

The Construction of A Social Support System for Early Childhood Care and Education for Children Aged 0–3 Under the Background of Internet+ in Gansu Province

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Abstract:

Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory states that the quality of early childhood care and education for children aged 0-3 years is deeply influenced by the interaction of family, community and social multilevel environments. In order to improve the quality of early childhood care and education for children aged 0-3 years in Gansu Province, this study systematically analysed the current situation and needs of social support for parents using a questionnaire. The results showed that the overall social support system for early childhood care and education in Gansu Province is weak: family support is insufficient in terms of economic conditions, parenting experience, and environmental resources; community and institutional guidance services are limited in coverage and content; and Internet platforms provide convenient information, but the quality is uneven and lacks effective supervision. At the same time, parents generally showed a high demand for emotional, informational, and instrumental support, especially the most urgent instrumental support. Based on this, the study proposes strategies such as strengthening the internal resources of families, improving the support of communities and professional organisations, regulating the development of "Internet+" platforms, and promoting the synergy and cooperation of multiple actors, with the aim of providing a theoretical basis and a practical path to improve the regional social support system and enhance the quality of early childhood care and education, so as to promote children's healthy growth and all-round development.

Keywords:

Early Childhood Care and Education(ECCE), Social Support, Internet+, Emotional Support, Informational Support

1. Introduction

The concept of "social support" was first proposed in the 1970s by Cassel and Cobb, who regarded it as an important moderator of stress and individual physical and mental health, and emphasized the use of social support to mitigate the negative

effects of stress [1]. Drawing on the trends and reform experiences of early childhood care and education (ECCE) both domestically and internationally, it is evident that the ECCE is contingent not only on family support but also on the development of a robust social support system [4]. This has emerged as a crucial approach to enhancing the quality of ECCE. Social support for ECCE refers to the provision of rich, convenient, and effective emotional, informational, and instrumental support for educators from the state, society, enterprises, communities, and other systems based on the development of children and the needs of educators [9]. Emotional support focuses on emotional and psychological understanding and companionship, enabling educators to feel respected, cared for, and supported; informational support provides methods, suggestions, and information to help educators analyze and solve parenting problems; and instrumental support is reflected in the level of practical material assistance and services [12]. Under the background of "Internet+", the channels and methods of information exchange among parents are more diversified, and the problems and confusions highlighted in ECCE are more easily seen, which urgently requires diversified and systematic support from all sectors of society. Based on this, this paper adopts the questionnaire survey method to investigate and analyze the current situation of social support for ECCE and parents' needs under the background of "internet+", and to explore the strategies to improve the social support system for ECCE in Gansu Province, so as to provide the basis and reference for promoting early childhood development.

2. Research Objects and Methods

2.1. Research Objects

This study conducted a questionnaire survey among 390 parents in Gansu Province, China (Lanzhou, Baiyin, and Pingliang), with 368 valid responses collected (94.4% response rate). The sample consisted predominantly of mothers (79.30%) compared to fathers (19.80%), with 78.3% of respondents aged 31-40 years. Household income data revealed that 48.90% of families earned $\leq 50,000$ CNY annually, while only 13.10% reported incomes $>150,000$ CNY.

2.2. Research Methods

This study primarily employs a questionnaire as the main research method. The questionnaire was randomly distributed, with the assistance of several kindergartens and early education institutions, to conduct a survey among parents of children aged 0-3 in Gansu Province. This approach aims to understand the current status of social support that parents perceive during the early education process and their needs for social support. The questionnaire was designed based on existing relevant studies and the regional context, titled "Questionnaire on Early Childhood Parenting and Social Support Status and Needs of Children Aged 0-3 in Gansu Province under the Background of 'Internet+'". It consists of three parts, and the collected questionnaires were analyzed and processed [7].

2.2.1. General Information Questionnaire

The research team compiled a questionnaire on parents' basic information, referencing relevant literature. It includes aspects such as parents' region, identity, age, occupation, educational level, and other relevant details, as well as children's age in months, gender, number, and the family's primary form of ECCE.

2.2.2. Current Situation of Social Support for ECCE of Children Aged 0–3 in Gansu Province under the Background of “Internet+”

This section investigates the status of social support that parents can perceive through or using the “internet+” during the ECCE process in Gansu Province. It covers various aspects, including family support, community support, institutional support, Internet support, and soon.

