

DEKAP: Emotional Assistance and Affective Language in Early Childhood from a Fitrah Perspective

Najwa Salma An Lamsari¹, Heni Novianti², Nur Ilham³

^{1,3} Sekolah Otak Kanan Indonesia, Indonesia

² Independent Researcher, Indonesia

¹ Email: anlamsarinajwa@gmail.com

² Email: heninovianti01@gmail.com

³ Email: ilhamkanan19@gmail.com

Proceedings of the Kalijaga International Conference on Education 2026

Abstract. Affectionate expression appears naturally in young children, both verbally through words like "beautiful," "handsome," "I like you," "darling," or "I love you" and physically, through hugging, stroking, and salim, the customary hand-kissing gesture of respect. Within Islamic thought, this inclination is seen as a manifestation of fitrah, the inborn human capacity to love and be loved. This research focuses on a 4-year-old boy who showed strong affective language abilities alongside a notable pattern of emotional regulation, settling quickly from distress through simple physical closeness, a pattern also presents in his mother's caregiving style. The study set out to explore how emotional support and affective language develop in early childhood, interpreting the pattern through both developmental psychology and the Islamic principle of fitrah, using the DEKAP framework (Detection of emotion, verbal Empathy, affective Contact, positive Affirmation, and Pattern reinforcement) as a guiding lens. A descriptive qualitative case study design was used, drawing on semi-structured interviews with the mother and direct behavioral observation, with findings processed through data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Results indicate that maternal emotional support rooted in physical affection (the DEKAP approach) plays a central role in shaping the child's affective language, which emerged both spontaneously and in response to caregiving, largely through modeling and the stability created by co-regulation. Interestingly, the mother's caregiving stemmed from her own psychological intuition and lived experience rather than explicit religious motivation, yet it aligned closely with the fitrah-based values found in the Qur'an (Surah Ar-Rum: 21) and authentic hadith on embracing and kissing children. The study offers a theoretical contribution by connecting emotional caregiving and affective language to the concept of fitrah, and a practical one by presenting DEKAP as an initial reference model for parents and educators.

Keywords: *affective language skills; DEKAP strategy; early childhood; emotional assistance; fitrah*

INTRODUCTION

Even at a young age, children naturally express emotion and affection both verbally and physically. Verbally, this appears as affective language words like "beautiful," "handsome," "I like you," "darling," or "I love you." Physically, it shows up through hugging, stroking, and salim, the customary hand-kiss offered as a sign of respect toward elders. In Islamic thought, this tendency reflects fitrah, the innate human capacity, instilled by God from birth, to love and be loved, and a source of tranquility in family life [1]. This pattern was observed in a 4-year-old boy with strong affective language skills and a distinct way of regulating emotion, calming quickly through simple closeness and touch. His mother showed a similar caregiving style, having relied on affective touch as her main way of supporting his emotions since infancy.

Psychologically, this connects to co-regulation, the process by which a child temporarily "borrows" calm from a caregiver through touch and comforting presence before developing self-regulation [2]. Consistent emotional support, including affective touch, shapes the communicative rhythm between caregiver and child and fosters a calm, alert state that prepares the child for verbal interaction [3]. Early observations suggest the mother's approach; detecting emotion, offering verbal empathy, providing affective contact, giving positive affirmation, and reinforcing these patterns consistently (framed here as the DEKAP Strategy) is closely linked to the child's affective language development, both through direct modeling and the emotional stability co-regulation provides. DEKAP is derived from the Indonesian-language acronym for the five stages (*Deteksi emosi, Empati verbal, Kontak afektif, Afirmasi positif, Penguatan pola*) and DEKAP also a common Indonesian word meaning 'to embrace' or 'hold close,' reflecting the touch-based nature of the strategy. The acronym is retained in its original Indonesian form as the strategy's proper name; in the English rendering of its components (Emotion Detection, Verbal Empathy, Affective Contact, Positive Affirmation, Pattern Reinforcement), the Indonesian 'Kontak' (K) corresponds to 'Contact' (C), as both are pronounced /k/.

