



Early Childhood Development Within Multigenerational Caregiving Systems in Central Kalimantan

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| Received: May 25, 2025 | Revised: December 04, 2025 | Accepted: December 09, 2025 | Online: December 31, 2025 |
| ABSTRACT Multigenerational families living under one roof create a unique caregiving environment that can influence early childhood development in both positive and negative ways. This study aims to describe the developmental characteristics of young children living in multigenerational family settings in Central Kalimantan. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, with research conducted in two regions North Barito Regency and Murung Raya Regency. Primary data were collected from eight multigenerational families, consisting of four families in Teweh Baru District and four families in Puruk Cahu City. The findings reveal that children engage in diverse daily activities such as independent play, peer play, watching television, and using digital devices. Parents and grandparents also introduce early moral values, religious practices, and basic academic skills. For children attending preschool, formal learning activities also contribute to their developmental experiences. These daily routines collectively shape multiple domains of development, including cognitive, motor, language, social, and emotional growth. The study highlights that family dynamics, caregiving practices, and environmental stimulation within multigenerational households play a significant role in supporting or constraining early childhood development. Keywords: <i>Early Childhood Development, Multigenerational Families, Caregiving Practices, Daily Activities, Family Environment</i> | | | |

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has entered a demographic bonus period from 2012 to 2040, a phase accompanied by the rise of the sandwich generation. A 2022 survey conducted by Litbang Kompas across 34 provinces revealed that 67% or approximately 56 million Indonesians experience this phenomenon (Harmadi, 2022; Supriatna et al., 2022). The relationship between members of the sandwich generation and their parents is also shaped by Indonesia's diverse cultural landscape (Rari et al., 2022). This situation affects various aspects of family life, particularly when multiple responsibilities converge and become increasingly complex. Kusumaningrum (2018) notes that families in this position face physical, psychological, emotional, and financial challenges. Such pressures often lead to social dysfunction within the family structure (Khalil & Santoso, 2022).

At the same time, early childhood represents a critical developmental period. Children at this stage require skilled parenting and appropriate guidance to support the growth of cognitive, socio-emotional, linguistic, physical–motor, and religious–moral domains (Ashari & Anwar, 2022; Setyowati, 2013; Warmansyah et al., 2023). Therefore, adults are expected to model appropriate behavior and filter environmental stimuli that may influence young children's development (Bertini, 2011; Mansur, 2011). Within this context, multigenerational family structures can significantly affect early childhood development. Existing studies have highlighted the complexity of issues arising in such families (Tanuri, 2025; Yeyeng & Izzah, 2023). Research by Chen and Zhou (2022) further shows that providing simultaneous care for children and aging parents constitutes a substantial challenge, particularly because educational costs for children are often higher than expenditures for elderly family members an issue strongly correlated with economic conditions.

Several studies indicate that families with children under the age of 15 are more likely to experience heightened levels of depression due to the dual burden of caring for both children and other dependent family members (Brenna, 2021; Sudarji et al., 2022). Consistency in parenting also emerges as a challenge. Inconsistent or ineffective parenting practices can lead to problematic behaviors among young children, especially when guidance does not align with developmental needs (Andriono, 2017). Moreover, social, economic, and cultural differences within communities contribute to varying family dynamics (Cravey & Mitra, 2011). Socioeconomic pressures such as rising living costs and unstable employment prospects have led many families to revert to traditional multigenerational living arrangements for economic efficiency and the sharing of resources (Nurdiansyah & Ch, 2025).

Although previous research has examined various aspects of multigenerational families, most studies have focused primarily on economic, psychological, and general caregiving issues. Limited attention has been given to how multigenerational dynamics specifically shape early childhood development within distinct sociocultural and religious contexts. This gap highlights the need for studies that closely examine children's developmental experiences within multigenerational households, especially in regions with strong cultural identities such as Central Kalimantan. Such an approach provides deeper and more contextually grounded insights into the developmental conditions faced by young children.

Similar patterns are found in many families in Central Kalimantan, where complex multigenerational household arrangements remain prevalent. These conditions are influenced by various internal and external factors, including local social and cultural traditions that support co-residence across generations. Additionally, religious and belief systems significantly contribute to the persistence of this phenomenon. One recurring challenge is the presence of two distinct caregiving approaches those adopted by parents and those practiced by grandparents which often leads to inconsistencies that affect the emotional, social, and religious development of young children.

