

Children and Feelings: Early Investment to Maintain Mental Health and Positive Emotional Development in Children

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Abstract. This study aims to examine children's emotional development in depth. Emotional development is often considered a minor aspect that receives little attention from most parents, yet it plays a crucial role in shaping how a child responds to various life situations later in life. Through a qualitative approach involving conversations with parents and children, this study seeks to understand how attention given during early childhood can shape stable and manageable positive emotions. The research process demonstrates that children actually have the ability to understand and express their feelings independently. However, at certain ages, emotional expression is not yet fully mature, requiring appropriate guidance from adults. There are various moments when children feel fear or sadness, and simple actions from adults are often enough to help them regain their composure. These findings demonstrate that early emotional investment is a crucial factor in maintaining children's mental health. The research confirms that small gestures, warm communication, and a non-judgmental environment are the main foundations for positive emotional development. This research is expected to raise awareness, especially among parents and educators, that efforts to build children's mental health do not always require complex methods. Instead, sensitivity and genuine attention from adults, along with support from those closest to them, play a significant role.

Keywords: Children's Emotions, Early Investment, Mental Health, Positive Emotional Development.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse regarding child mental health continues to garner serious attention in both academic circles and the realm of global public policy. A World Health Organization report indicates that one in seven children aged 10–19 worldwide experiences a mental health condition, while many mental health conditions begin during childhood and adolescence [1]. These findings demonstrate that emotional development in children is not merely a supplementary aspect of growth but a crucial foundation for shaping the quality of human life in the future.

From a human development perspective, childhood is understood as a critical period because, during this phase, psychological, social, emotional, and cognitive foundations develop simultaneously and interactively [2]. A lack of attention to emotional needs during these early stages of life can lead to long-term consequences that extend beyond mental health to affect social capabilities, character formation, and the quality of interpersonal relationships in adulthood.

Child development in the modern era presents increasingly complex challenges, particularly regarding mental and emotional health. Technological advancements, shifting social interaction patterns, academic pressure, and the intensifying use of digital media create a developmental environment that is not always conducive to a child's psychological well-being. The rising prevalence of anxiety, depression, aggressive behavior, and even suicide among adolescents demonstrates that mental health does not suddenly emerge in adulthood but is rooted in early life experiences.

This reality underscores the profound impact of early emotional experiences on how children perceive themselves, form social relationships, and cope with future life pressures. Consequently, fostering positive emotions from an early age must be viewed as a long-term investment that determines the quality of future human capital. In daily life, children's behavior is often superficially interpreted through labels such as "lazy," "naughty," "spoiled," or "stubborn." Yet, such behaviors frequently stem from unmet emotional needs or underlying psychological conditions that are not fully understood by those around them. A lack of adult awareness regarding children's emotional states often leads to psychological issues being overlooked during the early stages of development.

Children raised in environments characterized by a lack of empathy, harsh communication, insecurity, or unresponsive relationships are at risk of developing difficulties in emotional regulation. The consequences of such conditions extend beyond childhood, potentially leading to low self-esteem, challenges in forming social relationships, chronic anxiety, and even a vulnerability to mental health disorders later in life.

Childhood is a pivotal phase, as rapid brain development occurs during this time, laying the essential foundation for the future. Throughout this period, cognitive, social, and emotional abilities develop concurrently and are deeply interconnected; consequently, the quality of a child's environment plays a crucial role in shaping their psychological well-being. Adverse early-life experiences—such as domestic violence, bullying, emotional neglect, excessive academic pressure, poverty, and exposure to unhealthy digital environments—can have lasting impacts on mental health. Conversely, an environment that is warm, supportive, attentive, and responsive to emotional needs fosters a sense of security, self-confidence, and empathy, while enabling children to adapt healthily to life's various challenges.

Unfortunately, emotional development is still often treated as secondary to academic achievement and intellectual ability. Many parents and educators prioritize cognitive success, failing to realize that future life success is heavily influenced by the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions. These skills do not develop automatically; rather, they are shaped by the quality of consistent interactions within family and social environments. Simple acts of attention—such as listening to a child's grievances, validating their feelings, showing affection, and fostering warm communication—play a significant role in shaping healthy emotional regulation. [3], [4], [5], [6], [7].

Conversely, neglecting emotional needs can hinder personality development and lead to various forms of psychological maladaptation in later developmental stages. Evidence on maternal–fetal attachment indicates that relational bonding can begin during pregnancy, while after birth caregivers play an important role in helping infants regulate distress through co-regulatory strategies [8], [9].

For instance, longitudinal work on preschool emotional competence shows that early emotional competence contributes to later social competence, while related research links poorly regulated anger with lower social competence [10], [11]. A review by Morris et al. summarizes evidence that parenting shapes children's emotion regulation through modeling, emotion-related parenting practices, and the emotional climate of the family [12]. Siegel and Bryson likewise emphasize that consistent caregiver presence and repeated relational experiences shape children's emotional development [13]. Collectively, these findings underscore the urgency of investing in emotional well-being from an early age as a foundation for long-term mental health.

