when grandparents recognised their caregiving work contributions. For instance, 11-year-old Luping from Household 15 said:

Not only do we help our grandparents with farming, which makes things easier for them, we also get rewards.

Meanwhile, Grandma 15 had even taken a mobile phone video of her grandson chopping wood for fuel and sent it to his migrant mother and the school principal, both of whom praised him. Likewise, Pingyi and Pinger aged 9 and 8 from Household 3 said that the best thing about living with grandma was that they could help her do jobs and that she often thanked them for this help and gave them money. Grandma 3 further said that she sometimes showed her grandsons *douyin* (China's TikTok) videos about industrious children and told them that they were likewise good.

Children could further discern caregivers' implicit appreciation of their practical help. For instance, 11-year-old Qianli (Household 12), whose grandmother was frail, explained:

I wash the dishes, cook the rice, and wash the vegetables. When my grandma makes a dish, I feel like I contributed to it, which gives me a great sense of accomplishment.

Her 13-year-old brother added:

Grandma doesn't thank us for what we do directly, but we can tell she's grateful. For example, the sphagnum moss in the field was too old to be dragged back, so she asked me to drag it. When I helped her, she talked to me with a big smile.

At the same time, though, expectations of reciprocity were also a way of socialising the children to contribute their labour to the household, with gender being an aspect of this socialisation: For instance, more older boys reported helping with farmwork while girls talked more about doing housework. For some children, this normalised expectation of their labour could blur the lines between their willing contribution and felt obligation, especially when their own emotional needs for rest or play were subordinated to household survival requirements. This caveat notwithstanding, though, most children still talked about feeling happy when their grandparents recognised their work contributions.

5 | Interaction: Listening and Accompaniment

Interaction is a further need that the children articulated, often with reference to the terms ‘active listening’ (qingting 倾听) and ‘accompaniment’ (peiban 陪伴), with children often further using the words ‘play’ and ‘chatting’ to convey what they ideally wanted in the accompaniment. Consistent with the children’s accounts, we discuss listening and accompaniment as distinct but overlapping interactive activities. While listening is often part of accompaniment, accompaniment can involve shared activities with high or low levels of interaction, and it can also involve listening for a purpose other than understanding the other person’s experiences as they express them, such as when playing a game.

5.1 | Active Listening

Children identified being actively listened to as important to them, especially by the adults to whom they felt the closest. Children who had lived with their parents until at least the start of primary school before they had transferred to their grandparents’ care most sought and appreciated their migrant parents’ active listening. For instance, 11-year-old Shuangxi from household 11 who had lived with his parents till age 10 said that whenever anything arose, he most wanted to talk with his parents. He further explained that when he talked with them on video calls, they seldom interrupted. Thereafter, they would tell him about how they made money in Changsha. Shuangxi appreciated these calls ‘because I feel they care about me, and I want to care about them. So, I listen to them too.’ Meanwhile, 13-year-old Lulu from household 15 who had likewise lived with her parents till age ten said that she talked with her parents when she felt troubled, calling them her ‘active listeners’ (qingtingzhe 倾听者).

By contrast, children who had been raised by their grandparents since infancy most wanted their grandparents to be their listeners. For instance, 10-year-old Liangliang said that although her grandma did not understand her when she talked about homework, she still appreciated that her grandma listened to her. She additionally appreciated that her grandma always knew when she was sad because she did not bounce around as usual.

Other children, though, wished that parents or grandparents would be more attentive to them. Ten-year-old Honghong in Household 14 who had lived with her parents till aged 8 explained, ‘I really want to tell my parents things, but they’re busy and hang up in a hurry.’ Eleven-year-old Weilin from Household

2 who had lived with his parents till age six said that video calls with his parents were frequent but so short that they never had the time to listen to him or to ask questions about his life. Meanwhile, his grandfather, although gentle, also did not listen to him and did not even know which foods he liked.

