

The Role of Parents in Managing Negative Emotions in Early Childhood

Tabina Efrideanti^{1✉}, Wulansari Vitaloka², Amin Zaki³

Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini, Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kerinci, Indonesia

Universiti Islam, Malaysia³

Email: tabinaefrideanti2005@gmail.com

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Abstract

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Emotional development in early childhood is crucial for children's understanding of themselves and their environment. This study aims to describe parental roles in helping 4–6-year-old children recognize and manage negative emotions. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation, and analyzed thematically. Findings show that parents actively use visual media and physical activities to effectively support children's emotional regulation. The study highlights the importance of parental involvement in fostering emotional skills from an early age.



Corresponding Author

Keywords: Negative Emotions, Parental role, Early Childhood, Emotional regulation

Abstrak

Perkembangan emosional anak usia dini sangat menentukan kemampuan mereka memahami diri dan lingkungan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan peran orang tua dalam membantu anak usia 4–6 tahun mengenali dan mengelola emosi negatif. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi, lalu dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa orang tua berperan aktif melalui penggunaan media visual dan aktivitas fisik, yang efektif mendukung regulasi emosi anak. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya keterlibatan orang tua dalam pengembangan regulasi emosi sejak dini.

Kata Kunci: Emosi Negatif, Peran Orang Tua, Anak Usia Dini, Regulasi Emosi

INTRODUCTION

Emotional development in early childhood is one of the fundamental aspects that shapes how children understand themselves and the world around them (Utami, 2019; Warmansyah et al., 2023). Childhood is often referred to as the Golden Age, a critical period that significantly determines the direction of a child's development, including their ability to recognize and respond to various feelings they experience (Desmita et al., 2023; Mulyana et al., 2017; Wulandari et al., 2024). These feelings may be positive, such as happiness and pride, or negative, such as anger, disappointment, or fear. A child's ability to manage emotions especially negative ones serves as a crucial indicator of their mental health and their capacity to form healthy social relationships (La Mott &

Martin, 2019). Therefore, healthy emotional development is a foundational element in shaping a child's character and psychosocial well-being in the long term.

Negative emotions in early childhood pose a unique challenge both for children and their parents (Mawardah & Adiyanti, 2014). Ideally, children should be able to identify, express, and regulate emotions such as anger, sadness, and frustration in adaptive ways. In reality, many children struggle to channel their negative emotions and often express them through aggressive or withdrawn behaviors—such as tantrums, hitting, or avoiding social interaction (Oktavianingsih & Fitroh, 2021). This phenomenon reflects a limited ability to regulate emotions, which is often compounded by a lack of parental understanding of how to accompany children through emotional experiences. Many parents feel frustrated or anxious when faced with their children's negative emotions, and some avoid emotional conversations altogether, depriving the child of valuable opportunities to learn how to manage their feelings.

If left unaddressed, children's inability to deal with negative emotions can lead to long-term consequences. Children who are not equipped with healthy emotion regulation skills tend to grow into individuals who struggle with stress, frustration, and conflict in daily life (A. R. Putri & Rahmasari, 2021; Warmansyah et al., 2023). Suppressed or poorly regulated emotions can manifest in difficulties with social relationships, even into adulthood. Therefore, guiding children to recognize and accept negative emotions, and assisting them in finding constructive ways to manage those emotions, is a critical component of emotional education. In this regard, the role of parents is central as facilitators and emotional coaches who can turn emotional moments into meaningful learning experiences (Istiqomah et al., 2023).

Unlike adults, children do not yet possess the cognitive and affective capacities necessary to recognize and understand emotions on their own. The process of calming themselves during emotional outbursts, using language to express feelings, and developing coping strategies in difficult situations all require consistent guidance from adults—especially parents (Rahiem, 2023). Unfortunately, many parents also have limited understanding of emotion regulation concepts and may struggle to express their own emotions in healthy ways or respond appropriately to their children's emotional expressions. This lack of emotional literacy within families can result in children developing poor emotion regulation skills.

The strategic role of parents in supporting children's emotional development is also emphasized in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which argues that children learn emotional regulation through social interactions, particularly with meaningful adults in their lives. Parents serve as important mediators who help children label their emotions, express them appropriately, and practice healthy regulation strategies. This process is not only part of emotional education but also part of the transmission of family values and cultural identity that strengthens a child's sense of self (Kurniati, 2025).

