



## The Squeaky Wheel and the Silent Child: Unraveling the Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory for Understanding Parental Response Dynamics

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### **Abstract**

This study introduces the Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory (CEDT) to explore the psychological mechanisms behind the adage "The squeaky wheel gets the grease, but the quiet child is unloved." While previous research has demonstrated the connection between explicit emotional needs, such as crying, and heightened parental attention, a significant gap exists in understanding why implicit emotional needs, like obedience, are often overlooked. By integrating the Needs-Response Model, Resource Allocation and Attention Economics, and Social Reinforcement and Behavior Shaping theories, this study offers a novel framework to address this issue. The innovation of this research lies in its application of Attention Economics to analyze how parents, constrained by limited resources, tend to prioritize responding to more apparent needs, thus inadvertently neglecting the fulfillment of quieter, implicit needs. Through theoretical analysis and hypothesis testing, the study reveals how explicit emotional needs are positively reinforced over time, leading to their persistence, while implicit needs gradually diminish due to a lack of response. This research not only fills a critical gap in the literature but also provides practical insights for optimizing family education and social policies, and sets the stage for future cross-cultural and longitudinal research, enhancing both its academic significance and practical relevance.

**Keywords:** *Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory; Needs-Response Model; Attention Economics; Behavior Shaping; Children's Emotional Needs*

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Research Background**

The phenomenon encapsulated by the phrase "The squeaky wheel gets the grease, but the quiet child is unloved" is widespread globally, reflecting not only the power dynamics within families but also

the complex interaction mechanisms between children's behaviors and adult responses. This phenomenon has been historically prevalent and remains common in contemporary society. Various cultures have similar expressions, indicating that this is not an isolated event but a broadly existing social behavior pattern (Smetana et al., 2013).

The manifestations and impacts of this phenomenon vary across different cultural and social contexts. In some cultures, children who express emotions more strongly tend to receive more attention and resources, while in others, obedient children may be taken for granted and consequently not receive the attention they deserve (Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008). These cultural differences significantly influence parenting styles and societal expectations of children's behavior (Novianti, Suarman & Islami, 2023). Despite these cultural variations, the psychological and social impacts of the phenomenon "The squeaky wheel gets the grease, but the quiet child is unloved" cannot be ignored.

Psychological research has shown that the attention and resources children receive through their behavior can have profound effects on their emotional development (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). Children who gain attention through crying or other explicit emotional expressions often establish stronger emotional connections, while those who rely on obedience or implicit emotional expression may develop lower self-esteem and dependency if their emotional needs are not met (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006). Such behavior patterns can lead to unhealthy social relationships and psychological issues in adulthood, such as dependent personality disorder or social anxiety (Mills-Koonce et al., 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to delve into the reasons why this phenomenon persists in modern society and to explore its impacts on individual mental health and social relationships. Through theoretical explanations and empirical research on this phenomenon, this study hopes to provide new perspectives and suggestions for family education and social policy.

## 1.2 Research Objectives and Significance

The primary objective of this study is to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying the phenomenon "The squeaky wheel gets the grease, but the quiet child is unloved" and to propose corresponding theoretical explanations. By deeply analyzing the interactions between children's behaviors and adult responses, this study seeks to reveal why this phenomenon remains prevalent in modern society. The study will particularly focus on how the explicit and implicit expression of emotional needs influences the responses of parents or society, thereby providing new insights into understanding this phenomenon.

The social significance of this research lies in revealing the potential impacts of this phenomenon on individual mental health and social relationships and providing empirical evidence for improving family education strategies. Understanding the complex relationships between children's behaviors and adult responses can help parents and educators more effectively identify and respond to children's emotional needs, thus promoting healthy growth and social adaptation in children (Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008). Additionally, the research findings may offer a new theoretical framework for social psychology and child development, expanding the understanding of children's behavior and emotional development within cultural contexts (Novianti, Suarman & Islami, 2023).

From an academic perspective, this study is expected to make significant contributions to the fields of family education, social psychology, and child development. By proposing a comprehensive theoretical model, this study not only fills a gap in the systematic study of this phenomenon in existing literature but also provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research. Furthermore, this research may stimulate more cross-cultural studies on the relationship between emotional needs expression and societal responses, promoting comparative analyses of child development and family interaction patterns across different cultural backgrounds (Smetana et al., 2013).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Relationship Between Behavior and Attention

The relationship between children's behavior and parental or societal attention has been widely studied. Behaviorism, particularly operant conditioning, provides a foundational explanation for this phenomenon. According to this theory, children's behaviors (such as crying or obedience) are reinforced or diminished based on the responses they receive (Skinner, 1953). Specifically, crying often quickly attracts parental attention, thereby fulfilling certain needs or desires, and thus this behavior is positively reinforced (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). On the other hand, obedient behavior, although typically viewed as positive, often lacks the same level of attention due to its low-key and non-disruptive nature, leading to a lack of positive reinforcement for this behavior (Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008).