Several children further observed that significant adults did not understand their lives, especially at school. Notably, migrant parents and grandparents did not always know about the children’s difficulties, with approximately one quarter of them having experienced bullying or ostracism at school. For instance, Grandpa 8 told us that his granddaughters were not bullied at school. But when we interviewed 14-year-old Zhenna, she barely drew breath for three hours, telling us about her nightmare at school. For the past year, a group of girls had been subjecting her to relentless name-calling like ‘the sound of crickets’ and had spread rumours about her association with another girl. When Zhenna had tried to tell her grandparents, she found that they were preoccupied with running their shop. Moreover, they admonished her for concerning herself with her classmates’ business instead of concentrating on her lessons. Several other children similarly learned that their grandparents would not sympathise with them, so they stopped telling them about their school difficulties. Yet, other children did not want to worry their grandparents.

A few children also felt that their grandparents did not listen because they did not respect their views. Dongwei, a 13-year-old boy in Household 13, gave the following example:

We were asked to write an essay as homework during the holidays, but our Chinese teacher said that we could be exempted if we met certain requirements. The Chinese teacher said I could be exempted from writing the essay, but then grandma said, ‘you must still write an essay for me.’

She also forced him to write a daily diary. Dongwei’s experiences exemplify Tronto’s observation that listening can be thwarted when caregivers view themselves as the party most capable of discerning the care-recipient’s needs and interests. Such a view links to a strong sense of duty and purpose emanating from the caregiver role (Tronto 1993, 170–172), which in this context was also sometimes influenced by seniors’ Confucian socio-cultural emphasis on adults’ responsibility for and authority over children (Hu et al. 2020).

5.2 | Interactive Accompaniment

Like listening, accompaniment entails a contribution of time to another person, while the interactive accompaniment that the children desired also involves the contribution of attention. Parental absence is likely to have intensified the children’s emphasis on their longing for and appreciation of accompaniment (Murphy 2022; Wang et al. 2024; Zhang 2018). Children mostly mentioned their grandmothers’ accompaniment of them, which reflects a gendering of caregiving roles. For instance, 10-year-old Liangliang said, ‘I feel happiest when grandma and I play together. We watch ancient

dramas on TV.' Thereafter, though, Liangliang complained that her grandfather always looked at his mobile phone while ignoring her:

If I interfere with his phone-watching, he hits me, and we argue. Also, he won't play with me. He'll just look at his phone. I ask him to play with me, but he doesn't want to. Then he keeps looking at his phone, afraid that I'll bother him.

Children in Household 14 gave a similar account of their grandparents' gendered accompaniment of them. Ten-year-old Honghong said, 'I feel happy taking in the autumn harvest with my grandparents.' Lanlan, her 13-year-old cousin, then added, 'And I feel happiest when we help my grandparents cook, then we eat and chat together.' However, Lanlan continued, 'It's easy to chat with grandma, but grandpa likes to look at his mobile phone and doesn't chat so much. He doesn't like to talk with us.' Meanwhile, 11-year-old Weilin from Household 2 said that he wished that his grandfather would play with him instead of going to play mahjong.

When grandparents were unavailable some children turned to other children for companionship, though other children lacked playmates. This was the case for 11-year-old Anlin (Household 19), who lived in a sparsely populated hamlet an hour's walk from his village's administrative centre where no other households had resident children. Moreover, after his brother started boarding at junior high school, Anlin felt extremely lonely. However, his grandparents did not offer compensatory companionship. His grandfather said:

We don't have much time to accompany them because I need to farm and go out into society to do jobs to earn money. I don't have time to play with them.

Even as Anlin acknowledged that his grandmother occasionally played cards with him after he had finished his homework, he wished that his grandparents would play with him more. He most wanted them to play ping pong with him. He added, 'Also, I wish they'd chat with me more, about ordinary everyday things.' Chiefly, children longed for interaction.