Nevertheless, several research gaps remain inadequately addressed. First, the majority of studies on children's emotional development have been conducted in Western societies characterized by individualism; thus, their relevance to the collectivist context of Indonesian society requires further examination. Second, the evolution of theoretical understanding regarding children's emotions has not been fully matched by the development of practical intervention models that are both contextual and applicable within Indonesian family and school environments. Third, previous research has tended to treat mental health and positive emotional development as separate issues, despite their close interconnection. Fourth, the perspective of the child as an active subject in the process of emotional investment remains relatively limited in existing studies.

Based on the identified research gap, this study offers a novel contribution through an integrative approach that links children's mental health with the development of positive emotions, viewed through the lens of early investment. It also considers Indonesian cultural values as contextual variables that significantly influence parenting styles and children's emotional development. Methodologically, the study seeks to integrate developmental psychology perspectives with character education—a long-standing element of Indonesia's educational tradition. Furthermore, the research aims to formulate a model for developing emotional competence that is contextual, collaborative (involving family, school, and community), and grounded in a strength-based approach. Research linking self-compassion with adolescent well-being also supports attention to young people's own adaptive capacities [14]. This orientation is consistent with Indonesia's national education framework, which positions character and competence development as integrated dimensions of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila [15].

In light of the foregoing, this study formulates several key research questions: (1) how are the constructs of children's feelings and emotions understood within the framework of early-stage mental health investment; and (2) what factors contribute to the development of positive emotions within the family and school ecosystems in Indonesia?

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the development of children's feelings and emotions, as well as the role of the immediate environment in shaping mental health and positive emotions from an early age. A qualitative approach was selected because the research focuses on experiences, behaviors, emotional expressions, and the forms of guidance provided by parents in daily life, rather than on the quantitative measurement of emotional development. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to obtain an overview of how a child's feelings are formed and evolve through interactions with parents and the social environment. This aligns with the study's objective of framing the development of children's feelings and emotions as an investment in mental health from an early age.

The subjects of this study consist of parents and children who serve as sources of information regarding the children's emotional development. The informants include Mrs. V and Mrs. HR, along with their respective children. Mrs. V, who holds a junior high school education, has a seven-year-old daughter; they live in a rural area, and the child frequently accompanies her parents to the farm in her daily life. Meanwhile, Mrs. HR holds a master's degree and has a three-year-old daughter; they reside in an Islamic boarding school (*pondok*) environment. These two informants were selected to provide insight into parental experiences regarding the guidance, attention, communication, and caregiving practices associated with the children's psychological and emotional development.

Data collection was conducted through interviews and observations. Interviews were held with parents to gather information regarding their experiences in supporting their children's emotional development, the ways children express their feelings, and the forms of attention and communication provided in daily life. Interviews were also used to explore how parents assist their children when experiencing various emotional states, such as fear, sadness, disappointment, or anger. In addition to interviews, observations were conducted to directly assess the children's behavior, particularly regarding cheerfulness, self-confidence, independence, empathy, the ability to express feelings, and the ability to manage emotions. By combining these two techniques, the researcher was able to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the children's emotional state.

The research focused on the development of children's feelings and emotions as part of an investment in mental health from an early age. Key aspects included positive mental health traits such as cheerfulness, self-confidence, independence, empathy, and emotional expression. Furthermore, the study examined the development of positive emotions, including happiness and satisfaction, optimism and hope, as well as gratitude and appreciation. Other aspects addressed were affection, empathy, and the children's ability to manage emotions positively.

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative-inductive approach, beginning with empirical facts gathered through interviews and observations, followed by categorizing the data based on themes related to children's emotional development and mental health. The collected data were first organized and selected according to the research focus. Subsequently, information was grouped based on aspects such as emotional development, parenting styles, parent-child communication, affection, empathy, and the child's ability to manage their feelings. The data were then interpreted to identify patterns regarding the relationship between parental attention and guidance and the child's positive emotional development. This process was undertaken to gain an understanding of how a child's experiences and environment contribute to the formation of mental health from an early age.

To ensure data validity, information obtained through interviews was cross-referenced with observations of the children's behavior. Parental statements regarding the child's emotional state and development were compared with behaviors observed in daily life. Thus, the research findings are not based solely on informant accounts but also take into account empirical conditions observed by the researcher. Through this method, the study aims to provide in-depth insight into the importance of attention, warm communication, affection, empathy, and a supportive environment in helping children manage their feelings and cultivate positive emotions from an early age. The findings also indicate that simple actions by adults can help children manage feelings of fear, sadness, and disappointment, and regain a sense of calm.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Respondent profile

Based on interviews and observations regarding the behavior and emotional development of their children, insights were gained into the parenting patterns applied in daily life and their influence on the children's psychological and emotional development. The subjects included Mother V (a junior high school graduate) and her daughter Q (7 years old, first-grade student in a rural public school, though she frequently

accompanies her parents to the farm); Mother HR (a master's degree holder) and her daughter H (3 years old, living in an Islamic boarding school environment); and Mother F (a high school graduate) and her child P (9 years old, fourth-grade student in a rural area attending a school with a small student population).

First Indicator: Positive Mental Health in Children

Based on five indicators of positive mental health in children—cheerfulness, self-confidence, independence, empathy, and emotional expression—interviews with V, HR, and F generally reveal a positive picture. The three informants provided mutually reinforcing accounts of the child's mental health development, despite some variations in the specific information shared. The interview with V focused largely on the child's observable behavior in daily life. The interview with HR provided insights into the child's development and the parents' role in offering support, while the interview with F offered more detailed information regarding the child's behavior in various daily situations and identified areas where guidance is still needed.