Numerous studies have shown that parental involvement in children's emotional stimulation is positively correlated with the child's ability to regulate emotions (Azzahra

et al., 2021; Dey Putri et al., 2020; Yulianingsih et al., 2020; Yulianti et al., 2022). This is supported by interviews and observations that reveal children who receive emotional guidance from their parents tend to be calmer, more cooperative, and more empathetic toward others (Karisma et al., 2020). In addition, play-based activities conducted together with children have proven to be an effective medium for stimulating emotional intelligence. Structured and attentive play provides a safe and enjoyable environment for children to recognize, express, and regulate emotions (C. I. H. Putri & Primana, 2018; Sa’ida, 2018; Wandasari, 2019).

However, there is a significant gap in the practical implementation of emotional guidance for children, particularly in terms of appropriate and contextually relevant strategies for everyday family life. Many existing studies remain descriptive or theoretical, lacking concrete, adaptable, and easy-to-implement strategies for parents at home (Ariani et al., 2022; Mulyana et al., 2017; Sufa & Setiawan, 2018). Thus, it is necessary to conduct studies that specifically explore emotional coaching in real-life settings, focusing on everyday activities such as biking, gardening, or engaging in motor play as meaningful ways to channel negative emotions in a healthy manner. This study seeks to offer practical and contextual contributions that empower parents with applicable emotional support strategies.

Based on the aforementioned issues, this research aims to answer the following questions: how do parents introduce negative emotions to children; what are the obstacles parents face when guiding children in managing negative emotions; what kinds of activities can help children regulate negative emotions; what behavioral changes are observed in children after receiving emotional guidance; and what factors do parents believe contribute to the success of children in managing negative emotions? The objective of this study is to identify and analyze parental strategies in helping children manage negative emotions, explore the challenges encountered during the process, and uncover the supporting factors that influence successful outcomes. The results of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of effective and context-based family-centered emotional coaching programs.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach, aimed at obtaining an in-depth and contextual understanding of parental strategies in assisting young children to manage negative emotions. The use of a qualitative paradigm is justified by the need to explore complex social phenomena—specifically, the dynamic and multifaceted nature of emotion regulation within the parent-child relationship—which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Through this lens, the study seeks to reveal the subjective experiences, perspectives, and practices of parents as they guide their children through emotional challenges.

Given the focus on detailed, nuanced narratives and lived experiences, this research employs a case study approach. The case study design enables intensive

examination of a single case within its real-life context, thus allowing researchers to uncover rich, contextual insights that contribute to the understanding of how emotional development is supported within the family system. The selected case centers on a parent of a child aged 4 to 6 years, providing a representative instance of emotional coaching within early childhood settings.

The selection of the research participant was conducted using purposive sampling, guided by specific inclusion criteria to ensure relevance and information-rich data. The participant met the following criteria: having a child in early childhood (aged 4–6 years), possessing prior experience in addressing the child's negative emotional expressions, and demonstrating a willingness to engage in in-depth interviews. No exclusion criteria were applied, in alignment with the study's exploratory character and its intent to deeply investigate a singular parental perspective.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and complemented by naturalistic observations within the respondent's home environment. The home setting was intentionally chosen to foster openness and authenticity during the interview process, providing a safe space for the respondent to articulate their thoughts, emotions, and reflections without external pressures. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent to ensure accuracy and to enable comprehensive analysis. In addition, direct observation of parent-child interactions in their natural environment enriched the data and facilitated triangulation, strengthening the study's internal validity.

The main research instrument consisted of an interview guideline, which was meticulously developed based on the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly focusing on emotional regulation as a socially mediated process. The instrument was further refined through expert validation involving academic supervisors with expertise in early childhood education and developmental psychology. The validation process ensured that each question aligned with the overarching research questions and the study's theoretical underpinnings.

The interview guideline was structured around five core indicators, each reflecting a distinct dimension of parental engagement in emotional coaching: (1) the parent's ability to recognize and interpret negative emotional cues in children; (2) the challenges and barriers encountered when guiding children through emotional regulation; (3) the types of activities or strategies utilized to help children manage emotions constructively; (4) observed behavioral and emotional changes in the child as a result of parental guidance; and (5) perceived factors that contribute to the success of children in developing emotional regulation competencies. Each indicator was derived from existing literature and theoretical models to ensure the coherence and depth of data elicitation.