6 | Recognising Children's Worth Beyond Grades

A final theme which recurred in the interviews is children's experiences of their grandparents' efforts to *guan* 管 their studies. *Guan* means 'to care for', 'to control' and 'to discipline' (Chao 1994). Chao (1994) argues that in an ideal practice of *guan*, the caregiver continuously supervises the child's studies and behaviour with firmness and warmth. Meanwhile, a child's academic performance indicates the quality of the adults' *guan* (Chao 1994). In recent decades, children's education has become a core focus in rural families because fertility decline has enhanced the children's emotional preciousness to the adults. Meanwhile, urbanisation and marketisation have intensified the salience of education in wider evaluations of individuals' worth in labour markets and society (Gu 2021; Hu 2019; Hu et al. 2020; Murphy 2020).

Hu et al. (2014) observe that education is the most important need of children as perceived by Chinese caregiver-grandparents. Indeed, several grandparents told us that they felt under immense pressure because the parents' migration was ostensibly for the children's education, but they lacked the academic knowledge to tutor their grandchildren and to ensure that the middle generation's sacrifice of migrant labouring was not in vain. For their part, children learned that they needed to repay the adults' efforts to support their education and prospects through diligence in their studies (Gu 2021; Hu 2019; Murphy 2020). However, children's feelings about *guan* also depended on the adults' exact childrearing approach and on their own academic performance. Most children saw their migrant parents' material support for their education as expressing care (Murphy 2022). But some children, especially those with mediocre grades, simultaneously wished that adults would cease pressuring them about study and would instead try to understand their difficulties at school and encourage them in their efforts (Households 1, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 13).

A few children especially struggled emotionally when their caregivers required them to spend much time studying and repeatedly mentioned grades while apparently disregarding their feelings and efforts. Eleven-year-old Songsong from Household 7 was such a child. His grandmother wanted him to fare better in his formal education than his father, a junior high school graduate and air-conditioning repairer, had done. Grandma 7 believed that she encouraged Songsong. However, we learned that this 'encouragement' involved her frequently pointing to the excellent student certificates awarded to Songsong's cousins which plastered a living room wall while telling him that if his cousins could excel then so could he. Grandma 7 had won the high opinion of her daughter-in-law for her strictness. The daughter-in-law had even said that she was more at ease about her son's education under the *guan* of Grandma 7 than if she herself was raising him. Songsong was one of three children who wept during our interview because of grandparents' persistent control alongside feelings of helplessness. Songsong felt that his low grades meant that he had 'no strengths'.

Three children aged 11–13 years in Household 1 likewise wished that their grandmother would cease pressuring them about grades. Grandma 1 had even told her grandchildren that they needed to be especially determined to excel academically because their mother, who had left and remarried several years ago, did not want them. These siblings resembled several other children in wanting adults to prioritise listening to them talk about the events in their daily lives and understanding their feelings rather than forever emphasising grades. Children in four households (1, 5, 11 and 17) also expressed a desire for their grandparents and migrant parents to be gentler (温柔) when discussing their studies or behaviour.

In contrast, though, some children appreciated their grandparents' gentleness both generally (Households 2, 18 and 19) and with respect to understanding and encouraging them when they experienced study setbacks (Households 11, 12, 15 and 19). Children's emphasis on gentleness within the family may partly stem from the prevalence of corporal punishment and cursing by teachers and therefore a desire for respite from severe treatment: over a third of the children reported harsh treatment at

school for minor transgressions such as not completing homework or forgetting textbooks, with such severity likely stemming from assumptions about the extra discipline necessary to guan rural and left behind children.

However, one child, 13-year-old Zanzan from Household 17 told us that his study pressure was not at all heavy. When we asked why, he said, ‘because I’m the “study dregs”’ 学渣. Zanzan dealt with his study dregs status by reassuring his grandmother, who explained:

I’m so old I can’t do a good job of raising him. Sometimes I say to him, ‘others study well because they have a mother to teach them, but you don’t.’ He said, ‘Don’t worry, I have strength, and I’ll find a job and work hard.’ He wants to be a soldier. I said, ‘But if you haven’t studied how will you be a soldier?’ He said, ‘I’m tall and can hold a gun. There’ll be something I can do.’

