

Anxiety Disorders in Early Childhood and the Role of Father Involvement in Children's Emotional Development

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Abstract. Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health issues experienced in early childhood and may have long-term impacts on children's social and emotional development. One of the influential factors in the emergence and management of anxiety in children is parental involvement, particularly the role of fathers in parenting. This study aims to examine the role of father involvement in early childhood emotional development and its influence on anxiety disorders. This research employs a library research method with a descriptive qualitative approach by reviewing and analyzing relevant national and international journal articles related to early childhood anxiety and father involvement. The findings indicate that active, responsive, and emotionally supportive father involvement contributes significantly to the development of children's sense of security, self-confidence, and emotional regulation abilities, which play a crucial role in reducing anxiety symptoms. Conversely, minimal or inconsistent father involvement may increase the risk of anxiety disorders in early childhood. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening the role of fathers in parenting practices as a preventive and supportive strategy in addressing anxiety disorders among young children. Enhancing father involvement is therefore essential for promoting healthy emotional development and psychological well-being in early childhood.

Keywords: *anxiety disorders; early childhood; emotional development; father involvement; parental involvement*

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety in early childhood is a phenomenon that is frequently encountered in the learning process within early childhood education institutions. This condition can be observed when children display fear, nervousness, or reluctance to participate in classroom activities, such as being asked to come to the front of the class or to answer simple questions posed by the teacher. Anxiety experienced by young children should not be regarded as a trivial issue, as it may significantly affect their mental health as well as their overall growth and development.

Early childhood represents a critical and formative stage of development that has long-term implications for later life. During this phase, children's development encompasses physical, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects that are closely interconnected and develop simultaneously. Social-emotional development plays a crucial role, as it forms the foundation for children's ability to interact with others, regulate emotions, and adapt to their surrounding environment [1]. Evidence indicates that anxiety disorders are among the most commonly diagnosed mental health conditions in children aged 3–17 years and may adversely affect children's social, emotional, and academic functioning if not appropriately addressed [2], [3]. In early childhood, difficulties in managing fear, excessive worry, and emotional stress may hinder the development of self-confidence and healthy emotional regulation [4].

The prevalence of anxiety disorders in early childhood, particularly during the preschool period (approximately ages 2–5 years), is estimated to be relatively high. Various studies have reported that the prevalence of anxiety disorders in this age group ranges between 10% and 20%, making anxiety one of the most common mental health problems during early developmental stages [5]. Research employing standardized clinical diagnoses has also identified prevalence rates of impairing anxiety disorders ranging from 0.3% to 6.5% among preschool-aged children [6]. Anxiety problems in early childhood warrant serious attention, as persistent and untreated symptoms may disrupt children's emotional, social, and academic development. In the long term, anxiety that is not addressed early may continue into school age and adolescence, increasing the risk of other mental health disorders and reducing overall quality of life [3].

During early childhood, children are highly sensitive to their surrounding environments. Unpleasant emotional experiences, academic pressure, and inappropriate responses from adults may trigger the emergence of anxiety in young children. Previous studies have demonstrated that anxiety symptoms in

early childhood are influenced by developmental factors as well as interactions with parents, and may persist into later developmental stages if not properly managed [7], [8]. When such conditions continue without adequate support, anxiety may hinder children's emotional and social development [9]. Therefore, understanding the impact of anxiety on the mental health of young children is of considerable importance.

In the context of family influence, parental involvement plays a central role in shaping children's emotional security and mental health during early childhood. While the role of parents is often discussed as a unified construct, emerging perspectives highlight that fathers contribute uniquely to children's emotional development and anxiety regulation. Fathers' emotional availability, responsiveness, and engagement in daily interactions may provide children with a distinct sense of security and support that complements maternal caregiving. Research suggests that parental factors, including interaction patterns and emotional responsiveness, significantly influence the development and persistence of anxiety symptoms in children [7], [10].