The following table presents the alignment between the indicators, sources of question formulation, and the focus of inquiry:

Table 1. Interview Instrument Grid

Indicator	Theoretical and Empirical Source	Focus of Inquiry
Role of parents in recognizing negative emotions	Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky)	How do parents identify and interpret negative emotions in their children?
Parental challenges in guiding children	Observational data and parenting literature	What are the main obstacles faced by parents when helping children manage negative emotions?
Emotion regulation strategies used by parents	Literature on parenting strategies	What specific actions or activities do parents engage in to support emotion regulation?
Changes observed in children	Child development and emotional growth literature	What changes, if any, are observed in the child's behavior and emotional expressions following parental guidance?
Contributing factors to emotion regulation success	Prior research on parenting and emotional development	What contextual or familial factors do parents believe support or hinder emotional regulation in children?

The data in this study were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive data analysis model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the first stage, data from interviews and observations were filtered and categorized according to relevance to the research objectives, focusing on parents' role in managing children's negative emotions. Relevant data were then organized into narratives, tables, or diagrams for easier identification of emerging patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying key themes and comparing findings with existing theory, followed by verification through data triangulation from interviews and observations, and expert consultation to ensure consistency and validity. This process provided a comprehensive understanding of parental strategies in helping children manage negative emotions, forming the basis for drawing valid and relevant conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study, based on the in-depth interviews and observations conducted with one respondent, provide valuable insights into how parents can play an essential role in helping children manage negative emotions. The interviewee shared several effective strategies and also outlined some of the obstacles they faced in dealing with their child's emotional challenges. These findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of emotional development and the importance of consistent parental support.

Parental Strategies in Recognizing Negative Emotions

One of the primary strategies employed by the respondent to help their child recognize and manage negative emotions involved the use of visual aids, particularly

pictures depicting different facial expressions. By showing the child pictures of various emotional states, such as anger, sadness, and frustration, the respondent helped the child identify and understand what they were feeling. This approach allowed the child to associate specific emotions with corresponding facial expressions, thereby enhancing emotional literacy. As one respondent stated: *"I usually show pictures of facial expressions to my child, so that he can distinguish between anger and sadness."* (R1). This technique aligns with emotional socialization theories, which highlight the importance of language and visual cues in helping children identify and express their emotions (Vygotsky, 2021). By using pictures, parents provide a tangible reference that helps children better articulate their emotional experiences.

Obstacles Faced by Parents in Helping Children Manage Negative Emotions

Despite the various strategies employed, the respondent faced several obstacles in helping their child regulate negative emotions, particularly in dealing with tantrum behavior. The lack of sufficient emotional explanation often led to the child's frustrations escalating into intense emotional outbursts such as excessive crying or even hitting. As described by the respondent: *"If my child has not been given an explanation, he can get angry and throw a tantrum, to the point of hitting."* (R1). This challenge is not uncommon in early childhood, where children may struggle to process and communicate their emotions effectively, leading to frustration and disruptive behavior. According to research by Turk et al., (2005), young children often rely on parents for emotional regulation guidance, and without adequate explanation or support, they may resort to behavioral outbursts as a coping mechanism.

Physical Activity as a Medium for Regulating Children's Emotions

An interesting finding in this study is the respondent's use of physical activities as a means to help the child regulate emotions. The respondent actively involved the child in various outdoor activities such as cycling, gardening, and playing ball. These activities serve as a healthy outlet for the child's emotions, allowing them to channel their energy into productive and positive physical exertion. As noted by the respondent: *"I usually take my children for a leisurely bike ride or gardening, so that their emotions are channeled through positive activities."* (R1). Research by Suryadi, (2023) supports this approach, stating that physical activities not only improve children's physical health but also play a significant role in enhancing emotional well-being by providing opportunities for emotional expression in a controlled and structured manner. Through such activities, children can release pent-up emotions, which helps reduce the likelihood of emotional outbursts.

Changes in Children's Emotional Regulation

The study also revealed that consistent guidance from the respondent led to noticeable improvements in the child's ability to manage emotions. After regular explanations and involvement in physical activities, the child began to exhibit a better

understanding of how to deal with negative emotions in a healthier way. The respondent reported that the child was more willing to listen and adopt the coping strategies suggested by the parents. As the respondent remarked: *"Thank God, he was willing to listen after being given an explanation about how to control his emotions."* (R1). This outcome aligns with theories of social-emotional development, which emphasize the role of caregivers in helping children learn emotional regulation skills (Erikson, 1950). When parents consistently model appropriate emotional responses and guide their children through emotional challenges, it fosters emotional resilience in children.