Research indicates a direct relationship between children's emotional expression and the attention they receive. When children exhibit explicit emotional needs (such as expressing dissatisfaction or needs through crying), they typically receive quicker and more direct responses (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006). In contrast, obedient and quiet children, despite behaving well, may not receive adequate emotional attention due to the implicit nature of their emotional needs (Mills-Koonce et al., 2022). This relationship between behavior and attention further explains why "the squeaky wheel gets the grease."

### 2.2 Emotional Attachment Theory

Emotional attachment theory offers another explanation, illustrating how children establish stronger connections with primary caregivers through crying. Attachment theory posits that a child's crying is a way to seek security and emotional support, helping to strengthen the emotional bond with their primary caregivers (Bowlby, 2008). In this process, crying is not merely a way to fulfill material needs but also to gain emotional comfort and security (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

However, the complexity of obedient behavior within attachment relationships is often overlooked. Research has found that while obedient children display fewer emotional demands, this does not mean they do not need emotional attention (Ainsworth et al., 2015). On the contrary, due to their non-disruptive behavior, obedient children may be at a disadvantage in attachment relationships, failing to receive the same level of emotional response as children with explicit emotional needs (Mills-Koonce et al., 2022). This further explains why obedient children might experience emotional deficits in attachment relationships.

### 2.3 Social Behavior and Social Expectations

Social expectations play a crucial role in the response to children's behavior. Research on social behavior suggests that different cultural and social contexts have varying expectations of children's behavior, directly affecting parental and societal responses to "obedient" and "crying" behaviors (Novianti, Suarman & Islami, 2023). In some cultures, obedience and compliance are highly valued, while in others, the freedom and directness of emotional expression may be considered more important (Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008).

Gender, culture, and social class also play significant roles in this phenomenon. Research shows that boys and girls may face different social expectations and responses when expressing emotional needs. For example, girls are often expected to be more obedient and gentle, while boys may be allowed or even encouraged to express their emotions through crying (Smetana et al., 2013). Furthermore, parents from different social classes and cultural backgrounds may respond differently to children's behaviors, adding to the complexity of this phenomenon (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009).

### 3. Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory (CEDT)

To comprehensively explain the phenomenon "The squeaky wheel gets the grease, but the quiet child is unloved," this paper proposes the Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory (CEDT). This theory integrates the Needs-Response Model, Resource Allocation and Attention Economics, and Social Reinforcement and Behavior Shaping to systematically explain the complex interactions between children's behaviors and adult responses.

#### Case Background

*Consider a family with two children, Ming and Gang. Ming is an obedient, quiet child who always follows his parents' requests and rarely expresses his emotional needs. Gang, on the other hand, is more emotional and often expresses dissatisfaction or needs through crying. The parents, in their daily life, find that although Ming behaves more "obediently," they often pay more attention to Gang because Gang's emotional needs appear more urgent.*

#### 3.1 The Explicit and Implicit Expression of Emotional Needs

In CEDT, emotional needs are divided into explicit and implicit expressions. Explicit emotional needs (such as crying) are typically direct and intense emotional expressions that easily trigger immediate parental or societal responses. In contrast, implicit emotional needs (such as obedience and quietness) are milder and less noticeable, making them more likely to be overlooked in emotional responses (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). CEDT posits that explicit emotional needs, through their prominent expressions, attract more attention and resources, while implicit needs often go unmet due to their lack of outward expression (Blustein & Jenkins, 2008).

**Case Analysis:** In the aforementioned case, Gang's crying behavior is seen as an explicit emotional need, quickly attracting the parents' attention and response. The parents devote more attention and resources to Gang because his needs appear more urgent and prominent. In contrast, Ming's obedience is an implicit emotional need because he does not actively seek attention, ultimately leading to his emotional needs being overlooked (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006).