Based on these considerations, the present study aims to describe the developmental conditions of early childhood within multigenerational families in Central Kalimantan by examining the social, cultural, and religious factors that shape caregiving dynamics in this setting.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, which focuses on describing and interpreting phenomena naturally and holistically within their real-life context. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore, understand, and interpret the developmental dynamics of young children within multigenerational families. The nature of the research problem—which involves complex patterns of interaction, caregiving, and developmental variation—requires an in-depth, flexible, and context-sensitive method. A case study strategy was integrated into the approach to enable a detailed examination of children’s development as it occurs in everyday family life.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in two regions in Central Kalimantan: four multigenerational families residing in Teweh Baru District, North Barito Regency, and four families in Puruk Cahu City. The research took place over six months, from May to October 2024. Participants were selected based on predefined criteria to ensure relevance to the research focus. Families were included if they lived in a multigenerational household, had children aged 0–6 years, and had at least one additional family member such as grandparents living in the same home. This selection enabled the researcher to observe variations in caregiving practices and developmental outcomes within multigenerational settings.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation. Observations were carried out in natural family environments to capture children’s daily routines, interactions, and developmental behaviors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and caregivers to obtain deeper insights into caregiving practices, family dynamics, expectations, and perceived developmental progress. Documentation techniques included collecting field notes, photographs, and relevant supporting materials that strengthened the validity of findings. The combination of these techniques allowed the researcher to gather comprehensive, contextual, and triangulated data.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a systematic qualitative framework consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data condensation, the researcher selected, simplified, and organized raw data obtained from the field. In the data display stage, information was presented in narrative form to identify thematic patterns related to children’s development in multigenerational families. The final stage involved drawing conclusions by interpreting the meaning of emerging themes and verifying them against observational and interview data. This analytical process ensured that findings remained grounded in actual field experiences while maintaining methodological rigor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a detailed picture of early childhood development within multigenerational families in Central Kalimantan. Each family demonstrates unique caregiving dynamics, daily routines, and patterns of parent–child interaction, all of which shape children’s physical, social–emotional, language, and cognitive development. The results are presented as in-depth narratives organized into thematic sub-sections. Each sub-section includes original interview excerpts, English translations, coded identifiers, and analytical explanations that illustrate how daily family interactions influence children’s developmental outcomes.

Shared Caregiving, Social Preferences, and Emotional Expression

The first family illustrates a caregiving system shared between parents and the grandmother. Observations show that the child spends evenings and mornings with both parents, while daytime care is provided by the grandmother. This arrangement is reflected in the following interview quote:

“Night to morning with both parents, from morning to noon with his grandmother...” (C1-Routine)

This pattern demonstrates the typical multigenerational caregiving structure in which children receive emotional and behavioral modelling from more than one adult. Such arrangements can strengthen feelings of security while simultaneously exposing children to varied expectations and caregiving approaches.

In terms of emotional development, the child frequently exhibits unstable emotions. Parents tend to respond with minimal intervention, allowing the child to calm down independently and, when unsuccessful, fulfilling the child’s requests to avoid escalation. The parent expressed:

“Our child must be emotional, and our way of solving it is we just let him be until he calms down...” (C1-Emotion)

This approach reflects a permissive emotional regulation strategy in which the child is not yet guided to understand or manage feelings appropriately. Although allowing space for calming down can be beneficial, consistently giving in to children’s demands may interfere with long-term self-regulation.

In the domain of social development, the child prefers playing with older children and avoids peers perceived as “naughty.” The parent explained:

“likes to play with older children... those the same age are naughty to him.” (C1-Social)

This social preference reflects early social judgment and selective engagement. Although the child shows the ability to assess social comfort, limited interaction with peers of the same age may reduce opportunities to practice equal-level social negotiation skills. Overall, the first case highlights how shared caregiving, emotional sensitivity, and selective peer interaction collectively shape the child’s developmental trajectory.

Readiness-Based Religious Learning and Limited Outdoor Play

The second family applies religious instruction based on the child's developmental readiness. Parents introduce Islamic learning when the child reaches an age they perceive as more capable of understanding it. This is evident in the interview excerpt:

"Pendidikan agama tuh ilajar iki be awen mulai jahawen nyelo... ida tapi paham lagi." (C2-Religion)

Translated as:

"We have taught religious education to our children since they were six years old because if taught earlier, they would not really understand and would still prefer playing."