Regarding cheerfulness, the interview with V indicated that the child frequently appears cheerful, smiles easily, and shows enthusiasm when playing or engaging in favorite activities. These findings align with the interview with HR, which noted that the child generally maintains a good mood and that the parents strive to manage the child's emotional state when feelings of frustration or disappointment arise. The interview with F reflected a similar picture; F noted that the child often appears cheerful, particularly when playing with friends—sometimes to the point of losing track of time. The child also smiles readily when not upset, when their wishes are met, or when they are not being restricted. Furthermore, the child appears visibly happy when preparing for outdoor activities. Thus, all three informants characterized the child as having a generally cheerful disposition. The differences lay in the specific contexts emphasized: V observed cheerfulness through daily activities; HR highlighted the child's mood and parental support; and F focused more on the child's cheerfulness while playing with friends and engaging in outdoor activities.

Regarding self-confidence, the interview with V indicates that the child is sufficiently brave in expressing opinions and believes in their own abilities, although some hesitation remains when facing new situations. The interview with HR reveals that the child's self-confidence is being fostered by providing opportunities to voice opinions and try new things, as well as offering support during difficulties. Interviews with F also show that the child is willing to express opinions at home. F noted that the child has aspirations, which increases their motivation to engage in various activities; however, when encountering something new, the child sometimes prefers to ask for help before attempting the task independently. Collectively, these interviews suggest that the child's self-confidence has developed well, particularly regarding expressing opinions and having goals or aspirations. Nevertheless, hesitation persists when facing new experiences, indicating a need for encouragement to boost the child's belief in their own capabilities.

Regarding independence, the interview with V shows that the child is capable of performing simple tasks, making minor decisions, and taking responsibility for their belongings, although reminders are sometimes still required. The interview with HR reveals that the child's independence is cultivated through habituation—such as encouraging them to complete tasks before seeking help and fostering a sense of responsibility for their possessions and duties. Meanwhile, the interview with F indicates that while the child can perform various simple tasks independently, they sometimes choose to ask their parents for assistance. The child is also able to make minor decisions but occasionally requires encouragement due to lingering uncertainty. When fulfilling responsibilities, the child still needs parental guidance and reminders to ensure tasks are completed. Based on these three interviews, the child's independence is developing but is not yet fully consistent. V focuses on the child's ability to handle daily tasks; HR explains the process of fostering independence through parenting practices; and F highlights the child's tendency to seek help and their need for encouragement when making decisions or fulfilling responsibilities.

Regarding empathy, the interview with V indicates that the child's capacity for empathy is becoming evident through habits such as helping friends and family and recognizing when others are sad or upset. Interviews with HR reveal that the child's concern for others is reinforced by parental modeling and guidance in understanding feelings from another person's perspective. Meanwhile, the interview with F shows that the child already cares about others, although they sometimes struggle to demonstrate that concern. The child enjoys being involved in helping family members and friends; however, when asked to help while engrossed in play, the child may feel annoyed or angry yet remains willing to assist. F also notes that the ability to understand others' feelings is emerging, even though the child still finds it difficult to express empathy. Thus, all three informants indicate that the child's empathy is developing: V highlights the behaviors of helping and understanding others' states; HR emphasizes the parents' role in setting an example; and F points out that while the capacity for caring exists, it is not always easily expressed, particularly when the child is focused on a favorite activity.

Regarding emotional expression, the interview with V shows that the child is capable of expressing the various feelings experienced in daily life. The interview with HR provides broader insight into the child's ability to articulate emotions such as sadness, disappointment, anger, and guilt, as well as the habit of sharing experiences with parents. Meanwhile, the interview with F indicates that the child can express happiness, sadness, and anger, though their mood can shift quite rapidly. The child is willing to share feelings with parents, although they may not volunteer information unless asked first. When feeling annoyed or sad, the child typically redirects their attention to a preferred activity, preventing those feelings from lingering too long. Overall, the interviews with all three informants suggest that the child's ability to express emotions is well-developed. V provides a general overview of emotional expression, and HR explains the types of emotions that can be conveyed and the nature of communication with parents, while F offers more specific information regarding mood swings and a child's tendency to open up after being asked questions by their parents.

Second Indicator: Children's Positive Emotional Development

Based on three indicators of a child's positive emotional development—namely happiness and satisfaction, optimism regarding the future, and gratitude and appreciation—interviews with V, HR, and F generally indicate a favorable level of positive emotional development. The three informants provided complementary perspectives on the child's emotional state. The interview with V focused more on expressions of positive emotion observed in daily life, whereas the interview with HR shed light on how positive emotions are fostered through parental support and child-rearing practices. Meanwhile, the interview with F provided specific details regarding the child's behavior in daily routines, including areas that still require guidance and the reinforcement of habits.