2.2.3. Social Support Demand Scale for ECCE of Children Aged 0–3 in Gansu Province under the Background of “Internet+”

The scale adopted was compiled by scholar Lai Yuhua and adapted by scholar Shan Jingxian. It comprises three dimensions: emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support, with a total of 18 items. Emotional Support focus on parents' feelings of emotional and psychological support, respect, acceptance, and protection. For example, “When I am frustrated and worried about parenting, someone can give me comfort and encouragement.” Informational Support includes suggestions, information, or methods provided by others to help parents understand, analyze, and solve problems encountered in ECCE. For instance, “Someone will help me analyze the problems of educating my children or provide advice through the Internet platform.” Instrumental Support refers to the material or practical services and assistance given directly by others, such as “If there is a need, there is a person or organization that can help me look after my children.”

The scale uses a Likert 5-point scale, assigning values from 1 to 5 to the level of parental need for each item, anchored at ‘Strongly Disagree’ (1) to ‘Strongly Agree’ (5). Higher scores indicate a higher parental need for social support in that area. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of the scale is 0.959, with the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the three dimensions being 0.886, 0.912, and 0.965, respectively, indicating good reliability. Additionally, the correlations between the three dimensions of social support and the total scale are high, with each dimension’s correlation with the total score being higher than the correlation between each dimension and the others, suggesting satisfactory validity.

Table 1. Social Support Correlations Between Dimensions and Total Scale.

	Emotional Support	Informational Support	Instrumental Support	Total Social Support
Emotional Support	—			
Informational Support	.744**	—		
Instrumental Support	.586**	.729**	—	
Total Social Support	.832**	.915**	.910**	—

Note. ** $p < 0.01$.

3. The Current Situation of Social Support for ECCE of Children Aged 0–3 Under the Background of Internet+

3.1. Current Situation of Family Support for ECCE of Children Aged 0–3

Among the 368 samples surveyed on the status quo of family support for ECCE of children aged 0–3, 22.8% of parents are full-time housewives (or househusbands), 3.5% of parents are unemployed, and 83.15% of families have a total annual income of less than 100,000 yuan. These basic family conditions constitute the realistic basis for the support they can provide in ECCE. In terms of reproductive status, 63.04% of the families were two-child families, and more than 80% of the families had two or more children, indicating that most families have accumulated some experience in ECCE. In terms of financial support, 58.7% of families spend no more than RMB 3,000 per month on ECCE, with 33.2% of them focusing on the RMB 1,001–2,000 range. At the level of environmental support, 35.9% of the families had one parent taking care of the children at home full-time, 32.1% had both parents taking care of the children together, and the proportion of three generations living together and taking care of the children together was 25.3%. At the level of informational support, 73.6% of parents tend to first discuss solutions with family members when they are confused about parenting. Overall, there is still much room for improvement in the economic, environmental, and informational dimensions of family support for ECCE.

3.2. Current Situation of Social Support for ECCE of Children Aged 0-3

In the construction of the social support system for ECCE, the support provided by communities and institutions plays a crucial role in alleviating the pressure of family upbringing and improving the quality of upbringing. This study investigated the form and frequency of guidance received by parents in the process of ECCE, focusing on the Women's Federation, Maternal and Child Health Institutions, and the community as the main targets.

The results show that 60.3% of parents have received early parenting guidance provided by women's federations or maternal and child healthcare institutions through Internet platforms; 55.7% of parents have participated in parenting activities organized by such institutions; 48.1% of parents have received guidance manuals on eugenics and early parenting; 44.8% of parents have participated in parents' experience exchanges to share and discuss their experiences and confusions in parenting; and only 23.6% of parents have participated in parent-teacher training workshops. Additionally, only 23.6% of parents have attended special seminars held by early childhood education experts hired by the relevant organization.

