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Childhood emotional incest scale: assessing its psychometric properties in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Childhood Emotional Incest Scale (CEIS), developed by Çimşir and Akdoğan[1], is a 12-item scale that was designed to measure the construct of emotional incest. The current research aimed to investigate this matter, raising awareness and adapting the newly developed scale to the Bangladeshi culture. One hundred eighty-six participants were chosen, of which 123 were females and 63 males, and 181 responses were later used for analysis after excluding outliers. The participants were adults, ranging in age from 19 to 36 years old. Inter-item correlation, validity, reliability, and factor analysis were computed, revealing that the scale exhibited good inter-item and inter-factor validity, as well as a high reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.891). Three factors were extracted following the factor analysis: Unsatisfactory Childhood, Surrogate Spouse, and Parentification. Overall, the scale was proven to be an excellent measure for the construct and can be used for further study in this area.

Introduction

The parent-child relationship is a child's most fundamental and influential bond. It is critical to the child's emotional, social, and psychological development. This relationship is significant because it shapes the child's understanding of the world, their relationships with others, and their ability to navigate challenges. Positive interactions with parents help children develop confidence, resilience, and a secure attachment style, which benefits their social interactions and mental health[2,3]. Conversely, when the parent-child relationship is dysfunctional—such as in cases of neglect, abuse, or enmeshment—it can lead to long-term emotional and psychological struggles, including difficulties with self-esteem, forming boundaries, and managing emotions[4,5]

Most of the research was conducted on parenting styles and parent-child attachment. However, psychologists have recently emphasised an old but different perspective on parent-child relationships, and it is called emotional incest. Emotional incest can be defined as a dynamic between parent and child where a parent seeks to fulfill their relational,

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spousal, and emotional needs through the relationship with their child[6]. This often arises when the parent is unwilling or unable to form a proper relationship with a spouse, leading them to project their emotional needs onto the child. It is a type of dysfunctional relationship between parents and children where a parent experiences difficulty in establishing and maintaining healthy emotional boundaries with the child and the spouse. This concept is also known by other terms such as “parent-child enmeshment”, “parent-child codependent relationships”, and “parent-child boundary dissolution”[7-11].

Scholars argue that the term "incest" is appropriate in this context, as the psychological effects of emotional incest can be just as long-lasting and harmful as those of sexual incest, disrupting the child’s psychosocial development. It’s important to distinguish that this form of parenting should not be confused with the child feeling "special" or "privileged" in the parent's eyes[12]. Covert (emotional) incest often involves the parents’ expectation of loyalty from the child, who is made to feel responsible for the parents’ emotional needs, even in the absence of sexual contact[6].

A dysfunctional parenting style can be unconsciously transferred from one generation to another, creating a cycle of[13]. Researcher[11] describes this process as "account due" or "debit," where parents attempt to compensate their unmet childhood emotional needs by exhibiting emotionally incestuous behaviours. This pattern can manifest in conscious and unconscious attitudes and behaviours that deprive the child of specific emotional needs.

Culture and Emotional Incest

Cultural and socioeconomic factors may also influence emotional incest by shaping the way different families and cultures perceive and conceptualise it[13-15]. In some families and cultures, emotionally incestuous parenting may be viewed as usual or even desirable[11,13,16]. For instance, a study[13] found that in some cultures, e.g., in Muslim, Jewish, and Latino cultures, a higher degree of parent-child involvement is endorsed, which increases the probability of emotional incest[17,18].

In Bangladeshi culture, parent-child relationships are deeply rooted in respect, obedience, and strong family bonds. There is a chance that, due to our cultural values, emotional incest is practised between parents and children.

Consequences of Emotional Incest

Emotional incest can have lasting adverse effects on a child's psychosocial development because meeting a parent's needs often requires the child to neglect their own, such as independence and separation[6,8,9,11,12]. Children in such relationships may miss out on peer interactions to prioritize their parents, which can lead to difficulties forming healthy peer relationships and increase the risk of isolation and interpersonal issues later in life[12,19]. They may also develop perfectionism or a compulsive drive for success as a compensatory mechanism for social deficits[12]. Additionally, being the focus of their parents’ attention

may foster narcissistic traits and a false sense of superiority, driving extreme efforts to outperform peers professionally[12,20]. Other potential consequences are developmental delays, higher risk of mental health issues (e.g., depression, & anxiety), poor self-esteem, suicidal behaviour, personality, identity, and psychosomatic disorder[7,8,13,21].