Regarding the aspect of happiness and satisfaction, the interview with V revealed that the child appears happy and content with the simple things in daily life. The child frequently expresses joy through activities such as singing and playing at home and feels at ease within the family environment. Interviews with HR reflected a similar picture, noting that the child appears cheerful and enthusiastic in daily activities. A comfortable family environment serves as a key factor in fostering the child's happiness. Similarly, the interview with F indicated that the child often shows happiness at home and is generally satisfied with daily life. However, challenges remain regarding the management of playtime, even though the parents have attempted to establish a routine for it. F also noted that while the child spends a significant amount of time playing with friends, the family environment remains the place where the child feels most comfortable. In summary, V, HR, and F all indicate that the child experiences a healthy sense of happiness and comfort. The perspectives differ in focus: V emphasizes expressions of joy through daily activities, HR highlights the influence of the family environment, and F illustrates that the child's sense of comfort remains strong despite spending considerable time playing with friends and still requiring supervision to manage playtime effectively.

Regarding the aspect of optimism and hope, the interview with V reveals that the child already has aspirations and remains willing to try when facing difficulties, particularly after receiving help and encouragement from their parents. Confidence in their own abilities is also evident when the child receives praise for their efforts. The interview with HR indicates that the child's optimism is fostered by allowing them the freedom to develop their interests and desires without excessive demands. When encountering difficulties, the child is accustomed to attempting a solution first and seeking guidance if obstacles arise. This approach helps the child understand that challenges can be faced without feeling pressured.

Meanwhile, the interview with F shows that the child holds hopes and aspirations for the future. The parents support the child's wishes—provided they are positive—and avoid imposing excessive academic demands. Although the child sometimes appears frustrated when facing obstacles, they persist in their efforts until they succeed. F also notes that the child's belief in their ability to succeed strengthens when receiving parental support. All three interviews demonstrate a healthy level of optimism. V highlights the child's courage to keep trying; HR explains the parents' role in providing freedom and guidance; and F illustrates the child's persistence despite initial frustration when facing difficulties. Parental support emerges as a common factor in building the child's confidence in their abilities and their hope for the future.

Regarding gratitude and appreciation, the interview with V indicates that the child is accustomed to saying "thank you," valuing gifts or assistance from others, and accepting situations without making excessive demands. The interview with HR reveals that this attitude of gratitude and appreciation is fostered by habitually using the words "please," "thank you," and "sorry." The child is also taught to understand that not every wish can be granted immediately; for instance, when the child wanted a laptop, the parents explained the appropriate timing and readiness for using such a device, enabling the child to accept the situation. Meanwhile, the interview with F shows that the child is accustomed to saying "thank you,"

although occasional reminders from the parents are still necessary. The child is also taught to appreciate gifts from others and to take good care of the items received. In expressing gratitude, the child is encouraged not to insist on having their own way and to accept instances when their wishes cannot be fulfilled. Based on these three interviews, it is evident that a sense of gratitude and appreciation has developed in the child. V describes the child's habit of expressing thanks and accepting circumstances; HR explains the process of habituation and the fostering of understanding regarding unfulfilled wishes; and F indicates that these attitudes are practiced in daily life, even though the child sometimes still requires reminders from the parents.

Third Indicator: Children's Mental Health

Based on two indicators of the child's mental health—namely affection and empathy, and positive emotional management—interviews with V, HR, and F generally indicate favorable development, despite variations in the child's observed behavior and emotional regulation. The interview with V highlights behaviors visible in daily life, whereas the interview with HR sheds light on the parents' role in fostering affection, empathy, and emotional management skills. Meanwhile, the interview with F provides specific insights into the child's responses during social interactions and when facing situations that provoke feelings of annoyance, sadness, or disappointment.

Regarding affection and empathy, the interview with V reveals that the child shares a strong emotional bond with the family. Affection is demonstrated through habits such as hugging parents upon returning home. The child also shows concern for friends facing difficulties and easily forms connections with others when treated kindly. The interview with HR reinforces these findings, explaining that familial affection is cultivated through parental modeling; specifically, hugging is practiced to foster care and emotional closeness between the child and parents. Meanwhile, the interview with F indicates that the child holds affection for the family, even if it is not always expressed directly. The child consistently demonstrates care for friends and others, with affection also evident in habits like offering greetings and smiles after school. Collectively, these interviews demonstrate the child's capacity for showing affection and empathy. V emphasizes affection through physical contact and concern for friends; HR explains how affection is nurtured through parental example; and F highlights that affection, while not always explicitly stated, is visible through attentive gestures such as greetings and smiles. Thus, the child's development regarding affection and empathy can be considered positive, even though such feelings are not always expressed openly.

Regarding positive emotion management, there are noticeable differences among the interview results from V, HR, and F. The interview with V indicates that the child is reasonably capable of controlling anger, although they still occasionally exhibit behaviors like stomping their feet when annoyed. When feeling sad or disappointed, the child is able to calm down after receiving hugs and attention from their parents. The child also tends to seek help when facing problems by sharing the issue with their parents and working together to find a solution. Interviews with HR reveal that the parents allow the child space to express emotions; when sad or disappointed, the child is permitted to cry until they feel relief. Once the emotional state subsides, the child is guided to understand their mistake and apologize. The child is also encouraged to try resolving problems independently before seeking assistance or guidance from their parents.

