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Secure Attachment in Supporting Self-Esteem in Three-Year-Old Children: A Fitrah Perspective in Islam

Desinta Hafina Sari¹, Heni Novianti², Nur Ilham³

^{1,3} Sekolah Otak Kanan Indonesia

² Independent Researcher Indonesia

Email: sintahafina@gmail.com; heninovianti01@gmail.com; ilhamkanan19@gmail.com

Abstract. Secure attachment refers to a secure emotional bond between a child and their primary caregiver, marked by responsiveness, emotional availability, and the caregiver's capacity to provide a sense of safety and comfort. In early childhood, this relational experience is widely regarded as a foundational factor in the development of self-esteem, the child's evolving sense of self-worth and self-appreciation. This article examines the role of secure attachment in shaping the self-esteem of three-year-old children by drawing together perspectives from developmental psychology and the Islamic concept of fitrah, the innate, God-given disposition that guides human growth and potential. The discussion is organized around four interrelated dimensions: parental responsiveness, emotional validation, positive affirmation, and the provision of safe opportunities for environmental exploration. Findings suggest that when these elements are consistently present, children develop a stable internal sense of security that enables them to explore their surroundings, attempt new activities independently, express themselves freely, and recognize their own competence. Collectively, these experiences point to a meaningful link between secure attachment and the emergence of healthy self-esteem during this critical developmental period. Beyond its psychological dimension, this parenting pattern also reflects an approach that honors children's inherent potential and respects the natural trajectory of their development, as understood through the lens of fitrah. Rather than positioning fitrah as a replacement for empirical findings in developmental psychology, this article treats it as a complementary and integrative framework, one that enriches and deepens the interpretation of how secure attachment contributes to self-esteem formation in early childhood, while remaining grounded in established psychological theory.

Keywords: *early childhood, fitrah, parenting, secure attachment, self-esteem*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a formative period for social, emotional, and personality development. At this stage, interactions with parents and other caregivers do more than satisfy physical needs; they also provide repeated relational experiences through which children learn whether other people are dependable, whether emotions can be expressed safely, and whether their own efforts are worthy of attention. The quality of caregiving relationships is therefore a central developmental context for the emergence of security, autonomy, and an early sense of personal competence.

Secure attachment describes a relationship in which a child can approach a caregiver for comfort and use that caregiver as a secure base from which to explore. Indonesian studies have linked secure attachment with children's independence, adjustment, language expression, emotional intelligence, and discipline-related outcomes [1], [2], [3], [4]. These findings suggest that attachment is not merely emotional closeness. Rather, a secure relationship may organize the conditions under which children can explore, communicate, regulate distress, and gradually act with greater autonomy.

International evidence also supports a connection between attachment security and positive self-evaluation. Pinquart's [5] meta-analysis of 202 studies involving 81,485 participants found a positive association between attachment to parents and self-esteem. In a longitudinal study of young children, Clark and Symons [6] reported that concurrent attachment security at age five was positively related to self-esteem, suggesting that children's representations of themselves are meaningfully embedded in relational experience. Seon [7] further showed that self-esteem can function as a mediator between parental attachment security and social anxiety. Although these studies differ in age group and design, they collectively reinforce the proposition that a dependable attachment relationship is relevant to how children come to experience themselves as worthy, capable, and socially secure.

Caregiver sensitivity is particularly important within this process. Madigan et al. [8], through meta-analytic evidence, identified maternal and paternal sensitivity as key determinants of child attachment security. Sensitivity involves noticing children's signals, interpreting them appropriately, and responding in ways that are timely and proportionate. In everyday parenting, this may be visible when an adult recognizes distress without dismissing it, offers assistance without immediately taking control, and remains emotionally

available while the child attempts a task. Such interactions can communicate two complementary messages: the child is protected when support is needed, and the child is trusted to act when capable.

At approximately three years of age, self-esteem should be interpreted cautiously. A three-year-old does not necessarily possess the stable, abstract, and verbally elaborated self-evaluation expected in older children. Early self-esteem may instead be inferred from developmentally appropriate behavioral expressions, including willingness to try, pride following success, expression of preferences, help-seeking, acceptance of support, and the capacity to return to exploration after reassurance. Research with preschool children also indicates that academic self-esteem is related to social skills, problem behaviors, and teacher-child relationships [9], underscoring that children's sense of competence develops within relational contexts across both home and educational settings.

The psychological discussion can be extended through the Islamic concept of *fitrah*. In Islamic educational thought, children are understood as possessing inherent potential that requires nurturing through family relationships, education, moral guidance, and developmentally appropriate experiences [10], [11], [12]. *Fitrah*-based education emphasizes alignment between family values and educational practice, parental accompaniment, and respect for developmental stages [13], [14]. This perspective shifts the emphasis from shaping a child through unilateral adult demands toward accompanying the growth of capacities that are already present as potential.