The Islamic tradition has also long encouraged affectionate physical contact with children. Literature on Islamic early childhood education emphasizes that the Qur'an and Sunnah guide nearly every aspect of child-rearing, including affection-based approaches [4]. The Qur'an identifies *mawaddah wa rahmah* (compassion and mercy) as part of the *fitrah* placed within family life [1], while authentic hadith from Bukhari and Muslim describe the Prophet ﷺ regularly kissing, stroking, and embracing young children, even gently rebuking a companion who had never kissed his own child.

Much existing research on co-regulation has relied on Western psychological and neuroscientific frameworks [2], [3], [5], largely without engaging the Islamic concept of *fitrah*, which has long framed affection as an inborn human trait [1], [6]. Meanwhile, Indonesian scholarship on Qur'an- and Hadith-based early childhood education [4], [7] tends to focus on curriculum or *tawhid* education, rarely linking emotional caregiving empirically to children's affective language. A more notable gap emerged from this study's preliminary observations: the mother-child affective pattern, while consistent with *fitrah*, seemed to arise instinctively from the mother's own psychological outlook and lived experience rather than explicit religious intent, a convergence between instinct and revealed values still largely unexplored in early childhood education research.

This study aims to describe patterns of emotional support and affective language development in early childhood, interpreting them through both developmental psychology and the Islamic concept of *fitrah*, using the DEKAP Strategy as a supporting analytical framework. Its significance lies in offering an integrative approach that treats neuroscience-based findings and Islamic values as equally valid, convergent sources of insight, rather than one merely justifying the other. For education, the study contributes theoretically by expanding the concept of co-regulation through an Islamic lens, and practically by offering the DEKAP Strategy as an accessible guide for educators and parents responding to young children's emotional needs through meaningful touch.

METHODS

Research Design and Setting

This study employed a descriptive qualitative case study approach aimed at providing an in-depth description of the pattern of emotional assistance and affective language skills in a single early childhood subject and their mother, without intending to test causal relationships statistically [8]. This approach was chosen because the phenomenon under study—the relationship between affective touch, emotion regulation, and children's affective language skills—is contextual in nature and requires in-depth data collection, making a case study more suitable than a quantitative approach. The research was conducted in the subject's home and school environments, namely at Islamic Preschool Otak Kanan Yogyakarta, where the subject spends his daily life with caregivers and educators.

Participants

The research participants consisted of one child subject (case) and one key informant (key informant), selected using purposive sampling based on the criterion that the phenomenon observed was prominent and relevant to the focus of the study. The subject was a 4-year-old boy (initial G) who displayed pronounced affective language skills and a distinctive pattern of emotion regulation. The key informant was the subject's biological mother, who displayed a similar tendency in her use of physical touch as a caregiving strategy. The subject was selected based on the researcher's preliminary observation, which naturally identified this unique phenomenon within the learning environment, rather than through random recruitment.

Research Instruments

The instruments were designed as a grid (grid) bridging each theoretical indicator with the data items to be collected in the field, allowing systematic triangulation between observation and interview results.

Table 1. Observation and Interview Guidelines for Affective Language Skills

No.	Aspect	Theoretical Basis	Indicator
1.	Physical Touch (Behavior)	Form, frequency, and context of affective touch in daily caregiving [3]	The child hugs others without being asked
			The child comfortably accepts hugs/strokes (does not avoid them)
			The child performs <i>salim</i> (hand-kissing) toward adults
			The mother spontaneously gives affective touch (stroking the head or back, holding hands)
2.	Attachment (Attachment)	Quality of mother-child responsiveness and emotional closeness [10]	The child seeks the mother when feeling uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the environment
			The child uses the mother as a “secure base” (stays close to the mother first before venturing to explore)
			The child shows a joyful reaction upon reunion with the mother (after a brief separation)
3.	Child's Affective Language	Frequency and context of using affective words (“beautiful,”	The child utters positive expressions (beautiful, handsome, darling, like)
			The child spontaneously expresses verbal affection (unprompted)

No.	Aspect	Theoretical Basis	Indicator
		“handsome,” “like,” “darling,” “love”	The child expresses verbal affection as a response (prompted by others)
			Tone/facial expression when uttering affective words (smiling, enthusiasm, etc.)