Meanwhile, the interview with F suggests that the child's ability to manage emotions still requires attention. F noted that when annoyed, the child sometimes has tantrums and cries loudly, even over relatively minor issues. However, the child is still able to calm down after releasing those emotions. F explained that when the child is crying, they are initially left alone without being questioned excessively, so as not to prolong the crying. Only after the child has stopped crying and calmed down are they encouraged to talk about their feelings or the problem at hand. When facing problems, the child shows an inclination to seek solutions but sometimes asks for parental help immediately without first attempting to resolve the issue themselves.

DISCUSSION

How the construction of a child's feelings and emotions is understood within the framework of mental health investment from an early age.

Children possess the innate ability to feel and express emotions.

Understanding a child's emotional makeup begins with the recognition that they are not individuals devoid of emotions; rather, they are already capable of experiencing and displaying a wide range of feelings—such as happiness, sadness, fear, disappointment, anger, and even guilt. However, their ability to manage and express these emotions is not yet fully mature, as it continues to develop alongside their age and experiences.

Research findings indicate that the children participating in the study were already able to express their feelings in various ways. Some children could talk to their parents when facing problems, while others tended to manifest their emotions through crying, mood swings, or simple reactions. This demonstrates that emotional expression is an integral part of the developmental process, meaning children still require guidance from adults.

From the perspective of investing in mental health, these fundamental emotional skills need to be nurtured from an early age. Parents should not view a child's crying, anger, or sadness merely as negative behavior; instead, these emotions should be understood as a form of communication regarding what the child is experiencing. With appropriate guidance, children can gradually learn to recognize, articulate, and manage their emotions.

The emotional bond with parents serves as the primary foundation.

A child's emotional development is heavily influenced by the emotional bond between child and parent. Research indicates that hugs, attention, communication, opportunities to share stories, and the acceptance of a child's feelings can foster a sense of security. For instance, when a child feels sad or disappointed, a parent's attention and a hug can help them regain their composure. In other cases, children are given the chance to cry until they feel relief; once their emotions have settled, they are then encouraged to talk about the issue at hand.

This demonstrates that parents serve not only as providers of physical needs but also as a source of emotional safety. When children feel their emotions are accepted rather than immediately judged, they become more willing to express how they feel. From the perspective of mental health investment, a warm emotional bond represents a long-term investment; experiences of safety and responsiveness during childhood lay the foundation for self-confidence, communication skills, and the ability to manage emotions.

Parenting styles shape how children manage their emotions.

Research indicates that parenting style is a key factor in a child's positive emotional development. The three informants described an approach where children are given opportunities to express their opinions, attempt tasks independently, and make simple decisions, while also receiving assistance and guidance when facing difficulties. This pattern reflects a democratic parenting style, characterized by a balance between freedom, support, guidance, and boundaries. Such a parenting style helps children understand that they have the freedom to grow while acknowledging the existence of limits and responsibilities. Children are neither left entirely without guidance nor subjected to constant control.

The study also links this approach to Baumrind's theory of democratic (or authoritative) parenting. Parental warmth and responsiveness are combined with clear rules and boundaries, allowing children to develop independence while still receiving supervision. Thus, investing in mental health does not mean allowing children to do whatever they please; rather, it involves granting freedom accompanied by appropriate support, guidance, and boundaries.

Positive emotions are built through everyday experiences.

Positive emotions—such as happiness, optimism, gratitude, empathy, compassion, and self-control—are not cultivated merely through advice. Research indicates that these emotions develop through daily experiences, role modeling, and the habits established within the family. For instance, children can be encouraged to say "please," "thank you," and "sorry," to appreciate what others give them, to help family members or friends, and to learn to accept situations where their desires cannot immediately be met.

This means that children learn about emotions and social relationships through what they directly observe and experience. When parents demonstrate empathy, respect for others, and emotional self-control, children gain tangible examples to emulate. Therefore, within the context of investing in mental health, small habits practiced consistently hold significant value. Such habits gradually shape the way children emotionally respond to the challenges of daily life.

Independence strengthens the construction of positive emotions.

Fostering independence plays a crucial role in a child's emotional development. Research indicates the importance of giving children opportunities to perform simple tasks, make minor decisions, and take responsibility for their belongings or duties. In some cases, children are even encouraged to try completing a task on their own before asking for help. When a child successfully accomplishes something independently, they gain the experience of realizing, "I am capable of doing this." Such experiences reinforce their self-confidence and sense of competence. Conversely, when a child faces difficulties, parental support helps them maintain the courage to keep trying. Therefore, providing opportunities for independence is not merely about mastering daily skills; it is also integral to fostering mental well-being.

Children learn to cope with challenges, try again, make simple decisions, and avoid easily feeling incapable.

Families and schools need to become a mutually reinforcing ecosystem.

The construction of a child's emotions does not occur solely within the family. From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, child development unfolds through interactions between the child and the various environments surrounding them. The family serves as the primary environment for shaping emotional habits, while schools and peers expand the child's social and emotional experiences. However, this study also notes an important limitation: the data obtained regarding schools is not as extensive as the data regarding families. Consequently, the study cannot definitively conclude that teachers or the classroom climate constitute the primary findings. While schools remain significant from the perspective of ecological theory, they do not represent the study's main empirical findings.