However, discussions regarding childhood anxiety have tended to focus more heavily on general parenting practices or maternal roles, with comparatively limited attention given to the specific contribution of fathers. In many cultural contexts, including early childhood education settings, fathers are still primarily perceived as economic providers rather than active emotional caregivers. This perspective may obscure the potential impact of father involvement on children's emotional regulation and anxiety management. Understanding the specific role of fathers is therefore essential for developing a more comprehensive approach to supporting early childhood mental health and preventing anxiety disorders from an early age [8], [11].

This article aims to examine the impact of anxiety on the mental health of early childhood and to explore the roles of parents and teachers in supporting children's anxiety management. This review is expected to provide insights for educators and parents regarding the importance of creating emotionally safe environments for young children.

METHODS

This study employed a literature review (library research) method using a qualitative descriptive approach. A literature review was selected as the study aims to examine and analyze concepts, theories, and findings from previous research related to anxiety and mental health in early childhood, without conducting field data collection.

The data sources consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data sources included national and international journal articles addressing anxiety and mental health in early childhood, while secondary data sources comprised textbooks, reports from official institutions, and relevant regulations, such as the National Standards for Early Childhood Education.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature search using academic journal databases and other reliable sources. The selected literature was screened based on topic relevance, year of publication, and alignment with the objectives of the study.

Data analysis was carried out using content analysis techniques, which involved identifying, categorizing, and synthesizing information from various sources to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the effects of anxiety on the mental health of young children. The results of the analysis are presented descriptively in the form of a scientific narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concept of Anxiety in Early Childhood

In the context of early childhood education in Indonesia, the development of children's social and emotional aspects is regulated within the National Standards for Early Childhood Education. These standards emphasize that children require appropriate stimulation to develop optimally, including the ability to regulate emotions [12].

Anxiety in early childhood can be defined as an emotional condition characterized by feelings of fear, worry, or nervousness that arise in response to certain situations. Childhood anxiety is influenced by the interaction of various factors, including children's temperament, parenting styles, and early emotional experiences [10]. Children who are continuously exposed to stressful environments are at risk of developing anxiety disorders that may persist into later developmental stages [11]. In early childhood, anxiety often manifests in behavioral forms, such as crying, refusing to interact, or avoiding situations perceived as stressful. While such reactions may be part of normal emotional development, they require attention when they occur excessively or persist over time.

Anxiety experienced by young children not only affects their emotional well-being but also influences the learning process as a whole. Anxious children tend to have difficulty concentrating, show reluctance to try new activities, and exhibit reduced self-confidence in participating in learning activities. These conditions may hinder the optimal development of children's potential, as learning in early childhood should ideally take place in an environment that is enjoyable, safe, and free from excessive pressure.

Young children have not yet developed mature emotional regulation skills and therefore rely heavily on support from adults around them. Children's anxiety may be shaped by daily experiences as well as interaction patterns with parents and teachers. Consequently, understanding the concept of anxiety in early childhood is essential in efforts to maintain and promote children's mental health.

Factors Contributing to Childhood Anxiety

Anxiety in early childhood may be caused by various factors originating from both the family and school environments. Within the family context, less responsive parenting, ineffective communication, and family conflict may trigger feelings of insecurity in children. Children who are frequently subjected to pressure or demands that are not aligned with their developmental stage tend to be more vulnerable to anxiety. Excessive performance demands, whether at home or at school, may cause children to fear failure, worry about making mistakes, and hesitate to express themselves [13]. When such conditions persist over time, they may disrupt children's emotional development and contribute to the formation of enduring anxiety patterns from an early age.

In the school environment, emotionally unsupportive learning atmospheres, pressuring instructional methods, and limited teacher understanding of children's emotional conditions may serve as contributing factors to anxiety. In addition, social experiences such as peer rejection or fear of making mistakes may also trigger anxiety among young children.

Impact of Anxiety on Early Childhood Mental Health

Anxiety experienced by young children may have significant effects on their mental health. Previous studies have shown that anxiety during childhood is associated with an increased risk of long-term emotional difficulties, highlighting the importance of early detection and intervention in supporting children's mental health [8], [14]. One of the most evident impacts is disruption in emotional functioning, such as children becoming easily frightened, nervous, or excessively uncomfortable in certain situations. Children who frequently experience anxiety tend to have difficulty regulating emotions and display lower levels of self-confidence when engaging in social environments or learning activities [15].