An Islamic model of warm, gradual, and respectful guidance can also be interpreted through the account of Luqman in Qur'an 31:13-18 [15]. The passage presents guidance through relational communication, moral instruction, and humility rather than humiliation. Within the present study, this framework is not treated as empirical proof of attachment theory. Instead, it functions as a complementary interpretive lens for considering how responsive caregiving, emotional warmth, and respect for developmental readiness may support the child's emerging sense of worth.

Accordingly, this study aimed to examine how secure attachment may support early manifestations of self-esteem in a three-year-old child and to interpret the observed caregiving pattern through both developmental psychology and the Islamic perspective of *fitrah*. Particular attention was given to parental responsiveness, emotional validation, positive affirmation, secure-base behavior, exploration, independence, self-expression, and the child's emerging sense of competence.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design supplemented by library research. The case study approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of how secure attachment was expressed in everyday caregiving and how those relational patterns were associated with early manifestations of self-esteem. The literature component was used to integrate developmental psychology with the Islamic concept of *fitrah*. Primary Islamic sources, particularly the Qur'an, and relevant developmental and educational literature were used as interpretive resources rather than as substitutes for the empirical case data.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at Sekolah Otak Kanan Indonesia. Purposive sampling was used because the case was selected on the basis of its relevance to the research focus rather than through random selection. The focal participant was one child, identified by the initial L, aged 3 years and 3 months. The child's parent and school facilitator also participated as informants. The mother was the primary caregiver and worked from home, resulting in relatively high day-to-day mother-child interaction. This contextual characteristic was considered relevant when interpreting the continuity of emotional availability and secure-base behavior across daily routines.

Data Sources and Instruments

Data were collected through two complementary techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parent and facilitator. The interview guide covered eight domains: parental responsiveness; emotional validation and accompaniment; positive affirmation; felt security and attachment; exploration and independence; self-expression and perceived competence; the relationship between secure attachment and self-esteem; and *fitrah*-oriented Islamic parenting. Second, direct observations focused on the child's behavior and the caregiver's behavior. A categorical observation guide used the classifications Present, Sometimes Present, and Not Yet Present, accompanied by descriptive field notes. The child indicators addressed help-seeking, secure-base behavior, exploration, persistence, self-expression, independence, emotion regulation, and positive self-response. Caregiver indicators addressed responsiveness, sensitivity, emotional validation, support, affirmation, opportunities for exploration, availability as a source of security, and assistance without taking over the child's activity.

Procedure and Data Interpretation

Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and organized according to the study domains. Observations were conducted in the child's natural school and/or home context and documented descriptively. Interview and observation data were then compared to identify convergent patterns. The interpretation remained case-based: categorical observation results were used to describe the consistency with which behaviors appeared, not to generate population-level statistical claims. Developmental literature was subsequently used to discuss the psychological meaning of the patterns, while fitrah-oriented literature and Qur'anic guidance were used as a complementary Islamic interpretive framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Parental Responsiveness as a Relational Foundation

The interview data portrayed parental responsiveness as an active process of reading the child's cues rather than simply reacting after distress became intense. The parent reported recognizing needs through facial expression, body movement, and direct communication, while also asking questions when the child's intention was unclear. When L requested help with a task such as putting on shoes, the parent generally waited, observed, and provided step-by-step direction before offering fuller assistance. This pattern is better understood as graduated support than as task completion on the child's behalf. It preserves the child's participation in the activity while keeping adult support available.

This pattern is consistent with the broader attachment literature in which caregiver sensitivity is associated with attachment security. Madigan et al. [8] emphasize that sensitive caregiving depends on accurately noticing and responding to child signals. In the present case, responsiveness appeared to combine emotional availability with respect for agency. This combination matters for early self-esteem because repeated experiences of 'I can try, and help is available if I need it' may allow competence and security to develop together rather than as competing goals. The parent's practice of pausing before taking over also aligns with the child's observed efforts to complete activities independently.

Emotional Validation and Co-Regulation

L expressed sadness, anger, fear, and disappointment through facial expression and behavior, with emotional intensity varying across situations. In contexts perceived as threatening, including encounters with a peer previously experienced as rough, the child showed self-protective behavior. The parent described responding to crying or strong emotion by offering physical closeness, such as a hug or being held, and by using breathing strategies. Islamic practices for managing anger, including sitting, lying down, or performing ablution, were also introduced as calming routines. Importantly, the parent reported allowing the child time to cry, become angry, or tell a story without immediately suppressing the emotion.