The relationship between family and school can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's concept of the *mesosystem*. This implies that a child's emotional development is optimized when the values and habits cultivated at home are reinforced at school. Table 1.1 below presents the construct of children's emotional development among the surveyed respondents.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Children's Emotional Development Indicators

Aspect	Child V (7 years old)	Child HR (3 years old)	Child F (9 years old)	Key Findings
Cheerfulness	Cheerful and active in daily activities.	Displays cheerfulness and positive responses to the environment.	Cheerful in carrying out daily activities.	The three children demonstrate positive emotional development through supportive activities and environments.
Self-confidence	Able to engage in activities and interact with the surrounding environment.	Beginning to demonstrate courage and independence appropriate to their age.	Able to engage in various activities, but still requires guidance in certain situations.	Parental support and guidance play an important role in developing children's self-confidence.
Independence	Relatively able to carry out daily activities independently.	Still requires parental assistance and guidance.	Able to carry out activities more independently, but still requires guidance.	Independence develops according to age, experience, and parenting patterns.
Empathy	Demonstrates concern and helping behavior toward others.	Beginning to imitate empathetic behavior demonstrated by parents.	Shows concern for others, but sometimes has difficulty expressing it when focused on preferred activities.	Parental role modeling and family habituation are important in the development of empathy.
Emotional expression	Able to demonstrate and express various feelings.	More likely to express emotions through simple responses, including crying when disappointed.	Able to express happiness, sadness, and anger and willing to share feelings when asked.	Children need a safe space to express their feelings without fear of being judged.
Emotional management	Able to control anger and regain calm after receiving parental attention.	Still requires parental assistance to calm down.	Able to manage emotions, although mood changes sometimes occur rapidly.	Emotional regulation develops gradually and requires age-appropriate guidance and support.
Affection	Demonstrates affection through hugging parents and showing concern for friends.	Affection is developed through closeness and examples provided by parents.	Demonstrates concern for people around them.	Warm emotional relationships help create a sense of security in children.
Communication with parents	Able to share problems with parents and seek solutions together.	Beginning to communicate through expressions and simple responses.	Willing to share feelings, particularly when prompted by parents.	Open communication helps children understand and express their emotions.
Happiness and satisfaction	Demonstrates happiness in response to simple things.	Demonstrates happiness through activities and parental attention.	Demonstrates positive emotions in daily life.	Positive experiences and parental attention support the development of happiness and satisfaction.
Optimism and hope	Demonstrates positive responses when facing new activities and experiences.	Beginning to develop through parental support and guidance.	Demonstrates hope and willingness to engage in activities, although still requiring guidance.	A supportive environment helps develop children's optimism and sense of hope.

Aspect	Child V (7 years old)	Child HR (3 years old)	Child F (9 years old)	Key Findings
Gratitude appreciation and	Able to appreciate positive things received in daily life.	Demonstrates positive responses to parental attention and pleasant experiences.	Beginning to show appreciation for things received from the surrounding environment.	Habituation and parental role modeling help develop gratitude and appreciation.

What factors contribute to the development of positive emotions within the family and school ecosystems?

Based on interviews with V, HR, and F, the development of a child's positive emotions is influenced by several factors within their immediate environment. The most prominent factors identified in the study include parenting styles, family support and emotional closeness, role modeling and the cultivation of habits, opportunities to develop independence, and peer interactions. These factors are interconnected in shaping cheerfulness, self-confidence, empathy, gratitude, optimism, and affection, as well as the child's ability to express and manage emotions.

Parenting Styles

Interview results indicate that parenting styles are a key factor in the development of positive emotions in children. Participants V, HR, and F all demonstrated practices where parents allow their children to express opinions, attempt tasks independently, and make simple decisions, while also providing assistance when the children encounter difficulties. These practices reflect the characteristics of a democratic parenting style—specifically, a balance between freedom, support, guidance, and boundaries [16]. Related work on parenting styles and practices provides further support for this interpretation [17], [18], [19], [20], [21].

In the case of V, the child is given opportunities to perform simple tasks and make decisions but still requires parental assistance and guidance. A similar situation is observed with F, where the child is capable of performing some activities independently but occasionally seeks help when facing new situations or difficulties. Meanwhile, HR's parenting style appears more structured, emphasizing the habit of completing tasks before asking for help and fostering a sense of responsibility for tasks and personal belongings.

These differences show that while all three parents provide space for their children to grow, they vary in their levels of consistency and guidance. HR's approach appears more structured, whereas the cases of V and F highlight the children's continued need for parental assistance and direction. This demonstrates that parenting styles supporting positive emotional development are characterized not only by granting freedom but also by providing support, communication, boundaries, and consistency [16]. Similar links between mindful or supportive parenting and children's emotional regulation have also been reported [22], [23], [24]–[26], [27], [28], [29].

These findings align with Baumrind's theory of democratic (or authoritative) parenting, which combines parental warmth and responsiveness with the establishment of clear rules and boundaries [16]. This style allows children to develop independently while remaining under parental supervision and guidance. The study's findings are further supported by Rohmiana et al. [30], who identified the influence of parenting styles on the socio-emotional development of children aged 4–5 years. The study indicates that socio-emotional development encompasses the abilities to interact, cooperate, exercise self-control, help others, share, be independent, and maintain discipline [30].