Beyond emotional effects, anxiety also influences children's daily behavior. Anxious children often exhibit avoidance behaviors, reluctance to participate in group activities, and refusal to perform or interact socially. Such conditions may hinder children's social development and negatively affect the quality of their interactions with their surroundings [16]. If not appropriately addressed, anxiety in early childhood may lead to long-term consequences for children's mental health.

Unmanaged anxiety in early childhood may directly affect children's overall mental well-being. Research indicates that chronic anxiety is associated with an increased risk of other emotional disorders, including depression, social withdrawal, and reduced psychological well-being [4]. These conditions may interfere with learning processes, social relationships, and children's ability to adapt to school and family environments [11].

The World Health Organization and UNICEF emphasize that the majority of mental health disorders begin before adolescence, making early detection and intervention crucial for preventing long-term adverse outcomes [17]. Interventions during early childhood, including the reinforcement of positive parenting practices and emotional support within educational settings, have been shown to be effective in improving children's mental health and reducing anxiety symptoms [18]. Therefore, examining the influence of anxiety on early childhood mental health is of significant scientific importance.

The Role of Parents and Teachers in Supporting Children's Mental Health

Parents and teachers play a critical role in supporting the mental health of young children, particularly in helping them manage anxiety. Early intervention programs involving parents and educators have been proven effective in reducing anxiety symptoms and promoting children's mental health and emotional regulation [7], [14]. Parents can provide emotional support through positive communication patterns, the provision of a sense of security, and effective emotional management in daily interactions. Warm and responsive parental attitudes help children feel accepted and understood.

In addition to teachers, parents also play a vital role in supporting children's mental health. Parenting practices characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and empathy contribute to children's emotional security. Parents are expected to adjust expectations according to children's developmental stages and

avoid comparisons that may generate psychological pressure. Strong collaboration between parents and teachers is essential in creating consistent environments that support children's optimal development.

Teachers contribute to the creation of emotionally safe learning environments by allowing children to learn without excessive pressure and by valuing children's learning processes. Learning environments that provide psychological safety enable children to feel accepted and confident in expressing themselves, thereby reducing anxiety levels [19]. Furthermore, collaboration between parents and teachers remains a key factor in fostering consistent and supportive environments for children's mental health. With appropriate and sustained support, anxiety in early childhood can be effectively minimized.

The findings of this review offer practical implications for teachers in early childhood education institutions. Teachers are encouraged to create learning environments that support children's mental health by avoiding excessive academic pressure. Providing appreciation for learning processes, applying child-friendly approaches, and offering opportunities for children to express their emotions may help reduce anxiety and enhance children's sense of safety during learning activities.

Efforts to prevent anxiety in early childhood should be implemented continuously from an early stage. Learning environments and family settings that provide psychological safety can help children develop healthy emotional regulation skills. Early prevention is essential to reduce the risk of more severe anxiety disorders later in life and to support children's overall growth and development.

The Role of Father Involvement in Reducing Anxiety in Early Childhood

Father involvement plays a significant role in supporting children's emotional development and mental health, particularly in the context of anxiety during early childhood. While parenting roles have traditionally been associated more closely with mothers, contemporary research emphasizes that fathers contribute uniquely to children's emotional regulation, sense of security, and adaptive coping strategies. Active and emotionally responsive father involvement can serve as a protective factor against anxiety symptoms in young children.

In early childhood, children rely heavily on caregivers to help them interpret emotional experiences and regulate feelings of fear and stress. Fathers who are emotionally available, responsive, and consistent in their interactions provide children with a secure emotional base. This sense of security is essential for reducing anxiety, as children who feel protected and supported are better able to explore their environment and engage confidently in social and learning activities. Previous studies highlight that parenting practices characterized by warmth and responsiveness are associated with lower levels of anxiety in children [7], [10].