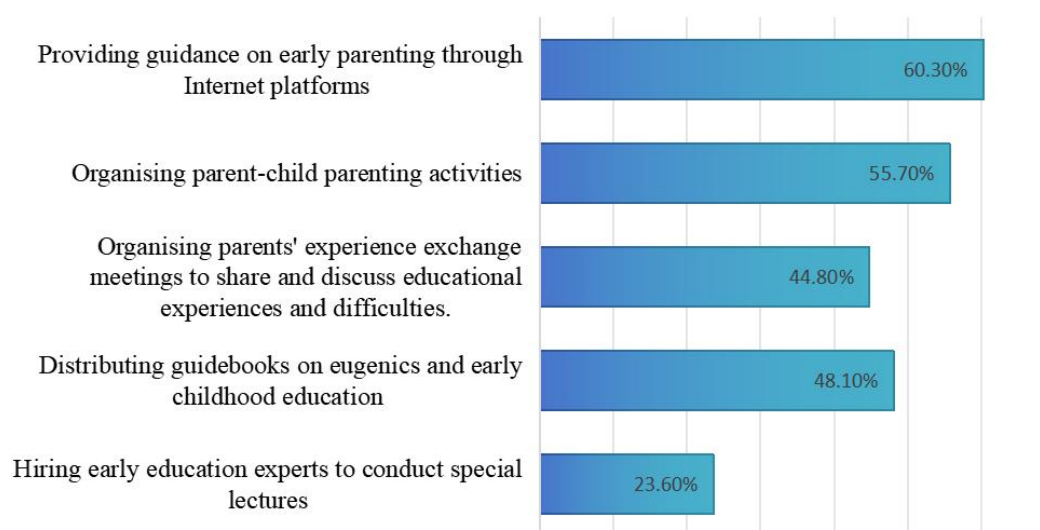


Figure 1. Frequency of ECCE Guidance Provided by Institutions.

Among the community-based support, 45.9% of parents indicated that they had participated in parent-child activities organized by the community; 43.2% of parents had noticed the publicity boards in the community to disseminate general knowledge on ECCE; 36.1% of parents had participated in parent-experience exchange meetings, and 35.6% had made use of the community website to obtain relevant guidance information. In contrast, the proportions of parents who had participated in face-to-face counseling activities, invited experts to give talks on special topics, and volunteers visiting their homes to provide guidance services were lower, at 20.7%, 17.1%, and 15.2%, respectively. Additionally, 37.0% of parents still indicated that their community had not provided any ECCE guidance services. This indicates that community support is dominated by routine publicity and group activities, and resources for specialized and personalized guidance are still insufficient.

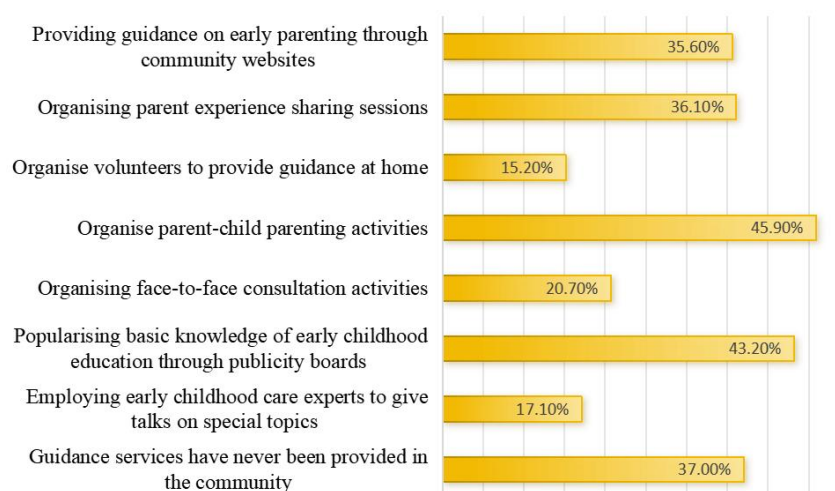


Figure 2. Frequency of ECCE Guidance Provided in the Community.

3.3. Current Situation of Internet+ Support for ECCE of Children Aged 0-3

In the context of the information age, ECCE of children aged 0–3 faces challenges such as rapid changes in knowledge, updating of parenting concepts, and continuous evolution of practice modes. “Internet+” provides a more convenient channel for parents to obtain and update their early parenting concepts and practice experiences. According to this survey, 69.6% of parents use their spare time to acquire early parenting knowledge through Internet platforms and accounts, and 78.0% of parents believe that the parenting concepts and methods acquired through Internet platforms play an important role in adjusting and improving their own parenting behaviors. In terms of guidance subjects, the main sources of early parenting knowledge received by parents on Internet platforms are experienced parents (69.8%) and kindergarten teachers (67.9%), while the proportion of guidance from personnel of women's federation organizations, community service organizations, university teachers, and scientific research experts is less than 25%. In terms of the content of guidance, the information obtained by parents through the Internet is mainly basic childcare knowledge, accounting for 75.0% of the total, followed by guidance on parenting styles and methods and professional parenting knowledge, with a relatively low proportion of information on social resources for early parenting. In terms of current problems, 55.4% of parents believe that there is a lack of systematic and organizational problems in the current early parenting guidance in the context of “internet+”, 47.6% point out that the content and form of guidance are relatively