Table 2. Observation and Interview Guidelines for Emotional Assistance

No.	Aspect	Theoretical Basis	Indicator
1.	Detection of Emotion	DEKAP conceptual framework	The mother is sensitive to early signals of the child's emotions
2.	Empathy (Verbal)		The mother responds with validating words
3.	Affective Contact		The mother provides touch when the child is upset
4.	Affirmation (Positive)		The mother gives verbal reinforcement after the child calms down
5.	Pattern Reinforcement		This pattern recurs consistently across observations

Procedure

Stage 1 — Behavioral observation. The researcher conducted direct observation of mother-child interactions and the child's affective behavior in everyday settings (at home and at school), recording the occurrence of each indicator on the observation guideline sheet along with a description of its context.

Stage 2 — Semi-structured interview. The researcher conducted an in-depth interview with the subject's mother to confirm and enrich the observational findings, using the interview guideline as a reference while remaining open to spontaneous answers and the informant's free narrative, in order to avoid the bias of leading questions.

Stage 3 — Documentation. Supplementary data in the form of field notes were collected throughout the observation and interview process to enrich the contextual understanding of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model, consisting of three stages: data reduction (sorting and categorizing interview and observation data according to theoretical aspects), data display (organizing the data into a descriptive narrative based on the indicator grid), and conclusion drawing (interpreting the findings in an integrated manner from the perspective of co-regulation theory and the value of fitrah in Islam). The trustworthiness of the data was strengthened through source and method triangulation, namely comparing the results of the child's behavioral observation with the mother's interview responses, to ensure consistency between what the informant reported and what was actually observed in the field [9].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented in two main parts. First, the empirical results describe the pattern of emotional assistance using the DEKAP Strategy and the emergence of affective language skills in the subject. Second, the discussion section interprets these findings by integrating concepts from developmental psychology, neurobiology, and the perspective of fitrah in Islam.

Implementation of the DEKAP Strategy in Maternal Emotional Assistance

Based on observational data and in-depth interviews with the subject's mother, the mother's emotional assistance in this study consistently followed five sequential stages conceptualized as the DEKAP Strategy (Emotion Detection, Verbal Empathy, Affective Contact, Positive Affirmation, Pattern Reinforcement).

Emotion Detection: The mother showed high sensitivity to early behavioral and verbal signals indicating the child's discomfort. Observations revealed that before reaching the peak of an emotional upheaval, the subject (child G, age 4) verbally expressed discomfort (for example, “Mommy, let's go home”). The mother actively recognized these early signals, allowing intervention to occur in a timely manner before the emotion escalated.

Verbal Empathy: When emotional upheaval arose, the mother prioritized emotional validation over direct behavioral correction. During episodes of sadness or anger, the mother validated the child's internal state using reflective questions (for example, “Are you sad, sweetie?” or “Are you angry, sweetie?”). The mother allowed the child to fully express his crying without belittling the emotion (“It's okay to cry first... do you still want to cry?”).

Affective Contact: Physical touch served as the primary anchor in emotion regulation. The mother provided physical closeness, hugs, and gentle stroking while holding the child close. Interview data confirmed that the mother frequently used kisses (“kisses”) and tight embraces as nonverbal expressions of affection across various contexts, including bedtime and transitions between activities. When the child experienced emotional dysregulation, physical contact acted as a calming agent: “If he's crying or angry, just hold him or hug him... he just needs someone to stay with him while he cries.”

Positive Affirmation: Once the child's physiological arousal subsided, the mother offered validating affirmations along with problem-solving redirection. Rather than lecturing, the mother reinforced the child's feelings and constructively redirected his attention (“Alright, if you don't want to play anymore, we'll just stay home”).

Pattern Reinforcement: This sequence of emotional assistance has been applied consistently since the child's birth. The mother also acts as the primary regulator within the family system, ensuring that other family members (such as the older sibling and father) behave in line with responsive, nonviolent communication.

Emergence of the Child's Affective Language Skills

Observation and interview metrics confirmed the emergence of pronounced verbal and nonverbal affective language skills in child G, both at school and at home.