Another study conducted in Indonesia in 2024 also demonstrates a link between authoritative parenting and the development of emotional regulation; specifically, the more effectively this parenting style is implemented, the better a child's ability to manage their emotions [31]. Thus, the findings by V, HR, and F reinforce the idea that a parenting style providing both freedom and guidance can serve as a crucial foundation for a child's positive emotional development.

Family Support and Emotional Closeness

A second factor evident in the research results is the emotional support and closeness between the child and their parents. Participant V demonstrated emotional closeness with the family through the habit of hugging parents upon returning home; when feeling sad or disappointed, the child would regain a sense of calm after receiving hugs and attention from the parents. Findings regarding participant HR also indicated that parents provided space for the child to express emotions. When the child felt sad or disappointed, they were allowed to cry until they felt relief. Once the emotions subsided, the parents would engage the child in conversation to understand the issue at hand.

Meanwhile, participant F showed a willingness to share feelings with parents, although sometimes only after being prompted by questions or receiving attention. These findings suggest that the parents' emotional presence provides a sense of security for the child to express their feelings. The child receives support not only when happy but also acceptance when experiencing anger, sadness, or disappointment. Such

conditions help the child learn that emotions are things that can be recognized and communicated [32]. This pattern is consistent with attachment and family emotion-socialization research [33], [34], [35], [36], [37], [38], [39], [40], [41].

These findings can be explained through the perspective of attachment theory, which posits that a secure and responsive relationship between child and caregiver forms a crucial foundation for social and emotional development [32]. In the context of this study, hugs, attention, opportunities to share, and parental responses to the child's sadness demonstrate emotional support that helps the child feel secure when navigating emotional experiences. Thus, emotional closeness within the family serves as a vital environment that fosters the development of the child's self-confidence, ability to express emotions, and capacity to manage feelings.

Leading by Example and Cultivating Habits

Interview results also indicate that parental modeling and the fostering of habits contribute to the development of positive emotions. HR explained that children are taught to use words such as "please," "thank you," and "sorry," and are shown examples of how to understand the feelings of others. F noted that the child has become accustomed to saying "thank you" and appreciating what others give, although reminders are sometimes still needed. V also observed that the child is capable of appreciating the help and gifts received from others and does not always insist on having their own way. These findings demonstrate that the formation of positive emotions occurs not only through verbal instruction but also through behavioral examples and consistent habit-building. When children directly witness and experience behaviors such as showing appreciation, apologizing, expressing gratitude, and helping others, they gain concrete experience in how emotions and social relationships are managed.

These findings align with research in Indonesia positioning parents as educators, companions, and role models in children's socio-emotional development. Such research also highlights that the quality of time spent with children and parental modeling are crucial factors in supporting socio-emotional development [42]. Thus, parental modeling and the cultivation of habits within the family contribute to the development of gratitude, empathy, appreciation for others, and self-control in children. Evidence on parent emotion socialization and modeling further supports these pathways [43], [44], [45], [46], [47], [48].

Opportunities to Develop Independence

The next factor involves providing children with opportunities to develop independence. Interview results from Participant V indicate that the child is already capable of performing simple tasks, making minor decisions, and taking responsibility for their personal belongings. Participant HR encourages the child to attempt to complete tasks independently before seeking assistance. Meanwhile, Participant F notes that while the child is able to perform various simple activities, they sometimes still choose to ask their parents for help. These findings demonstrate that parents have created space for children to gain experience in doing things independently. Successfully completing a task fosters a sense of competence and boosts self-confidence. Conversely, when children encounter difficulties, parental support helps them persist in their efforts without feeling like failures.

From a psychosocial development perspective, opportunities for independent action play a crucial role in shaping a child's sense of competence and self-confidence. Research by Rohmiana et al. [30] further indicates that independence is an aspect of socio-emotional development linked to parenting styles [30]. Thus, providing opportunities for independence serves as a mechanism linking parenting styles to positive emotional development—specifically self-confidence, optimism, and a sense of competence—in children. Related research also connects preschool self-regulation and mindful decision-making with social-emotional competence [49], [50], [51].

Parents' Education Level

In addition to parenting styles and emotional support, parental education levels can contribute to the development of positive emotions in children, as education influences parents' knowledge, mindset, and methods of providing stimulation. Interviews with V, HR, and F revealed that parents strive to give their children opportunities to express opinions, experiment, make decisions, manage emotions, and solve problems. This demonstrates an understanding that children require not only the fulfillment of physical needs but also support for their psychological and socio-emotional development.

Parental education plays a role in shaping how parents perceive their children's developmental needs. Research by Novrianti, Novitawati, and Sari found that parental education levels influence children's socio-emotional development, alongside the impact of parenting styles [52]. Conducted with 173 parents in Banjarmasin, the study demonstrated that parental education affects children's socio-emotional development. Research on family conditions in Indonesia also indicates that parental education is a background factor linked to how parents view their children's values and needs, although the specific

influence may vary depending on family and environmental contexts. Broader reviews of parenting education in Indonesia likewise underline the role of parental knowledge and support systems [53].