homogeneous, and 42.4% reflect the lack of professional competence of the instructors. Additionally, 36.1% and 28.5% express concern about the imperfection of the Internet regulatory mechanism and the effectiveness of the technological application, respectively. This shows that although “Internet+” provides parents with more ways to access ECCE knowledge, the systematic, professional, and standardized nature of its guidance resources still needs to be further improved.

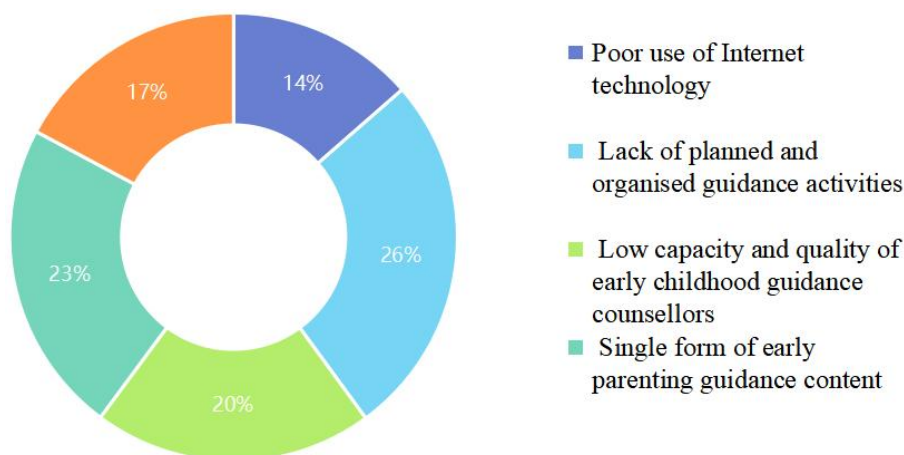


Figure 3. Major Problems of ECCE Guidance in the Context of “internet+”.

4. The Current Situation of Social Support Needs of ECCE of Children Aged 0–3 in Gansu Province

As seen through the survey, among the 368 samples that participated in this research on the social support needs of ECCE in Gansu Province, the overall level of parents’ needs for social support is high. As can be seen from the data in Fig. 4, the group of parents with a score of 72 has the largest proportion, followed by the group with a score in the 90-point range. This indicates that most parents generally face different levels of difficulties and challenges in ECCE, and there is a strong need for more multidimensional social support that is emotional, informational, and instrumental in nature.

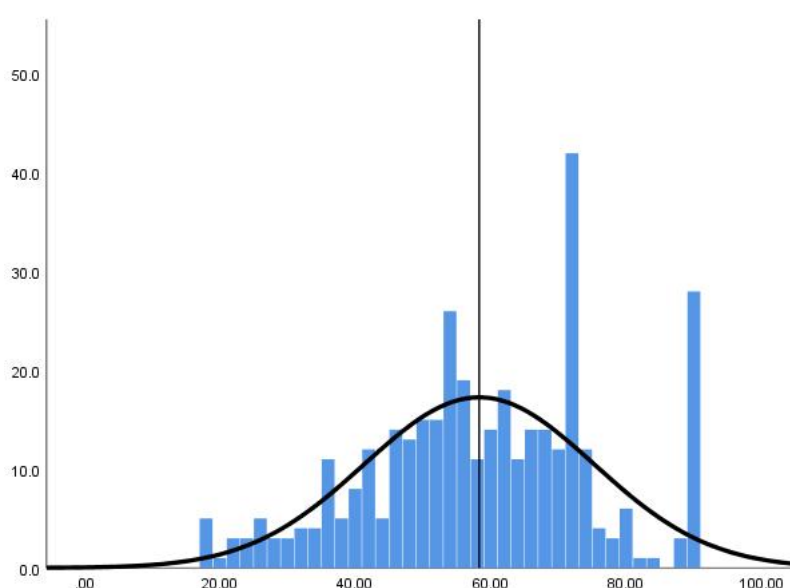


Figure 4. Histogram of Overall Demand for Social Support in ECCE.