Father involvement contributes to emotional development in ways that may differ from maternal involvement. Fathers often engage children in more physically stimulating, exploratory, and challenging play activities, which can help children learn to manage mild stress and uncertainty in a supportive context. Such experiences allow children to practice emotional regulation and develop resilience when facing new or demanding situations. When fathers encourage children to try new activities while providing reassurance, children gradually develop confidence and adaptive coping skills, which are crucial in preventing excessive anxiety [11].

Conversely, limited or inconsistent father involvement may increase children's vulnerability to anxiety. Children who experience emotional distance or unpredictability from significant caregivers may develop heightened fear responses, insecurity, and difficulties in regulating emotions. In early childhood, when emotional regulation skills are still developing, the absence of consistent paternal support may contribute to persistent worry, avoidance behaviors, and emotional withdrawal. Research indicates that children exposed to stressful or unsupportive family environments are more likely to develop anxiety symptoms that persist into later developmental stages [8], [11].

Father involvement is also closely related to the emotional climate of the family. Fathers who model calm emotional responses, effective problem-solving, and positive coping strategies help children learn appropriate ways to manage stress and anxiety. Children often observe and internalize adults' emotional reactions; therefore, fathers who demonstrate constructive emotional regulation can positively influence children's mental health. Such modeling is particularly important in early childhood, as children have limited verbal and cognitive abilities to process emotions independently [11].

In the context of early childhood education, collaboration between fathers, mothers, and teachers is essential in supporting children's mental health. Although teachers play a vital role in creating emotionally safe learning environments, parental involvement—especially from fathers—provides continuity between home and school contexts. When fathers actively engage in their children's education, communicate with teachers, and show interest in children's learning experiences, children tend to feel more secure and

supported. This sense of consistency across environments may help reduce anxiety related to separation, performance, or social interaction in educational settings [7], [14].

Cultural expectations and social norms may influence the degree of father involvement in parenting. In some contexts, fathers are still primarily viewed as financial providers rather than emotional caregivers. Such perceptions may limit opportunities for fathers to participate actively in children's daily emotional experiences. However, contemporary perspectives on parenting emphasize that fathers' emotional engagement is equally important for children's psychological well-being. Strengthening awareness of the importance of father involvement may therefore contribute to improved mental health outcomes for young children.

The findings of this review suggest that promoting father involvement should be considered a key component of early childhood mental health interventions. Programs aimed at reducing anxiety in young children may benefit from actively engaging fathers in parenting education, emotional support strategies, and collaborative activities with teachers. Early interventions that involve fathers alongside mothers can enhance children's emotional security and reduce the risk of persistent anxiety disorders [7], [18].

Overall, father involvement plays a crucial role in reducing anxiety in early childhood by fostering emotional security, supporting emotional regulation, and modeling adaptive coping behaviors. When fathers are actively involved in parenting and emotional support, children are better equipped to manage fear, stress, and uncertainty. Strengthening the role of fathers in early childhood care and education is therefore essential for promoting children's mental health and supporting their optimal emotional development.

CONCLUSION

Anxiety in early childhood is an emotional condition that requires serious attention due to its potential impact on children's mental health, emotional regulation, and social development. If not appropriately addressed, anxiety may interfere with children's learning experiences and contribute to long-term psychological difficulties. Therefore, early prevention and supportive interventions are essential to promote children's overall well-being.

The findings of this review highlight that parental involvement plays a crucial role in supporting children's mental health, with father involvement emerging as a particularly important factor in reducing anxiety during early childhood. Fathers who are emotionally available, responsive, and actively engaged in their children's daily lives contribute significantly to children's sense of security, self-confidence, and ability to regulate emotions. Such involvement helps children manage fear, stress, and uncertainty more effectively.

In addition, collaboration between fathers, mothers, and teachers is essential in creating consistent and emotionally safe environments for young children. Educational settings that recognize and encourage father involvement may further support children's mental health and reduce anxiety-related difficulties. Strengthening the role of fathers in early childhood care and education should therefore be considered a key strategy in preventing anxiety disorders and promoting healthy emotional development from an early age.

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