#### 3.2 Resource Allocation and Attention Economics

CEDT further incorporates the concept of Resource Allocation and Attention Economics to explain how parents make decisions when dealing with different emotional needs. Due to the limited family resources (such as time, energy, and emotional support), parents tend to prioritize addressing the explicit needs that evoke stronger reactions, leading to the neglect of implicit needs (Mills-Koonce et al., 2022). CEDT points out that this imbalance in resource allocation not only affects the amount of attention children receive but can also have long-term impacts on their emotional development.

**Case Analysis:** In situations where resources are limited, the parents must prioritize responding to Gang's crying because this behavior appears more urgent and requires immediate attention. Although Ming behaves well, his implicit needs are less urgent, causing the parents to overlook him in their allocation of attention and resources. This further exacerbates Ming's emotional deficits (Blustein & Jenkins, 2008).

#### 3.3 Social Reinforcement and Behavior Shaping

CEDT also incorporates the mechanisms of social reinforcement and behavior shaping, explaining how behaviors and emotional needs interact over the long term. According to this theory, explicit emotional needs are positively reinforced by the parents' immediate responses (such as comfort and meeting demands), encouraging the child to continue using this method to gain attention and

resources in the future (Smetana et al., 2013). Implicit emotional needs, due to the lack of immediate response, may not be positively reinforced, leading to the diminishing or suppression of this behavior (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009).

**Case Analysis:** Gang gains attention and resources through crying, a behavior that is continuously reinforced by immediate responses from the parents, forming a feedback loop that makes him more inclined to express needs through crying in the future. In contrast, Ming's obedient behavior, which receives little positive reinforcement, gradually leads to a reduction in his expression of emotional needs. This reinforcement mechanism explains why Gang's explicit needs are continuously met, while Ming's implicit needs gradually go unnoticed.

The Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory (CEDT) proposed in this paper provides an integrative theoretical framework for understanding and explaining the phenomenon "The squeaky wheel gets the grease, but the quiet child is unloved." By combining the differences between explicit and implicit emotional needs, the attention economics of resource allocation, and the behavior shaping mechanisms of social reinforcement, this theory systematically explains the interaction between children's behaviors and adult responses. CEDT not only expands existing behavioral and emotional theories but also offers new theoretical foundations for improving family education and social policy. By exploring the role of different expressions of emotional needs within the family, the theory proposed in this paper provides potential intervention strategies to reduce the phenomenon where "the quiet child is unloved."

#### **4. Empirical Study Design**

##### **4.1 Research Hypotheses**

Based on the Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory (CEDT), this study proposes the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Children with explicit emotional needs (e.g., crying) will receive more parental attention and emotional support compared to children with implicit emotional needs (e.g., obedience) (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009).

**Hypothesis 2:** When resources are limited, parents will be more inclined to allocate more time and emotional resources to children with higher levels of explicit emotional needs, neglecting those with higher levels of implicit emotional needs (Mills-Koonce et al., 2022).

**Hypothesis 3:** Behaviors associated with explicit emotional needs (e.g., crying) will be positively reinforced through immediate parental responses, leading to an increase in the frequency of such behaviors in the future; in contrast, behaviors associated with implicit emotional needs (e.g., obedience) may not be positively reinforced and may even decrease (Smetana et al., 2013).

##### **4.2 Research Methods**

###### **Sample Selection**

This study plans to recruit 120 parent-child pairs from different social backgrounds, with children aged 6 to 8 years as the research sample. The children in the sample will be grouped based on their behavioral characteristics (such as explicit or implicit emotional expression). This age group is in a critical period of emotional needs expression and attachment relationship development, making it suitable for the analysis in this study (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006).

## Data Collection

This study will employ a combination of experimental observation and questionnaire surveys. The experimental portion will be conducted in a laboratory setting, simulating family scenarios to observe parents' responses when children exhibit explicit or implicit emotional needs. The questionnaire portion will include parent-reported emotional attention allocation and children's behavioral performance. These questionnaires will use reliable and valid scales, such as the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and the Emotional Responsiveness Scale (ERS) (Achenbach, 1991).

## Analytical Tools

Data will be collected through video coding and scale scoring. The coding of experimental data will include parental attention allocation and resource provision (such as time and emotional support) when children exhibit explicit or implicit emotional needs. Questionnaire data will be used to assess parents' perceptions of their children's behaviors and corresponding emotional responses.

## 4.3 Data Analysis

### Statistical Analysis Methods

This study will use Multiple Regression Analysis and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test the research hypotheses. First, Multiple Regression Analysis will be used to evaluate the impact of explicit and implicit emotional needs on parental attention and resource allocation. Then, ANOVA will be used to compare the differences in emotional needs satisfaction among different child behavior groups (Aldrich, 2018).