From the data in Table 2, it can be seen that among the 368 samples, the mean values of the scores of the dimensions of social support needs and the total needs scores exceeded 3.0, indicating that parents of children aged 0–3 have a high degree of overall needs for social support in ECCE. Among them, the instrumental support dimension has the highest level of need, with a mean value of over 3.3, followed by the emotional support dimension, with a mean value also above 3.3, and the informational support dimension, with a relatively lower but still high level of need. This suggests that parents most urgently need concrete and actionable material and service support in the parenting process, and also desire emotional comfort and psychological support.

Table 2. Mean Scores of Needs Across Dimensions and Total Needs.

	N	Min	Max	Mean
Emotional support	368	6	30	3.33
Informational support	368	7	35	3.05
Instrumental support	368	5	25	3.39
Total Social support	368	18	90	3.24

4.1. Emotional Support Needs

The emotional social support needs dimension includes five items. The data show that there is some variability in parents' needs for emotional social support. It was found that parents' support needs for gaining others' recognition and support for their parenting concepts in the ECCE process, sharing their joys and sorrows in parenting with others, receiving comfort and encouragement when they encountered frustration and worry, and gaining others' empathy for the bitterness and joys of parenting were significantly higher than the overall mean of the dimension. In contrast, the need to receive care and assistance from those around them (including online) scored relatively low. This result suggests that in improving the social support system for ECCE, attention should be paid to meeting parents' needs for emotional recognition, communication, comfort, and empathy, in order to promote their psychological well-being, alleviate the stress of parenting, enhance parenting efficacy.

Table 3. Frequency Statistics of Items for Emotional Support Needs.

Item	Need Level					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
People around me can understand the joys and struggles of parenting.	36	40	103	127	62	3.38	1.18
I have someone to give me When facing parenting challenges, I receive comfort and encouragement.	39	41	74	147	67	3.44	1.21
I can share my parenting experiences (e.g., joys/frustrations) with others or online.	39	45	79	144	61	3.39	1.21
My emotions receive attention and support during parenting.	51	54	87	115	61	3.22	1.28
My parenting approaches are recognized and supported by others.	20	38	108	134	68	3.52	1.08

4.2. Informational Support Needs

The demand for informational social support dimension contains six specific items, with mean values ranging from 3.18 to 3.46, all of which are higher than the overall

mean value of the dimension, indicating that parents generally showed moderate to high intensity of demand for informational social support. Further analyses revealed that parents' needs for obtaining ECCE information and methods via the Internet, exchanging parenting opinions with others, analyzing educational problems, obtaining information on parenting courses, and discussing parenting problems were particularly prominent. In contrast, the need for obtaining solutions from the media scored lower, which may be related to the lack of trust in the media's information or parents' doubts about the usefulness of the media's information. Usually, when individuals face uncertainty and insufficient information in the parenting process, they will actively seek external information to reduce uncertainty and aid decision-making. Therefore, when building a social support system for ECCCE, emphasis should be placed on improving the professionalism, authority, practicality, and personalisation of information services, so as to provide parents with high-quality and trustworthy guidance resources.

Table 4. *Frequency Statistics of Items for Informational Support Needs.*

Item	Need Level					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	1	2	3	4	5		
Experts provide parenting advice/methods via online platforms.	23	40	105	143	57	3.46	1.07
I can discuss parenting challenges with others online.	35	42	101	132	58	3.37	1.16
Others analyze parenting problems/provide suggestions online.	43	48	93	128	56	3.29	1.22
Online platforms offer parenting courses/family education seminars.	35	47	101	132	53	3.33	1.16
Media provides solutions to parenting problems.	39	57	116	110	46	3.18	1.16
I collaborate with others online to resolve parenting difficulties.	36	47	92	140	53	3.35	1.17