Emotional Incest and Social Relationships

The adverse effects of emotional incest often emerge in adult romantic or marital relationships, particularly through difficulties with intimacy and commitment[10]. Some survivors may become emotionally distant and avoid commitment[6], while others may form premature attachments to partners, followed by inconsistency and removal due to fear of emotional closeness[12]. A qualitative study of couples' therapists highlights issues such as lower psychological and physical intimacy, infidelity, substance abuse, and as common outcomes of emotional incest[13]. Some experts[6] suggest that emotional incest can lead to sexual addiction and attachment disorders, as children may perceive their natural erotic feelings toward others as disloyal, fostering a sexuality marked by overstimulation, rage, guilt, ambivalence, and shame.

As adults, individuals who experience emotional incest may struggle with intimacy and establishing healthy boundaries. The lack of appropriate parental boundaries during childhood can result in difficulties in distinguishing between supportive and exploitative relationships[21]. This confusion may lead to challenges in forming close relationships, as they might either become overly dependent on others or avoid intimacy altogether to protect themselves from potential emotional exploitation[22].

Furthermore, the internalized belief that their worth is tied to meeting others' emotional needs can lead these individuals to enter codependent relationships, where they continue to prioritize others' needs at the expense of their well-being[23]. This pattern perpetuates a cycle of unhealthy relational dynamics, making it challenging to establish mutual and balanced intimate relationships.

Development of the CEIS scale

Although literature highlights the adverse effects of emotional incest, research remains conceptual mainly due to the absence of a specific scale to measure it. Emotional incest shares similarities with constructs like parentification, adultification, and neglect, suggesting that some aspects might be captured using existing scales. However, none directly address emotional incest, which is unique to the parent-child emotional dynamic. This led to the emergence of a 12-item psychometrically sound scale to assess emotional incest in adolescents and adults retrospectively, providing a foundation for future studies to deepen understanding of this complex phenomenon[1]. The analysis of the Childhood Emotional Incest Scale (CEIS) involved developing items based on theory and expert input, followed by pilot testing for clarity and refinement. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

identified the underlying structure, and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) validated it using fit indices. The scale has two subscales. They are a Surrogate spouse and have an Unsatisfactory childhood. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) and test-retest correlation value were calculated to measure reliability, while validity testing included convergent, discriminant, and criterion validity. The final scale, scored on a Likert scale, demonstrated strong psychometric properties, enabling retrospective assessment of emotional incest in adolescents and adults.

Rationale of the study

Since emotional incest can directly or indirectly create different problems, such as mental health issues, infidelity, sexual intimacy problems, substance abuse, poor locus of control, and self-confidence[13], adapting the CEIS to Bangla for use in Bangladesh is essential for several reasons. Emotional incest can manifest differently across cultures. In Bangladesh, where family dynamics are deeply rooted in traditional values, the CEIS must reflect these unique structures. Research[6] shows how emotional enmeshment may be overlooked in societies with strong family bonds. Studies[7] highlight how family dysfunction, including emotional incest, leads to long-term psychological issues. In Bangladesh, where mental health discussions are often stigmatised, recognising these patterns is crucial. A Bangla version of the CEIS would make it accessible to a larger population, improving accuracy in research and clinical settings. Studies[24] emphasise that tools adapted to the local language and culture lead to better outcomes. It would enable necessary research on the prevalence and effects of emotional incest, as well as identify and address emotional incest, improving treatment outcomes. The current study aimed to adapt the original scale according to Bangladeshi culture.

Materials and Methods

Sample

A total of 186 consenting adults (123 females and 63 males), mostly university students, participated in the study. Five responses were deemed outliers when the primary analysis was completed (their item total score fell below-3 SD), so their responses were omitted from the primary analysis. The total number of participants was 181, 59 males and 122 females. Participants' ages ranged between 19 and 36, with a mean age of 23.04 (SD = 2.48). Only participants who spent at least 16 years with their parents (father and mother) were selected for this study. Because only they could relate to the questions in the CEIS.