This reflects the family's emphasis on readiness, ensuring learning does not interfere with the child's natural play tendencies. Observation findings indicate that the child rarely plays outside the house and spends most of the day indoors. Such limited exposure to outdoor activities may influence physical and socio-emotional development by reducing opportunities for exploration, peer interaction, and gross-motor practice.

Emotionally, the child shows signs of instability and becomes easily upset, especially in interactions with siblings. Parents typically allow emotional expression to occur without substantial guidance unless the behavior becomes unsafe. While this strategy promotes independence, it may limit children's learning about emotional boundaries and coping strategies. Overall, the second case presents a developmental pattern strongly influenced by a home-centered play environment, readiness-based teaching, and minimal outdoor stimulation.

Strong Independence, High Imitation Ability, and Active Outdoor Play

The third family exhibits significantly advanced independence in the child's daily routines. The child is capable of performing self-help tasks without prompting, such as preparing drinks and organizing personal items. This autonomy appears in the following quote:

"langsung meandak sorangan aja, kada minta bantu..." (C3-Independence)

Translated as:

"He takes and puts things away on his own without asking for help."

This behavior suggests consistent modeling and reinforcement from caregivers, primarily the grandmother, who plays a pivotal role in establishing responsibility and routine discipline. In multigenerational families, grandmothers often become the primary source of structure, while parents focus more on emotional support.

The child also demonstrates strong imitation abilities, which are crucial during the preoperational stage. The child frequently mimics reading, singing, and even religious practices. This is shown in the quote:

"umpat jua R buka-buka buku... menpati yang baik..." (C3-Imitation)

Translated as:

"R also follows by opening books and imitates good behaviors."

These behaviors indicate that the child is highly observant and adopts modeled behaviors quickly, suggesting healthy cognitive and language development. Additionally, the child engages actively in outdoor play, which supports motor skills, environmental awareness, and peer socialization. The consistent outdoor activity provides opportunities for exploration that complement the structured discipline at home. Overall, the third case reflects a balance between independence training, strong observational learning, and rich sensory–motor experiences.

Expressive Language Emergence, Emotional Sensitivity, and Sibling Dynamics

The fourth family presents a developmental pattern characterized by early expressive language skills, emotional sensitivity, and complex sibling interactions. The younger child (NAS) demonstrates emerging communication abilities, often expressing needs through simple verbal cues and gestures. The mother explained:

“mabh..mabh.. sambil menunjuk.” (C4-Language)

Translated as:

“‘mabh..mabh..’ while pointing.”

Although vocabulary is still limited, the child shows intentful communication, indicating healthy early language development. Emotionally, the child displays frequent tantrums and is difficult to soothe. The mother often allows the emotional episode to subside naturally:

“...so I just let him until he stops crying...” (C4-Emotion)

While this may foster frustration tolerance, lack of verbal emotional coaching may prolong emotional immaturity. Sibling dynamics also significantly shape behavior. The older sibling often takes toys without permission, leading to conflict. This illustrates competition for attention within a multigenerational household containing multiple caregivers and limited personal space. The older sibling demonstrates more advanced abilities, such as writing and singing, highlighting developmental differences typical of preschool-aged children. Overall, the fourth case presents a rich picture of early language emergence, emotional dysregulation, and sibling influence on developmental behavior.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that multigenerational family structures play a significant role in shaping the developmental experiences of young children in Central Kalimantan. Across the four cases, children’s daily routines, emotional expression, language development, social behaviors, and autonomy were highly influenced by the caregiving patterns, cultural practices, and household dynamics characteristic of multigenerational living arrangements. These results resonate with the broader literature, which highlights the complexity of parenting practices in families where multiple generations coexist and share caregiving roles.

Multigenerational families often categorized within the broader discourse of the sandwich generation exhibit distinct caregiving dynamics that affect both children and adults. According to Bertini (2011), families simultaneously caring for young children and elderly parents often experience increased emotional strain and responsibility. This reality was reflected in our study, where caregiving responsibilities fluctuated between parents and grandparents, resulting in inconsistent emotional guidance and varied behavioral expectations. In the first and second cases, for example, children's emotional instability and selective social behavior mirrored caregiving inconsistencies, a phenomenon similarly identified by Andriano (2017), who found that inconsistent parenting within multigenerational households is strongly associated with early childhood behavioral challenges.