During school separation, the parent's response was especially illustrative. The adult lowered their body to the child's eye level, offered a hug, allowed time for the feeling to settle, discussed the fear, and ended with brief reassurance. This sequence suggests co-regulation rather than emotional dismissal. From an attachment perspective, a caregiver who remains available during distress can function as a secure haven, while successful calming can make renewed exploration possible. The observation data support this interpretation: L was able to return to a calmer state after receiving support. Such experiences may contribute indirectly to self-esteem by teaching the child that difficult emotions are manageable and do not threaten relational acceptance.

Positive Affirmation, Self-Expression, and Emerging Competence

Positive affirmation in this case was primarily linked to effort and successful independent action. For example, when L brushed their teeth independently, the parent offered spontaneous verbal appreciation and connected the achievement with gratitude. The child later reproduced this interaction in pretend play while 'teaching' a younger sibling. This imitation is noteworthy because it suggests that affirming relational scripts were not only received but also incorporated into the child's own play repertoire.

L also displayed direct expressions of preference and pride. The parent described the child as having clear choices from approximately 2 to 2.5 years of age and as remaining consistent even when alternatives were offered. Statements such as 'Mom, I'm pretty, right?' and 'I can do it!' represented spontaneous expressions of self-evaluation and perceived competence. At age three, such statements should not be equated with a mature, global self-esteem construct. Nevertheless, they provide developmentally meaningful evidence that the child is beginning to organize experiences of agency, success, and social affirmation into a positive sense of self. Clark and Symons [6] similarly found a positive concurrent association between attachment security and self-esteem in young children, while Pinquart's [5] broader meta-analysis supports a positive association between parental attachment and self-esteem across studies.

Secure-Base Behavior, Separation, and Exploration

The mother functioned as L's primary source of security, a pattern plausibly supported by the high amount of daily contact associated with working from home. The father could also provide comfort when present, although the child more often oriented toward the mother. Temporary separation initially elicited reluctance and questions about why the parent needed to leave. Rather than forcing separation without preparation, the parent used advance explanation and negotiation. Following this briefing, the child could accept being left with another caregiver without excessive distress. On reunion, L showed marked happiness.

These patterns are compatible with the secure-base and secure-haven functions central to attachment relationships. The child did not appear to require constant physical proximity in order to function; instead, proximity and communication were used to restore or anticipate safety. This distinction is important because secure attachment is not equivalent to dependence. A secure base should make exploration more possible. In the present case, L explored unfamiliar situations but often needed a trusted person nearby when an activity felt especially challenging. The child's behavior therefore reflected a developmental balance between autonomy and proximity rather than complete independence.

Scaffolded Independence and Persistence After Difficulty

Concrete examples of emerging independence were visible across settings. At school, L could put away sandals and a bag; at home, the child was beginning to dress, put on socks, dispose of trash, and place used dishes and cups in their proper location. The parent consistently reported giving the child an opportunity to try before intervening. When assistance was needed, the adult guided the child's hands together with the child rather than replacing the child's action. This form of participation allowed L to retain ownership of the task and was followed by statements such as 'Mom, I can do it!'

At the same time, persistence was not uniformly established. When an attempt failed, L could initially grumble and, if frustration continued, become emotional or throw an object. On better-regulated occasions, the child remained open to patient guidance. The observation data likewise classified exploration, trying new activities, independence, and persistence after failure as Sometimes Present rather than consistently Present. This variability is developmentally informative. It indicates that early self-esteem should not be interpreted as uninterrupted confidence; rather, the child's sense of competence appears to be developing through repeated cycles of trying, becoming frustrated, receiving support, and trying again. A supportive caregiver can therefore protect agency without demanding premature self-sufficiency.

From Fear to Confidence Through Gradual Support

One of the clearest examples of the relationship between felt security and competence involved a high slide. L initially showed fear, and the parent responded with graduated physical support: first holding the child, then waiting at the bottom, and eventually allowing the child to use the slide independently. After mastering the activity, L not only attempted it alone but also encouraged peers and repeated calming language previously heard from the mother. This sequence illustrates how relational support can be progressively withdrawn as the child gains mastery.

The finding is consistent with the idea that secure relationships facilitate exploration by reducing the emotional cost of uncertainty. Rather than removing all challenge, the caregiver calibrated support to the child's readiness. The child's later encouragement of peers also suggests that confidence was expressed socially, not only individually. The case therefore supports an interpretation of self-esteem as relationally scaffolded competence: the child experiences the adult as dependable, attempts a challenge, acquires mastery, and then begins to act from a more internalized sense of capability.

Fitrah-Oriented Parenting as an Integrative Interpretation

The parent described several practices that emphasized developmental timing and respect for the child's process. Toilet training and weaning, for example, were approached gradually and gently rather than through abrupt or coercive methods. The child was not routinely compared with others, and the parent described strengths such as empathy, communication, imagination, role play, and dancing as capacities to be observed and supported. These practices are compatible with fitrah-oriented educational literature that views children as possessing inherent potential to be nurtured through appropriate family and educational environments [10], [11], [14].