Measures

Childhood Emotional Incest Scale (CEIS)

The CEIS[1] is a new scale made to measure the level of dysfunctional parent-child relationships. The original scale consists of 12 items, each with a five-point rating. Ranging from "never" to "always" on a continuum. The scale has two subscales. They are-

1. Surrogate spouse (includes items 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10)
2. Unsatisfactory childhood (includes items 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12)

The test–retest reliability of the CEIS was calculated over a 3-week interval, and it was found to be 0.84 for the subscale "Surrogate Spouse", 0.95 for the subscale "Unsatisfactory Childhood", and 0.92 for the total scale score. The significant correlation between CEIS and childhood emotional neglect (r = .58) and between CEIS and emotional abuse (r = .52) indicated good convergent validity. It also indicated good divergent validity by exhibiting a negative relationship with early memories of warmth and safeness (r = 0.54).

Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS)

To measure the discriminant validity of the Bangla-translated version of the CEIS, the Bangla version of the MSIS was employed. The original MSIS is a 17-item scale measuring intimacy in various relationships, including those with friends, family, and partners [25]. The Bangla version of the MSIS consisted of 14 items, divided into two dimensions: "frequency of intimate contact" and "intensity of intimate relationships"[26]. This scale measures responses on a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very rarely) to 10 (almost always). Higher scores in this scale indicate greater intimacy. The Bangla version of the MSIS and its factors demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α). For the total score of MSIS, it was 0.83, for the dimension 'Frequency' it was 0.75, and for the dimension 'Intensity' it was 0.79. It also showed good discriminant validity. Therefore, the Bangla version of the MSIS is valid and reliable, making it suitable for future research on interpersonal relationships among the people of Bangladesh[26].

Procedures

Bangla Translation of the CEIS

In adaptation studies, forward and back translation are the two predominant methodologies for translating scales. These methodologies operate as independent processes to ensure the consistency and fidelity of meaning across the source and target languages of the items in question. Although these methods are crucial, the necessity of back translation is not universally acknowledged.

The original 12-item CEIS scale was adapted through forward translation for the present study. Initially, the items were translated from the source language into Bangla.

Subsequently, this translation was reviewed by a panel of three judges, each possessing expertise in Bangla, English, and Psychology, respectively. The judges evaluated the translations for semantic appropriateness and cultural relevance. Based on their collective expertise, they proposed modifications, which were then integrated into the final version of the scale. The decision to forgo back translation was informed by the involvement of bilingual experts who could discern where direct translations might misalign with cultural nuances or idiomatic expressions, thus rendering back translation redundant in this context. This approach is not without precedent; for instance, in a similar study[27], back translation was also omitted. This reflects a broader methodological acceptance that, under certain conditions, forward translation alone, when meticulously reviewed by culturally and linguistically competent experts, can suffice to adapt psychometric instruments.

Data acquisition

The test was administered using a Google form. Each participant was briefed on the general study purposes and was requested to participate voluntarily. Participants' confidentiality was assured, and the data would only be used for research purposes. Next, they proceeded to the questions, which first included a socio-demographic information section, a Bangla-translated version of the Childhood Emotional Incest Scale, and the Bangla-adapted version of the Miller Social Inventory Scale (MSIS).

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 30) was used to analyse the data. Pearson's Correlation coefficient was calculated to find the relationship between emotional incest and social intimacy. Factor analysis was conducted. Varying recommendations from researchers were provided to determine the adequate sample size for factor analysis, ranging from 100[28,29] to 250 participants[30]. Some studies even conducted factor analysis with fewer than 100 participants[31]. Another standard guideline suggests a subjects-to-variables (SV) ratio, depending on the number of scale items, ranging from 2:1 to 10:1[28,32-36]. In this study, the number of participants exceeded the number of items (12) on the CEIS scale by a factor of 10, meeting the required sample size for factor analysis. At first, the response distributions for all CEIS items were examined. The internal consistency is then assessed through inter-item and item-total correlations. Next, we proceeded with exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify the underlying structure[31,37-41]. The discriminant validity was examined by correlating the CEIS and CEIS subtests with the MSIS. Convergent validity was ensured by calculating the inter-factor correlation, and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated to ensure reliability.