Hence, his poor grades notwithstanding, Zanzan had a sense of purpose. Meanwhile, his grandmother recognised his good nature and industriousness in manual work.

Regardless of parents and grandparents’ approach to the children’s study, though, children still discerned that others measured their worth by their grades. For instance, tellingly, 10-year-old Liangliang (Household 9) singled out a teacher who she especially liked because, ‘regardless of whether classmates’ grades are good or not, he sits us according to our height.’ Our point is not that grandparents’ efforts to discipline the children in their studies were intrinsically harmful. Rather, the societal emphasis on grades was such that adults’ understanding and reassurance of the children that they and their efforts mattered beyond grades could assume extra importance to them, especially when their parents had migrated.

7 | Discussion and Conclusion

Attention to children’s needs acknowledges ‘their physical, material and emotional dependencies’, which can be overlooked in some sociological research that emphasises children’s autonomy and agency (Prout 2005; Tisdall and Punch 2012; Wihstutz 2016, 61). However, globally middle-class professional adults tend to dominate in defining children’s needs (Cockburn 2005). In China, such professionals typically frame the care needs of ‘left behind children’ as stemming from their families’ configurations and the associated disruptions to parent–child attachment. This framing leads to a top-down policy emphasis on educating and ‘disciplin[ing] rural migrant families according to a family ideology based on the experience of urban middle-class families’ that emphasises parent–child bonds (Gu 2022, 514). Meanwhile, the structural factors underpinning these families’ disadvantages remain unrecognised and unaddressed (Gu 2022; Guo and Spyros 2024).

Research on children’s views about their needs is scarce, with this article helping to address the gap. However, can privileged academics explore the needs of left behind children in

marginalised contexts without unintentionally discursively reinforcing structural inequalities or perpetuating stereotypes (Gu 2022; Guo and Spyrou 2024; Reich 2021)? In navigating this minefield, we recognise that we as adults and researchers do not ‘give voice’ to children or anyone else (Andrews 2009, 40–44). Rather, our participants are the givers. Indeed, many children liked that they were contributing to a calendar, which could help adults—parents, grandparents, teachers and us as researchers—better understand their ideas.

Consistent with child-centred literature, our research finds that listening to children’s voices yields distinctive perspectives. For instance, contrary to discourses in China claiming that rural custodial grandparents just care about the grandchildren’s food and warmth (Gu 2022), we echo others (e.g., Guo 2025; Wang et al. 2024) in finding that grandparents’ daily care actions, such as bringing bottles of hot water to the children for warming their hands, made them feel cared for. Meanwhile, in reciprocating their grandparents’ caregiving, children actively nurtured the daily interdependencies through which they could be acknowledged (Warming 2015). Moreover, we find that the children also wanted their caregivers to regularly listen to and interact with them.

We further find that children wanted their grandparents to support them in their studies by trying to understand their hardships and by recognising their efforts even when their grades were low. Children’s emphasis on interaction, recognition and encouragement with respect to both life in general and to their studies is salutary when juxtaposed with many grandparents’ overriding anxieties about their grandchildren’s grades and prospects, and about their own inadequacies as study supervisors because of their lack of education and resources (Hu et al. 2014). This is not to say that grandparents’ efforts to discipline their grandchildren’s studies or their monitoring of grades were always necessarily harmful. Rather, the children’s accounts reveal that what they most needed from their grandparents was listening, interaction, and encouragement.

The findings in this research coalesce around an expanded concept of listening as an interpersonal activity that incorporates hearing, seeing, understanding, valuing and responsiveness (Carmichael and Mizrahi 2023). In this research, responsive listening can be considered a central mechanism through which care, recognition and companionship become visible to the children. The significance of this finding can be expounded with reference to the psychological and social work concept of ‘mattering’. Mattering involves a ‘person realis[ing] that they are a necessary part of things within the setting and within their lives’ (Charles and Alexander 2014, 29). Listening underpins mattering because children need the attention, time, and listening of others to feel that they matter (Charles and Alexander 2014).