Thus, parental education can be viewed as a supporting factor that shapes the quality of parenting—particularly regarding a parent's ability to provide stimulation, communication, guidance, and opportunities appropriate for the child's developmental stage. However, the education factor in this study requires careful interpretation, as the interview data primarily reflect parenting practices rather than directly comparing the specific education levels of the informants. Indonesian studies also show that maternal emotion regulation and parenting stress form part of the broader context in which parenting practices operate [54], [55], [56].

Values Held by Parents

Another factor contributing to the development of a child's positive emotions is the set of values held and instilled by parents within family life. Interview results reveal that the values emphasized in the parenting practices of V, HR, and F include affection, responsibility, empathy, gratitude, respect for others, and the ability to accept circumstances.

These values are reflected in parental habits such as teaching children to say "please," "thank you," and "sorry"; helping family members and friends; appreciating gifts from others; and understanding that not all desires can be fulfilled. HR's case also highlights parental efforts to model how to understand the feelings of others. Meanwhile, F's case indicates that the child has begun to practice the values of respect and gratitude, although reminders from parents are still needed in certain situations.

These findings demonstrate that the values held by parents serve as the foundation for the behaviors and habits introduced to their children. Values consistently practiced in daily life can evolve into habits that shape how children interact with others. For instance, the value of empathy is evident in helping friends; responsibility is shown through completing tasks; and gratitude is demonstrated by the habit of saying "thank you" and accepting situations where desires remain unfulfilled.

These findings are supported by research conducted by Safira et al. regarding parental guidance in shaping children's life values at home. Their study shows that parents play a role in instilling values such as honesty, empathy, responsibility, and discipline, which in turn support children's social-emotional development and social skills [42]. Another study conducted in Indonesia in 2024 also indicates that parental guidance plays a role in fostering the development of children's moral and religious values.

In the Indonesian context, the values held by families can also be influenced by social, cultural, and religious factors. A 2026 study of 255 parents across urban and rural areas in Indonesia examined children's values across economic, social, emotional, and religious dimensions and found contextual differences associated with place of residence [57]. Therefore, the values instilled by parents cannot be separated from their respective cultural backgrounds and family lives.

The School Ecosystem as a Supportive Environment

Based on the available interview data, there is less information regarding the school environment than there is regarding the family. Consequently, this study cannot definitively conclude that teacher-related factors or the classroom climate constitute the primary findings derived from the interviews with V, HR, and F. Nevertheless, from a developmental ecology perspective, the school remains a crucial environment for a child's social and emotional development. This can be explained through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which views child development as the outcome of interactions between the individual and various interconnected environments [58]. The family and the school are among the immediate environments that directly provide developmental experiences for the child. In the context of this study, the family serves as the primary environment shaping the child's emotional habits, while the school and peers act as environments that expand upon those social and emotional experiences. Therefore, should school-related data become available, aspects such as teacher-child relationships, classroom climate, peer interactions, and teacher support in helping children manage their emotions could be analyzed as components of the school ecosystem. Research on social-emotional learning and supportive school environments provides a broader educational basis for this interpretation [59], [60], [61], [62], [63], [64], [65], [66], [67].

Synergy between Family and School

Based on the overall findings, a child's positive emotional development can be understood as the result of interactions across various environments. The family lays the foundation through parenting styles, affection, habit formation, role modeling, and opportunities to develop independence. Meanwhile, the school environment and peer interactions can reinforce these capabilities through social experiences and learning activities.

From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, the relationship between the family and school environments can be understood through the concept of the **mesosystem**—the connection between two environments that directly influence a child's development [58]. This implies that positive emotional development is optimized when the values and habits cultivated at home are reinforced at school. Thus, fostering a child's positive emotions is not the sole responsibility of either the family or the school in isolation; rather, it requires continuity between the two. Values such as empathy, responsibility, gratitude, independence, and emotional regulation skills need to be consistently reinforced in both home and school environments.

CONCLUSION

The construction of a child's feelings and emotions—viewed through the lens of early mental health investment—is understood as a gradual developmental process shaped by the child's interactions with their immediate environment. While children possess an innate ability to feel and express emotions from the start, the capacity to manage them requires guidance. Investing in mental health involves fostering warm emotional bonds, balanced parenting, modeling and habituation, opportunities for independence, and support from both family and school environments. Through this process, a child's fundamental feelings can gradually evolve into more positive emotional attributes, such as self-confidence, empathy, optimism, gratitude, compassion, and emotional regulation skills.

The discussion indicates that the development of a child's positive emotions within the family and school ecosystems is influenced by several interconnected factors: parenting styles, family emotional closeness, modeling and habituation, opportunities to develop independence, parental education, family values, and peer interactions. These factors play a pivotal role in shaping self-confidence, empathy, gratitude, responsibility, and compassion, as well as the child's ability to manage and express emotions. The family serves as the primary environment for cultivating positive emotions through parenting that balances freedom with guidance, provides emotional support, fosters positive behavioral habits, and offers opportunities for independent learning. Meanwhile, schools and peers reinforce a child's socio-emotional development through interactions and learning experiences. Thus, the development of positive emotions is not solely dependent on the family or the school but results from the interplay between the two. Synergy between family and school is essential to ensure that values such as empathy, responsibility, independence, and gratitude—along with emotional regulation skills—consistently develop throughout the child's life.

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