Results and Discussion

Item analysis

The correlation analysis examines the relationships between twelve items of the Childhood Emotional Incest Scale and the total score for all the items. All the correlations between the individual items (Items 1 to 12) and total score are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, with Pearson correlation coefficients ranging from 0.164 to 0.816. This indicates that each item is positively correlated with the overall total score.

Table 1. Correlation matrix for CEIS

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	CEIS total
1	1												
2	.337**	1											
3	.175*	.477**	1										
4	.490**	.461**	.349**	1									
5	.242**	.626**	.563**	.493**	1								
6	.334**	.348**	.529**	.474**	.349**	1							
7	.353**	.422**	.496**	.451**	.443**	.574**	1						
8	.281**	.262**	.409**	.343**	.287**	.518**	.621**	1					
9	.164*	.465**	.293**	.258**	.464**	.177*	.170*	.164*	1				
10	.269**	.558**	.288**	.358**	.487**	.245**	.231**	.048	.457**	1			
11	.548**	.512**	.282**	.701**	.397**	.442**	.512**	.439**	.199**	.381**	1		
12	.475**	.555**	.420**	.615**	.542**	.524**	.686**	.487**	.260**	.403**	.635**	1	
CEIS total	.575**	.730**	.654**	.747**	.720**	.693**	.743**	.613**	.493**	.564**	.749**	.816**	1

*Note. N = 181; inter-item correlation average = .41; item-total correlation average = 0.68. * p≤.05, ** p≤.001*

The results suggest that the items in the CEIS are highly correlated with each other and the overall total score, reinforcing the scale's reliability and internal consistency. The relationships between individual items vary in strength, with some showing stronger associations than others, but all demonstrate significant positive correlations with the overall construct.

Factor analysis

The results from the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity suggest that the data are suitable for running factor analysis. The value of the KMO statistic in this case was 0.883, which[42], suggests a strong correlation among the variables, meaning the data is appropriate for extracting factors. Bartlett's test produced a $\chi 2$ value of 1075.339, with 66 degrees of freedom and a significance level <0.001. This result indicates that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix, meaning significant correlations exist between the variables. According to studies[43], rejecting the null hypothesis (that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix) suggests that the variables are sufficiently intercorrelated to warrant factor analysis.

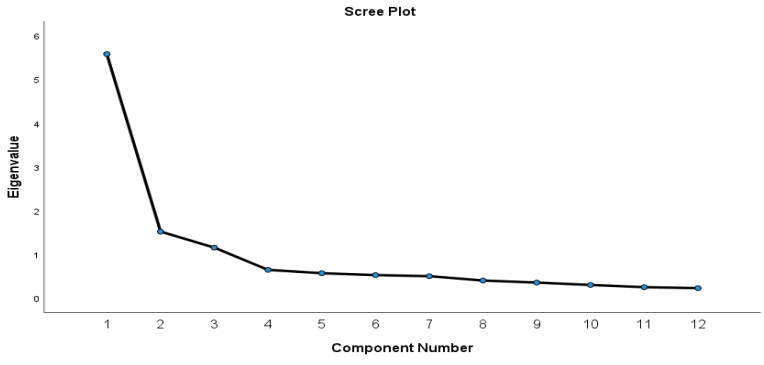

Fig. 1. The scree plot generated in EFA

A scree plot was generated to determine the optimal number of components to retain in the EFA. The plot exhibited an apparent "elbow" between the second and third components, suggesting that these two components account for a substantial portion of the variance in the data. This observation aligns with the findings[30] that proposed the "eigenvalue one criterion" for selecting components. This criterion suggests retaining components with eigenvalues greater than one, as they explain more variance than a single original variable. In this case, the first three components meet this criterion, further supporting their retention in the analysis.