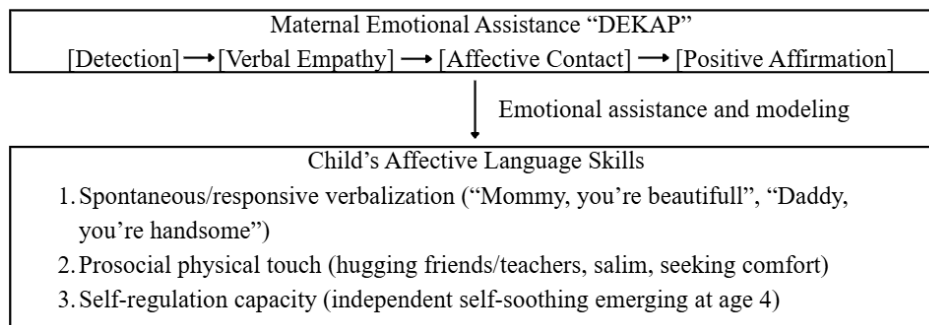


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Maternal DEKAP Assistance and the Child's Affective Outcomes

As summarized in Table 3, the subject displayed well-developed prosocial behavior and spontaneous affective communication.

Table 3. Summary of Observation and Interview Results on the Child's Affective Language and Emotion Regulation

Aspect	Observed Indicator	Manifestation and Field Context
Physical Touch (Behavior)	Spontaneous Hugging	Spontaneously hugs family members and teachers at school (Ummi)
	Acceptance of Touch	Comfortably accepts hugs and strokes without avoidance
	Respect Gesture (Salim)	Consistently performs hand-kissing (salim) toward adults
Attachment Quality (Attachment)	Attachment Security (Secure Base)	Uses the mother as the primary anchor; seeks the mother or a trusted family member when hurt or in an unfamiliar environment
	Safety-Seeking Behavior	Initiates contact (“I'm crying, it hurts”) and accepts physical touch for comfort
Affective Language	Positive Verbal Expression	Spontaneously offers compliments such as “Mommy, you're beautiful” or “Daddy, you're handsome”
	Contextual Spontaneity	Uses affective language spontaneously during casual activities (e.g., while out and about or looking at a phone)
	Strategic/Responsive Use	Uses affectionate words dynamically during interaction or persuasion (for example, “Mommy, you're so pretty, can I have ice cream?”)
Self-Regulation	Independent Self-Soothing	Shows an emerging capacity for self-soothing (approaching age 4); withdraws during conflict and approaches for a hug once emotions have stabilized

Instinctive Basis and Convergence with Fitrah

A crucial finding of this case study lies in the mother's motivation behind her parenting style. Interview analysis revealed that the mother's practice of affective touch and emotional validation was not driven by explicit religious knowledge or formal theological doctrine. When asked about her religious basis, the mother stated: “Not really, it's more medical, from a psychiatric point of view.” Furthermore, regarding the Islamic tradition of kissing children, she admitted: “Not yet [aware]... as far as I know, [children] are just given affection and raised somewhat more strictly once they reach puberty.”

Instead, her caregiving approach was driven by two personal motivators:

Personal Experience Reflection: Empathic introspection regarding her own emotional needs (“Personal experience, like when I'm sad, this is what I need... I just put myself in [the child's] shoes”).

Deliberate Modeling (Modeling): A conscious intention to model positive behavior rather than administer punitive discipline (“Because children imitate [what they see], so rather than hitting him, it's better to just give him affection”).

Although grounded purely in psychological intuition and personal experience, the mother's actual behavior was found to align and remain consistent with the principles of child-rearing in Islam (fitrah), particularly the principle of mawaddah wa rahmah (QS. Ar-Rum: 21) and the Prophetic sunnah on affection toward children

Discussion

The findings indicate a direct link between the mother's affective assistance, the child's emotional co-regulation, and the development of affective language skills. Interpreting these findings from the standpoint of developmental psychology alongside the Islamic value of fitrah enriches the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Psychological and Neurobiological Mechanisms of the DEKAP Strategy

The effectiveness of the DEKAP Strategy observed in calming child G and fostering his affective language is consistent with the neurobiological literature on attachment (attachment) [10] as well as recent applications of Polyvagal Theory [11]. Young children have an immature prefrontal cortex and are therefore not yet able to regulate their emotions independently during periods of high emotional arousal. When mother G provided affective physical touch such as holding, stroking, and tight hugs, she facilitated the process of co-regulation [5], [12].