4.3. Instrumental Support Needs

The instrumental social support needs dimension contains seven items covering specific helping behaviours such as caring for children, transporting children, and providing financial or material assistance. Although instrumental support has the highest mean value among the three dimensions, there are significant differences between the different forms of needs. As seen in Table 5, parents had the strongest need for companionship, desiring someone with whom they could engage in activities that were enjoyable. In contrast, the need for someone or an organisation to share chores such as household chores was relatively low, which may stem from parents' general belief that household chores could be accomplished through their own efforts and did not require additional social support. In addition, parents showed stronger needs for childcare, transporting children, financial or material assistance, and assistance in dealing with parenting problems, reflecting the important role of these supports in alleviating parenting stress and enhancing parenting efficacy. This suggests that when improving the social support system for ECCE, emphasis should be placed on providing diversified and operable substantive support services to help parents obtain greater support and resources in their parenting practices.

Table 5. *Frequency Statistics of Items for Instrumental Support Needs.*

Item	Need Level					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	1	2	3	4	5		
Access to childcare assistance when needed.	68	51	97	105	47	3.03	1.30
Help with child transportation when needed.	75	55	80	107	51	3.01	1.35
Financial support for parenting when needed.	73	49	101	95	50	3.00	1.32
Material assistance for parenting when needed.	71	50	97	104	46	3.01	1.30
Assistance in resolving children's behavioral/developmental issues.	68	52	94	103	51	3.05	1.31
Help with household chores related to parenting.	78	55	92	91	52	2.96	1.35
Companionship for stress-relieving activities.	53	35	83	136	61	3.32	1.27

5. The Strategies for Building a Social Support System for ECCE for Children Aged 0–3 in Gansu Province Under the Background of Internet+

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory, the ECCE of children aged 0–3 are nested in multiple interacting and mutually influencing environmental systems, and the systems and individuals continuously interact with each other to jointly shape children's development [5]. Therefore, to build a social support system for ECCE, it is necessary to integrate multiple resources and strengths of families, communities, institutions, and Internet platforms to respond to the diverse needs of parents in terms of emotional, informational, and instrumental support.

5.1. Strengthening the Internal Support System of Families

The family is the primary place for ECCE, and improving its internal support system is crucial for children's healthy growth. However, survey results show that some families still have limitations in terms of economic conditions, parenting experience, and environmental support. Specifically, 83.15% of families have an annual income of less than 100,000 RMB, and 22.8% of parents work full-time to care for their children at home, which to some extent limits the ability of families to access and utilise early parenting resources. To this end, efforts should be made to strengthen the internal support system of families.

First, parents' knowledge and skills should be upgraded to provide them with adequate information support. Although most families have some experience in childcare, some parents still face confusion in the process. Therefore, we can rely on the "Internet+" platform to provide parents with systematic parenting knowledge courses to help them master scientific parenting methods; meanwhile, we can encourage them to participate in online communities to share their experiences and solve problems with other parents and teachers. Second, optimise the division of labour and collaboration within the family. According to the survey, 35.9% of families have one parent taking care of children full-time, and 32.1% have both parents taking care of children together, so there is still room for improvement in the division of labour within the family. Through community publicity and online courses, family members can be guided to clarify their respective roles and responsibilities in

childcare, and share childcare tasks together, so as to alleviate the pressure of single-member childcare. At the same time, flexible employment opportunities, such as providing childcare resources and opening “mother’s posts” or “father’s posts”, can help parents who are full-time childcare workers to relieve their financial pressure and enhance the instrumental and emotional support for the family [5].

5.2. Optimising the Support System of Community Institutions

In the process of building a social support system for ECCE, the community and related organisations, as grassroots hubs, take on the important functions of alleviating the pressure on families and providing resources and services. However, the results of the survey show that some communities and institutions are still deficient in ECCE guidance services: only 63.3% of parents said that they had received guidance from women’s federations or Maternal and Child Healthcare institutions using the Internet platform, and 37.0% of parents said that their communities had never provided relevant guidance activities.