Pertinently, though, ‘mattering’ goes beyond the themes of listening, relationships and responsiveness by explicitly spotlighting children’s need to feel that they are actively seen and heard; that they are both valued and add value (Prilleltensky 2020); and that their existence makes a difference to others. Mattering also helps understand the analytical and practical value of our findings because it captures not only interaction but also outcome (Flett 2022): children reported feeling happy when caregivers’ interactions let

them feel consequential. As a protective resource and a modifiable resource that can be generated through investments of receptive attention in daily life (Flett 2022), mattering can offer an alternative to a dominant policy narrative concern with parent–child attachment disruption in non-normative families (Smith et al. 2017). In this regard, the calendar is a potentially useful tool in conveying to adults what children said that they needed.

Figure 1 above depicts a page of the calendar dedicated to one of the care actions children wished for, ‘active listening’. The page includes eight boxes for grandparents and grandchildren to tick if the latter agrees that a designated activity has occurred during the month. The calendar also includes an interactive game. The calendar thereby aims to leverage the attentiveness and responsiveness already integral to the caregivers’ important work (Bath 2013; Noddings 2002; Tronto 1993), while serving as a conduit for returning the interlocutors’ insights to their daily lives (Ku 2022). The ‘intervention’ is extremely limited. But it is designed to be low-cost and self-sustaining. Preliminary feedback on the calendar draft is positive.¹ We hope that like Balsell and colleagues (2025), this research enriches discussion about social interventions for understanding and responding to children’s needs as they articulate them.

This research has several limitations. First, the cases on which this research is based were drawn through convenience sampling within a specific region in rural China, such that although the findings resonate with wider studies, they will not necessarily travel easily to other contexts. Second, even as our core research objective is to understand children’s needs by listening to their situated voices, aspects of our research, notably conducting small group interviews, could have compromised our access to the children’s ‘authentic’ voices. Third, the use of the calendar as an elicitation tool and to return research findings to the participants is exploratory. Nevertheless, the content emphasises the listening and interaction that the children so valued. Fourth, an intervention to encourage listening in the microcosm of daily life is limited and can do little to address the structural inequalities that erode caregivers’ possibilities to provide receptive attention to children. Nevertheless, listening acknowledges that those who are less powerful matter (Charles and Alexander 2014).

Acknowledgements

We thank the two wonderful project artists, Dali Tao and Xiaou Zhou, who designed and produced the calendar. We are immensely grateful to our research assistants, Yan Xiang and Yingyang Yuan, from Central South University Department of Sociology. We are grateful to Francesca Tucci and Juliet Scott-Barrett for their support and guidance of this project, and for their great suggestions on the calendar. Moreover, we are indebted to our research participants for their generosity with their time and sharing their experiences and suggestions with us. We gratefully acknowledge a University of Oxford Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) SDG Impact Acceleration grant awarded to the authors, Grant Reference ES/X004511/1, which made this research possible.

Funding

We are grateful to a University of Oxford Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) SDG impact acceleration grant which was

awarded to the three authors to enable this research, Grant Reference ES/X004511/1.

Ethics Statement

This project received approval from the University of Oxford Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee for research involving children, R991637-30012025.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All relevant data, including illustrative quotes and thematic analysis summaries, are included in the published article. The data are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality.

Endnotes

¹In November 2025, Li Mi surveyed 30 grandparents (including 9 original interviewees) and 18 children aged 8–14 about the calendar: All grandparents would use it often (27) or occasionally (3), and felt the scenarios strongly resembled (22) or somewhat resembled (7) their lives. Of the children, 10 strongly liked, 7 quite liked, and 1 disliked it; on whether they would use it with grandparents, 8 said often, 8 said occasionally, 2 said never.

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