Neurobiologically, tactile stimulation activates low-threshold mechanoreceptors (C-tactile afferents) in the skin, triggering the release of oxytocin and promptly reducing sympathetic nervous system activity [12]. This physiological shift moves the child from a defensive state (fight-or-flight) toward the ventral-vagal circuit, which represents a sense of safety (sakinah) [11]. This attainment of a calm yet alert state (calm-alert) is precisely the essential precondition for the brain to process linguistic information [13]. The child not only becomes calm but also successfully internalizes such expressions, subsequently reproducing them through spontaneous verbal utterances ("Mommy, you're beautiful") and prosocial behavior resulting from emotional transmission within the family caregiving bond [14].

Convergence with the Fitrah Perspective in the Qur'an

The most notable theoretical implication of this study is the empirical convergence between psychological intuition and Qur'anic fitrah. Mother G applied deep emotional validation, physical touch, and verbal affection based purely on medical/psychological insight and personal empathy, without explicit awareness of religious textual injunctions. Yet her practice in fact reflects the core of child-rearing as taught in Islam, a phenomenon highly relevant to recent scholarly discourse in Islamic Psychology [15], [16]:

"And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may find tranquility in them, and He placed between you affection and mercy." (QS. Ar-Rum: 21)

As stated in Surah Ar-Rum: 21, God instilled mawaddah (affection manifested through physical action/expression) and rahmah (deep empathic care) as basic human tendencies for attaining sukinah (tranquility/emotional regulation). The fact that this psychologically grounded caregiving pattern naturally replicates the Prophetic model of affection, such as the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ practice of kissing, embracing, and stroking the heads of children [17], provides empirical evidence for the concept of Fitrah [16].

In Islamic epistemology, fitrah represents the innate, original potential of humanity as created by God. This study demonstrates that genuine human psychological needs and healthy developmental instincts will naturally always converge with divine revelation (wahy). When a parent acts with authentic human empathy (rahmah), her actions are automatically aligned with Islamic normative guidance, even without explicit theological awareness.

Unexpected Findings, Challenges, and Limitations

An unexpected finding was the emergence of independent self-regulation capacity in the child before the age of four. When the mother experienced emotional exhaustion and chose to withdraw/remain silent ("I stayed quiet"), child G did not experience prolonged emotional dysregulation; instead, he withdrew, waited approximately five minutes until his mother opened her arms, and then approached to ask for a hug ("come hug me"). This supports recent findings that consistent touch-based co-regulation in the early years accelerates the maturation of the child's brain architecture for self-regulating emotion [18]. Nevertheless, this study also identifies several challenges for broader application:

Maternal Emotional Fatigue: Co-regulation requires a high degree of emotional availability. During moments of the mother's own emotional exhaustion ("when I'm angry... things get out of hand"), the co-regulation process was temporarily interrupted, underscoring that the mother herself requires a supportive environment to maintain her own emotional stability.

Family System Inconsistency: This strategy requires alignment across all family members (such as the mother's intervention regarding the older sibling's tone of voice). Emotion regulation cannot be the sole responsibility of one caregiver but requires the resilience of the family system as a whole [19].

Methodological Limitations: As a single qualitative case study, these findings provide in-depth contextual understanding of behavioral mechanisms but are not intended for statistical generalization to a broader

population [20]. Future research is recommended to test the DEKAP framework on a larger quantitative cohort with varied socioeconomic backgrounds

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that maternal emotional assistance grounded in affective physical touch, structured through the DEKAP Strategy (Emotion Detection, Verbal Empathy, Affective Contact, Positive Affirmation, Pattern Reinforcement), plays a crucial role in facilitating the child's emotional co-regulation and fostering affective language skills in early childhood. The child's ability to express verbal affection ("beautiful," "handsome," "darling") and to display prosocial behavior (spontaneous hugging, hand-kissing) directly reflects the warmth of the emotional environment provided by the mother. In particular, this study highlights the phenomenon of fitrah convergence: the mother's intuitive, psychologically grounded caregiving practice spontaneously aligns with the Qur'anic principle of *mawaddah wa rahmah* (QS. Ar-Rum: 21) and the Prophetic sunnah, even without an explicit religious motivation. Practically, the DEKAP Strategy offers an applicable and accessible framework for parents and early childhood educators to nurture children's emotion regulation and affective communication through meaningful physical touch.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Sekolah Otak Kanan Indonesia, as well as the participating student and family, for their cooperation throughout the data collection process. This research and the authors' participation in this conference were funded by Sekolah Otak Kanan Indonesia.