The results also illustrate the influential role of grandparents as primary caregivers, particularly in the third and fourth cases. This aligns with research from Chen and Zhou (2022), who highlight that in many Asian contexts, grandparents often assume central caregiving responsibilities due to economic pressures or parental work demands. In such arrangements, children tend to adopt behavioral patterns modeled by the most available caregiver. This was evident in Case 3, where the grandmother's structured routines and consistent expectations promoted strong independence and imitation skills, consistent with Mansur's (2011) assertion that young children learn most effectively through daily modeling and habituation within family settings.

On the other hand, the emotional sensitivity and tantrum-prone behavior observed in Case 4 reflect the challenges identified by Cravey and Mitra (2011), who argue that transitions between caregivers in multigenerational contexts can contribute to emotional fluctuations, particularly when children must adapt to differing behavioral norms across adults. These findings also align with Sudarji et al. (2022), who describe how multigenerational caregiving can create stress for adults, which then inadvertently shapes emotional environments for children.

The emergence of the sandwich generation phenomenon within Indonesian families is also evident in this study. Parents often shoulder dual responsibilities—caring for their own children while supporting older family members leading to fragmented attention and reliance on grandparents for daily child-rearing. Khalil and Santoso (2022) describe this dual burden as a form of role conflict that can impact family functioning, while Kusumaningrum (2018) emphasizes the emotional toll on working parents who must balance caregiving and financial responsibilities. These structural pressures were visible in several cases, particularly where parents' long working hours resulted in children spending the majority of their time with grandparents.

Interestingly, the study also highlights positive aspects of multigenerational caregiving. In Case 3, grandparent involvement was associated with high levels of independence, social confidence, and self-help skills. This finding corroborates Supriatna et al. (2022), who argue that multigenerational households can serve as rich social systems that provide cultural continuity, emotional security, and expanded learning opportunities for children. Furthermore, Brenna (2021) notes that despite the stress experienced by sandwich-generation families, shared caregiving can mitigate parental burden and create intergenerational learning benefits.

The results also reflect variations in children's access to play, outdoor activities, and social interactions. Several families limited children's outdoor play due to safety concerns or household routines, which restricted opportunities for gross motor development and peer interaction. Such constraints are closely connected to the developmental risks identified in Harmadi (2022), who warns that increasing household pressures on sandwich-generation families may inadvertently reduce children's access to stimulating learning environments.

Moreover, differences in language development such as delayed speech or emerging expressive vocabulary were closely tied to variations in caregiver engagement and stimulation. Children who were regularly spoken to, read to, or involved in daily household tasks demonstrated stronger language outcomes, consistent with Vygotskian perspectives embedded in Indonesian early childhood frameworks. These results reinforce Sugiyono's (2017) emphasis on understanding contextual factors in qualitative research, where developmental outcomes cannot be separated from the environment in which children are raised.

Another notable theme is the emotional instability shown in several children, particularly in Case 1 and Case 4. These emotional difficulties can be understood within the broader literature on role strain and limited parental availability in sandwich-generation households. Rari et al. (2022) found that individuals in the sandwich generation experience lower happiness and higher stress, which can reduce emotional responsiveness toward children. Such patterns were reflected in parental interviews where emotional fatigue influenced how parents responded to tantrums or behavioral challenges.

Overall, the findings of this study affirm that multigenerational caregiving in Central Kalimantan presents both opportunities and challenges for early childhood development. While the presence of grandparents can enrich children's learning environments and support independence, inconsistencies across caregivers and parental role strain may contribute to emotional instability and restricted developmental experiences. These results underscore the need for strengthened family support systems, improved caregiver education, and community-based programs that promote shared understanding of developmental needs among all generations involved in caregiving.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood activities in multigenerational families in Central Kalimantan, such as children playing individually or with peers, watching television, and playing with gadgets. Parents also begin to introduce children to norms, religious education, and academics. For children who enter preschool age, children have learning activities at school. These children's daily activities also have an impact on children's development, both cognitively, motorically, language, and socially and emotionally. For families, with the existence of this multigenerational family condition, the main caregiver and other family members can make a joint agreement in terms of early childhood development. There is openness and acceptance of each other's opinions, so in addition to social, cultural, and even religious factors as reasons for living in one house, the two things above can also minimize intergenerational conflict.

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