Factors Influencing Children's Success in Managing Negative Emotions

In addition to the parental strategies, the study also highlighted factors outside the family environment that influence the child's emotional regulation. Peer interactions were identified as a helpful factor in alleviating the child's emotional distress. The respondent observed that when the child interacted with peers, they were often able to shift focus and forget their feelings of anger or sadness. However, the surrounding environment also posed challenges. As the respondent shared: *"If a friend invites him to play, he immediately forgets the anger or sadness he is experiencing, but sometimes the surrounding environment can also make him even more upset."* (R1). This observation underscores the importance of a supportive social environment in emotional development. Peer relationships can provide emotional support, but the broader context, including family dynamics and external stressors, can also influence emotional outcomes. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that social interactions, both within the family and among peers, significantly contribute to emotional development.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the critical role that parents play in early childhood emotional development. Emotional regulation is an essential skill that children need to develop to successfully navigate life's challenges, and parents are the primary agents responsible for fostering this skill in their children. As indicated by the findings, the strategies parents use to help children manage negative emotions, such as using visual aids and engaging in physical activities, are effective ways to promote emotional literacy and self-regulation. These approaches reflect the theoretical perspectives of Vygotsky (1978), who emphasized the importance of social interaction in learning and emotional development. By providing children with clear examples of how to express emotions appropriately, parents facilitate the development of essential emotional skills that children can carry throughout their lives.

In alignment with existing research, such as that by Karisma et al. (2020) and Setyowati, (2013), this study reaffirms the notion that parents who actively assist children in recognizing and expressing emotions have a significant impact on their emotional well-being. The use of visual aids, such as facial expression charts, is a strategy that helps children better understand their emotions, thereby improving their emotional vocabulary and enabling them to manage feelings of anger, sadness, or

frustration more effectively. Additionally, physical activities serve as a constructive outlet for children's emotions, allowing them to release energy in a positive manner. These findings reinforce the importance of play and physical engagement in the emotional development of children, as highlighted by previous studies.

Furthermore, this study adds to the body of literature by emphasizing the role of external social factors, such as peer relationships, in emotional regulation. The respondent's observations suggest that children's emotional responses can be influenced by their interactions with peers, and while positive peer interactions can alleviate negative emotions, the broader environmental context can also exacerbate emotional distress. This finding highlights the need for a balanced approach to emotional development, where both internal factors (e.g., family support) and external factors (e.g., peer influence) are considered in promoting healthy emotional growth.

The role of parents in emotional regulation is further supported by theories of psychosocial development, particularly Erikson's stages of development, which emphasize the importance of family and social environments in shaping a child's emotional and social competencies. According to Erikson (1950), the family serves as the primary socializing agent, and the quality of parent-child interactions directly affects the child's ability to develop a strong sense of self and emotional resilience. By fostering a nurturing environment and providing children with the necessary tools to manage emotions, parents can significantly influence the trajectory of a child's emotional development.

In conclusion, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of emotional regulation in early childhood and the significant role that parents play in helping children navigate negative emotions. Through the use of visual aids, physical activities, and consistent emotional guidance, parents can help children develop emotional intelligence and self-regulation skills that will serve them throughout their lives. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on the importance of early emotional development and the central role of parents in shaping children's emotional and social well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the crucial role of parents in helping children recognize and manage negative emotions through visual aids and physical activities such as cycling and gardening. The findings reveal that these strategies are not only practical but also serve as effective social mediation that strengthens the emotional bond between parent and child. Children are better able to understand, express, and regulate emotions constructively when engaged in enjoyable, parent-guided activities. This expands the concept of emotional parenting by integrating verbal guidance with kinesthetic strategies within everyday family routines. These insights are valuable for parents, educators, and child psychologists in designing early childhood emotional regulation programs. Consistent and empathetic parental support is essential, given the limited cognitive and emotional capacity of young children to self-regulate. Theoretically, this

research highlights that emotion regulation is not solely dependent on verbal communication but can also be fostered through engaging physical interaction. Further research is recommended to include a broader range of participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of parental emotion regulation strategies in varying family settings.

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