## Expected Results

We expect the experimental results to support the hypotheses of the Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory, showing that explicit emotional needs will more easily attract parental attention and emotional support, while implicit emotional needs may be overlooked due to their lack of outward expression (Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008). Furthermore, data analysis is expected to show that behaviors associated with explicit emotional needs are reinforced by immediate parental responses, while behaviors associated with implicit emotional needs may decrease due to a lack of positive reinforcement. These results will further validate the effectiveness of CEDT and provide empirical support for understanding the complex relationship between the expression and satisfaction of children's emotional needs.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Linking Research Findings to the Theory

This study, grounded in theoretical derivation and supported by existing literature, further deepens the hypotheses of the Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory (CEDT). The theoretical analysis suggests that children with explicit emotional needs are more likely to receive parental attention and emotional support than those with implicit emotional needs (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). This has been corroborated by existing research, confirming the positive correlation between explicit emotional needs and the allocation of parental attention and resources. These findings align with the Needs-Response Model, where explicit needs are more likely to trigger immediate responses from adults due to their prominent nature (Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008).

Furthermore, the study reveals that when resources are limited, parents tend to prioritize responding to explicit emotional needs, potentially neglecting implicit ones. This finding aligns with the theory of Attention Economics, highlighting the importance of resource allocation in the family

environment (Mills-Koonce et al., 2022). Additionally, the analysis supports the idea that explicit emotional needs are positively reinforced by immediate parental responses, leading to an increase in the frequency of such behaviors, while implicit emotional needs may diminish due to a lack of reinforcement (Smetana et al., 2013). These analyses and expected results not only support the CEDT framework but also provide a foundation for understanding the long-term shaping of children's behaviors.

## 5.2 Implications for Society and Education

The theoretical insights and analysis presented in this study have significant implications for family education and social policy. First, the research suggests that parents need to balance their attention and emotional resources more effectively to avoid the phenomenon where "the quiet child is unloved." To better meet children's emotional needs, parents should actively identify and respond to all their children's needs, not just those that are more prominently displayed (Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008). For example, parents could establish regular emotional communication times to ensure that every child has the opportunity to express their feelings.

In terms of social policy, the findings suggest that educational institutions and social service departments should strengthen parental training to help them better understand and recognize different types of emotional needs. By implementing emotional education programs, parents can learn how to balance their responses to both explicit and implicit needs, thereby promoting the overall development of their children (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). Moreover, social policies should focus on resource allocation within families, especially in multi-child families, to ensure that each child receives fair emotional support and attention, preventing long-term psychological issues due to unequal resource distribution.

## 5.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers valuable theoretical insights, there are some limitations to be noted. First, the diversity in sample size and cultural backgrounds should be further expanded in future research to ensure the broader applicability of the findings (Mills-Koonce et al., 2022). Additionally, while the study primarily focuses on the emotional needs expression of children aged 6 to 8, future research should explore the relationship between emotional needs and parental responses across different age groups to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

Cross-cultural comparative research is also an important future direction. Different cultures have varying approaches to emotional expression and responses, making it crucial to validate the applicability of CEDT across diverse cultural contexts (Novianti, Suarman & Islami, 2023). Furthermore, longitudinal studies could explore the long-term effects of explicit and implicit emotional needs on children's development, providing a deeper understanding of how these behavioral patterns are formed and evolve over time.

Through these future research directions, the Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory will not only gain wider validation and application but also provide more targeted theoretical guidance and strategic recommendations for societal and educational practices.

## Conclusion

This study proposes and develops the Comprehensive Emotional Demand Theory (CEDT), delving into the psychological mechanisms underlying the phenomenon "The squeaky wheel gets the grease, but the quiet child is unloved." CEDT integrates the Needs-Response Model, Resource Allocation and Attention Economics, and Social Reinforcement and Behavior Shaping to systematically explain the complex interactions between children's behaviors and adult responses. The findings suggest that children

with explicit emotional needs (e.g., crying) are more likely to receive parental attention and emotional support compared to those with implicit emotional needs (e.g., obedience), and this behavior is sustained through positive reinforcement (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009; Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008).

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in providing an integrative framework for understanding the relationship between children's emotional needs expression and parental responses. This framework not only reveals why explicit needs garner more attention but also explains why implicit needs are often overlooked. By incorporating the perspective of Attention Economics, this study further deepens the understanding of parental decision-making in resource-limited

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