Table 2. Rotated factor matrix for CEIS

Items	CEIS items in brief	Factor loadings		
		F1	F2	F3
1	Had to act maturely in problematic situations			.797
2	Had to advice parents in relationship matters		.719	
3	Had to stand for one parent to avoid conflict	.700	.470	
4	Had to overbear responsibilities at a young age			.711
5	Had to defend one parent in situations		.727	
6	Had an unsatisfactory childhood	.723		
7	Childhood needs were overlooked due to parental problems	.767		
8	Envied seeing friends' relationship with parents	.793		
9	Felt compelled to comfort one or both parent		.764	
10	Parents shared their problems with them instead of other adults		.754	
11	Had to think about household responsibilities at a young age			.800
12	Had to mature earlier due to parental problems	.520		.589
Eigen Value		5.578	1.519	1.151
Variance explained		46.479	12.656	9.594
Cronbach's (standardized) α		.815	.803	.845

***Note. N = 181 Factor loadings <.40 were suppressed.*
Varimax with Kaiser normalization rotation method was used.
Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

The table presents the results of an EFA, detailing the variance explained by each component. Initially, Factor 1 accounts for the largest proportion of variance, with an eigenvalue of 5.578, which represents 46.479% of the total variance. Factor 2 follows, explaining 12.656% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 1.519, while Factor 3 accounts for 9.594% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 1.151. The remaining components contribute progressively less variance, each explaining less than 5%.

The variance explained by the components remains consistent, with the extraction sums of squared loadings at 22.009%. The cumulative variance explained by the first three components after rotation remains 68.730%, though the variance is more evenly distributed across these components.

The first three components account for a significant portion of the total variance (68.730%). While factor 1 contributes the largest proportion before and after rotation, the rotation process redistributes the variance more evenly across factors 2 and 3. Despite these adjustments, the variance explained remains unchanged, highlighting the consistent explanatory power of the first three components.

The Rotated Component Matrix from the EFA, using Varimax rotation, reveals the underlying structure of the data. Three factors were identified, each associated with different items from the CEIS scale. Factor 1 includes items 3, 6, 7, and 8, where there was an overlap with item No. 3 as it had factor loading on both Factor 1 and 2, but since Factor 1 had higher loadings, item 3 was ultimately included in Factor 1. Factor 2 included items 2, 5, 9 and 10. Lastly, Factor 3 included items 1, 4, 11, and 12, where item 12 again overlapped with Factor 1 but had higher loadings for Factor 3; therefore, it was ultimately included.

The first factor was termed "Unsatisfactory Childhood," as the statements of the items included in this factor have a recurring theme of not being able to experience a proper childhood due to parental conflict. The second factor, titled Surrogate Spouse, contains the same items as those included in the original CEIS scale, reflecting the common theme of children having to fulfill specific roles of a spouse or an adult in many situations. The third newly added factor for this adaptation was termed as Parentification, based on an expert's idea. Parentification refers to a family dynamic in which a child takes on roles and responsibilities typically reserved for a parent or caregiver. This phenomenon often occurs when parents are unable or unwilling to fulfill their parental duties, leading the child to assume emotional or practical caregiving roles[44,45].

There were two factors in the initial CEIS [1]: Surrogate Spouse (items 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10) and Unsatisfactory Childhood (items 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12). However, in this study, the factor loadings and the scree plot result provided us with three factors. After revising the items included in Factors 1, 2, and 3, specific patterns in each factor were used to relabel them and introduce the new third factor. A notable change was the swapping of an item between Factor 1 and 2 of the original scale and this scale, where item 3, initially an item of Surrogate

Spouse, was included as an item in Unsatisfactory Childhood due to cultural and translation changes. So, Factor 1 included items 3, 6, 7, and 8. Factor 2, comprising items 2, 5, 9, and 10, contained the same combination of items as the original CEIS. The significant change was the introduction of the third factor, which included a combination of items from both factors of the prior scale, namely items 1, 4, 11, and 12. This factor had a recurring theme of early maturation, hence it was termed "Parentification." The reasoning behind this could be explained by the localization factor of the scale translation, where some phrases and words were altered slightly, or direct translation was avoided to better fit the context, thereby creating a new pattern or theme that may have influenced the responses accordingly.