REFERENCES

- [1] Al-Qur'an, QS. Ar-Rum: 21.
- [2] F. M. Lobo and E. Lunkenheimer, "Understanding the parent-child coregulation patterns shaping child self-regulation," *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 56, no. 6, pp. 1121–1134, 2020, doi: 10.1037/dev0000926.
- [3] S. Carozza and V. Leong, "The Role of Affectionate Caregiver Touch in Early Neurodevelopment and Parent–Infant Interactional Synchrony," *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, vol. 14, 2021, doi: 10.3389/fnins.2020.613378.
- [4] M. Saihu, "The Urgency of Early Childhood Education in the Qur'an and Hadith and Its Relevance With Life in Modern Times," *Jurnal AlifLam: Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 29–46, 2022, doi: 10.51700/aliflam.v2i2.301.
- [5] J. R. Silkenbeumer, E.-M. Schiller, and J. Kärtner, "Co- and self-regulation of emotions in the preschool setting," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol. 44, pp. 72–81, 2018.
- [6] Al-Qur'an, QS. Luqman: 12–19.
- [7] S. Sulaiman, "Desain Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Dalam Perspektif Al-Qur'an dan Hadits," *GENIUS Indonesian Journal of Early Childhood Education*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 158–172, 2020, doi: 10.35719/gns.v1i2.10.
- [8] T. Hollweck and R. K. Yin, "Case Study Research Design and Methods," *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 108–110, 2014.
- [9] M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.
- [10] J. E. Cooke, L. B. Kochendorfer, K. L. Stuart-Parrigon, A. J. Koehn, and K. A. Kerns, "Parent–child attachment and children's experience and regulation of emotion: A meta-analytic review," *Emotion*, vol. 19, no. 6, pp. 1103–1126, 2019, doi: 10.1037/emo0000504.
- [11] S. W. Porges, "Polyvagal Theory: A biobehavioral journey to sociality," *Comprehensive Psychoneuroendocrinology*, vol. 7, art. 100069, 2021, doi: 10.1016/j.cpnec.2021.100069.
- [12] C. J. Cascio, D. Moore, and F. McGlone, "Social touch and human development," *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience*, vol. 35, pp. 5–11, 2019, doi: 10.1016/j.dcn.2018.04.009.
- [13] S. Shanker and T. Barker, *Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life*. Penguin Books, 2017.
- [14] A. S. Morris, M. M. Criss, J. S. Silk, and B. J. Houlberg, "The Impact of Parenting on Emotion Regulation During Childhood and Adolescence," *Child Development Perspectives*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 233–238, 2017, doi: 10.1111/cdep.12238.
- [15] H. Keshavarzi, F. Khan, B. Ali, and R. Awaad, *Applying Islamic Principles to Clinical Mental Health Care: Introducing Traditional Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy*. Routledge, 2021.
- [16] A. Rothman and A. Coyle, "Toward a Framework for Islamic Psychology and Psychotherapy: An Islamic Model of the Soul," *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 57, no. 5, pp. 1731–1744, 2018, doi: 10.1007/s10943-018-0651-x.
- [17] M. ibn I. al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 78, Hadith 28, no. 5997.
- [18] K. L. Raby and M. Dozier, "Attachment across the lifespan: insights from adoptive families," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, vol. 25, pp. 81–85, 2019, doi: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.03.011.
- [19] H. Prime, M. Wade, and D. T. Browne, "Risk and resilience in family well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic," *American Psychologist*, vol. 75, no. 5, pp. 631–643, 2020, doi: 10.1037/amp0000660.
- [20] J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. SAGE Publications, 2017.