In response to the above problems, firstly, the community’s ECCE service function should be strengthened and the level of instrumental and informational support should be enhanced. On the one hand, the community should consolidate resources and establish professional ECCE guidance centers, which should regularly hold parent-child activities, parent experience exchange meetings, parenting seminars, etc., and provide flexible childcare services such as hourly and half-day classes, so as to provide parents with concrete and sustainable help. On the other hand, community bulletin boards, WeChat public numbers, websites, and other channels should be fully utilized to popularize the knowledge of ECCE and release relevant activity information in a timely manner, so as to increase parents’ knowledge of and participation in community services [13]. Secondly, the quality of institutional guidance was improved to provide parents with scientific and authoritative informative support. Institutions such as the Women’s Federation and Maternal and Child Healthcare should strengthen cooperation with Internet platforms to regularly push scientific and practical knowledge and methods to meet parents’ diverse needs. At the same time, other relevant institutions such as childcare institutions and early childhood education centers should also pay attention to the professional training of childcare guidance personnel, and improve their level of childcare guidance and their ability to communicate and collaborate with families, so as to ensure that high-quality and accurate guidance and services can be provided to parents.

5.3. Advancing the Development of Internet+ Support Platforms

In the Internet era, the rise of various types of social software and platforms has provided parents with convenient channels for obtaining information, but it has also brought about problems such as uneven quality of information and lack of effective supervision. According to the survey, 69.6% of parents acquire knowledge through Internet platforms, but 55.4% of parents pointed out that there is a lack of systematic and planned ECCE for children aged 0–3 years old in the context of “internet+”.

In order to further enhance the efficiency of the Internet platform’s informational support for parents, efforts should be made to optimise the development of the “Internet+” support platform. First, we should build a diversified “Internet+” parenting platform, design and develop a comprehensive parenting APP that integrates early parenting knowledge, online courses, expert consultation, parent communication, and information on childcare services, to provide high-quality, one-

stop services for parents, and to help parents set up parenting exchange groups to share experience and confusion, and to alleviate parenting anxiety. Second, strengthen online childcare platforms. On the one hand, it is necessary to strengthen the platform's content audit mechanism to ensure that the information is scientific, authoritative and practical, and to prevent false information from misleading parents; on the other hand, it is necessary to improve the platform's technical services, optimise the algorithm and push mechanism, and improve the accuracy and effectiveness of the information, so as to enhance the experience of parents and their sense of trust.

5.4. Refining the Mechanism of Multi-Body Cooperation

Multi-body cooperation is the key link and core objective of building a social support system for ECCE of children aged 0–3. However, there are still deficiencies in multi-body cooperation. Surveys show that the knowledge of ECCE acquired by parents through the Internet platform mainly comes from experienced parents and kindergarten teachers, while the participation of professional forces such as women's federations, community service personnel, university teachers and experts from scientific research institutions is relatively low. The establishment of an effective linkage mechanism among families, communities, institutions, and Internet platforms is the basis for realising synergistic cooperation among multiple subjects and ensuring the integrity and efficient operation of the social support system.

Each subject should strengthen communication and collaboration to form a cooperation model of resource sharing and complementary advantages [14]. For example, communities and organisations can jointly carry out offline parent-child activities and childcare services, and at the same time register and publicise the activities through internet platforms; organise childcare families of childcare age to set up activity groups in the community, and regularly organise experience-sharing and parent-child upbringing activities. In addition, social forces should be actively guided to participate in ECCE support services [2]. Employers are encouraged to provide childcare employees with flexible work opportunities such as parental leave and telecommuting to reduce the pressure of family parenting [10]; local governments are promoted to provide childcare subsidies for childcare families to alleviate the economic burden; and social organisations such as universities and research teams are supported to set up parenting funds and carry out public welfare activities to improve the quality of early parenting services. By deepening the synergistic cooperation of multiple subjects, we can further promote the systematic construction of the social support system for ECCE of children aged 0–3 in Gansu Province, better meet the needs of parents, and promote children's healthy growth and comprehensive development.

6. Conclusions

This study examines the social support system for early childhood care and education (ECCE) of children aged 0-3 in Gansu Province through a comprehensive investigation. The findings reveal systemic deficiencies across family, community, and digital support structures, with particularly strong parental demand for instrumental support. Grounded in ecological systems theory, the analysis demonstrates how multi-level environmental factors collectively constrain ECCE quality. The study proposes an integrated intervention framework addressing family capacity building, community service enhancement, digital platform regulation, and

multi-stakeholder collaboration. These theoretically informed, empirically grounded recommendations advance both scholarly understanding and practical approaches to optimizing ECCE support systems in developing regions. The research contributes to global ECCE discourse by offering a systems-based perspective on social support improvement while identifying important directions for future investigation in comparable socioeconomic contexts.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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