The analysis employed the Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization, which is designed to produce factors that are as interpretable as possible by maximising the variance of squared loadings across components. The rotation converged in 5 iterations, indicating that the algorithm reached a stable solution quickly. The Varimax rotation effectively clarified the structure, making it easier to interpret the relationships between the variables and the underlying factors.

Validity

Convergent Validity

The correlation matrix reveals significant and positive associations among all three CEIS factors (Unsatisfactory Childhood, Surrogate Spouse, and Parentification) and the total EI score. Specifically, Unsatisfactory Childhood exhibited a strong positive correlation with Surrogate Spouse ($r = .465$, $p < .001$) and Parentification ($r = .619$, $p < .001$). Surrogate Spouse and Parentification also demonstrated a significant positive correlation ($r = .552$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, strong positive correlations were found between each CEIS factor and the total CEIS score, indicating that each factor makes a significant contribution to the overall construct measure. These findings collectively support the convergent validity of the CEIS measures.

Table 3. Correlation matrix for the 12-item Bangla CEIS and the three CEIS factors

CEIS Factors/ CEIS	F1	F2	F3	CEIS total
F1: Unsatisfactory Childhood	1			
F2: Surrogate Spouse	.465**	1		
F3: Parentification	.619**	.552**	1	
CEIS total	.842**	.787**	.874**	1

*Note: N = 181. ** p≤.01 (two-tailed)*

Table 4. Correlation between the total scores of the Bangla version of CEIS and MSIS

Scale	CEIS	MSIS
Childhood Emotional Incest Scale	1	-.154*
Miller Social Intimacy Scale	-.154*	1

*Note; N = 181. ** p≤.05 level (two-tailed)*

Discriminant validity

The correlation analysis explores the relationships between CEIS and MSIS. Pearson correlation coefficient between CEIS and MSIS is -0.154, statistically significant at 0.05 (p = 0.039). This indicates a weak negative relationship, meaning that as CEIS increases, MSIS tends to decrease, although the strength of this relationship is modest.

Reliability

The 12-item CEIS scale demonstrated an excellent Cronbach's alpha value of 0.891, indicating high internal consistency. A Cronbach's alpha value above 0.8 is considered good, while values above 0.9 indicate excellent reliability[35]. The original CEIS scale also demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.91 for the total scale. The translated study's result suggests that the items are highly correlated and effectively measure the underlying construct with minimal measurement error. The scale demonstrates strong reliability, making it suitable for research or practical applications without significant concerns about consistency.

An interesting observation to be made was that among the participants who answered yes to the presence psychological problems, there was a significant number of the participants reported suffering from anxiety and depression(among 67 participants who answered yes, depression and anxiety were reported separately or together 41 times) this supports the original report on emotional incest that claimed emotional incest survivors may experience mental health issues, infidelity, sexual intimacy problems, substance abuse, poor locus of control, and self-confidence[8,9,13,21]. Further study on the correlation between these variables can be conducted using the Bangla version of the anxiety scales and other problem scales.

There has been less research on dysfunctional parent-child relationships in Bangladesh, and overall, less empirical evidence on the construct of emotional incest. The initial study conducted in Turkey explained that emotional incest may be seen as more typical in Turkish culture due to the family structure, which emphasises strong material and emotional interdependence. This dynamic is evident in child-rearing practices, where there is a higher level of parental control. Family structure in Bangladeshi culture is similar, where parents exert a high level of control even after children become adults. Children in Bengali households tend to bear some emotional responsibilities earlier than children in Western households. Emotional and non-sexual relationship boundaries, in the case of spousal and parent-child dynamics, tend to overlap, and parents have the tendency to rely on children

or sometimes use them as the sole reason not to get divorced, which could contribute to children acting as their surrogate spouse. Although single-parent families are rare in Bangladesh at present, many children often have to assume household responsibilities because one of their parents, although still living under the same roof, is absent from the family. This results in early maturation and an unsatisfactory childhood for the children. Since it was culturally not uncommon to practice this relationship style in many households, most respondents, now in their adult years, may not have been aware of these matters from their childhood. With further research on emotional incest using this adapted Bangla scale, researchers and mental health professionals could help spread awareness about this dysfunctional parent-child relationship.

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