Within this framework, responsiveness does not merely prevent distress; it can be interpreted as a way of protecting the conditions in which the child's potential can unfold. The gradual guidance depicted in Qur'an 31:13-18 also provides a theological-educational model of respectful instruction, moral direction, and humility [15]. However, the present study does not treat Qur'anic guidance as a psychological measurement or causal test. Its role is interpretive: it helps situate responsive, non-humiliating, developmentally sensitive caregiving within an Islamic understanding of human potential. This distinction strengthens the conceptual integration by keeping empirical developmental claims and religious interpretation methodologically clear.

Integrated Observation Findings

The direct observations broadly converged with the interview findings. Eight child indicators were consistently classified as Present, including seeking the parent when help was needed, approaching the parent when uncomfortable, returning to the parent after exploration, expressing preferences, requesting help, accepting support, calming after support, and showing happiness following success. Exploration, trying unfamiliar activities, independence, and persistence after failure showed greater variability, with several of these behaviors classified as Sometimes Present. The observation profile therefore suggests a child who already uses the caregiver as a relational resource while still consolidating confidence in challenging or frustrating situations.

All eight observed caregiving indicators were classified as Present: responsiveness, sensitivity, emotional validation, appropriate support, affirmation, opportunities for independent exploration, availability as a source of security, and assistance without taking over. The consistency of these caregiver behaviors provides an important context for interpreting the child's profile. The data do not establish that secure attachment caused the child's self-esteem, particularly because this is a single qualitative case without a comparison group. They do, however, show a coherent relational pattern in which caregiver availability and child expressions of agency repeatedly co-occurred. This interpretation is compatible with Pinquart's [5] meta-analytic evidence and with research linking caregiver sensitivity to attachment security [8].

Table 1. Observed Child Behaviors Related to Secure Attachment and Early Self-Esteem

No.	Aspect	Indicator	Result	Note
1	Relational responsiveness	Seeks the parent when assistance is needed	Present	
2	Felt security	Approaches the parent when uncomfortable	Present	
3	Secure base	Returns to the parent after exploration	Present	
4	Exploration	Explores the environment with confidence	Sometimes Present	Needs reassurance about environmental safety
5	Willingness to try	Attempts a new activity	Sometimes Present	
6	Persistence	Tries again after an unsuccessful attempt	Sometimes Present	
7	Self-expression	Expresses wants or preferences	Present	
8	Independence	Attempts to perform activities independently	Sometimes Present	
9	Help-seeking	Requests assistance when experiencing difficulty	Present	
10	Acceptance of support	Accepts parental help or support	Present	
11	Emotion regulation	Returns to a calmer state after receiving support	Present	
12	Positive self-response	Shows happiness after successfully completing an activity	Present	

Note. Categories describe the consistency of behaviors observed in this single case and are not inferential statistical measures.

Table 2. Observed Caregiver Behaviors Supporting Security and Child Agency

No.	Aspect	Indicator	Result
1	Responsiveness	Responds when the child needs assistance	Present
2	Sensitivity	Recognizes signs that the child needs support	Present
3	Emotional validation	Responds to the child's emotional expression	Present
4	Support	Provides assistance according to the child's needs	Present
5	Affirmation	Expresses appreciation for the child's effort	Present
6	Opportunity for exploration	Allows the child to try independently	Present
7	Availability as a secure base	Remains available when the child needs reassurance	Present
8	Non-intrusive accompaniment	Helps without taking over the entire activity	Present

CONCLUSION

This case study indicates that secure attachment was expressed through a consistent pattern of parental responsiveness, emotional validation, positive affirmation, and supportive accompaniment. Within this relational context, L used the caregiver as a source of security while also showing early manifestations of self-esteem through help-seeking, self-expression, pride after success, willingness to act independently, and increasing confidence in exploration. The less consistent appearance of exploration, independence, trying unfamiliar activities, and persistence after failure suggests that these capacities were still developing and were strengthened when support was gradual rather than controlling.

From a fitrah perspective, the observed parenting pattern can be interpreted as one that respects inherent potential and developmental timing. Gentle transitions, avoidance of comparison, emotional availability, and opportunities to try before receiving help reflect an approach in which the child is accompanied rather than forced toward predetermined outcomes. Fitrah therefore serves as a complementary interpretive framework for understanding the meaning of responsive caregiving in an Islamic educational context, while empirical claims about attachment and self-esteem remain grounded in developmental research.

Because the study involved a single case, the findings should not be generalized as causal evidence. Future research could include multiple cases, repeated observations across longer periods, and more systematic examination of effort-focused affirmation and persistence following failure. Such work would help clarify how relational security, developing competence, and fitrah-oriented parenting interact across different children and caregiving contexts.

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