

Relationship between Negative Maternal Parenting Style and Social-Emotional Development of Young Children from Urban Low-Income Households in Lembah Klang, Malaysia

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Abstract

Negative parenting styles are known to correlate with more challenges in social-emotional development of children. Early emergence of challenges in social-emotional development, such as difficulties in regulating emotions and forming healthy social relationships during childhood, often persists into later years and is associated with various adverse outcomes. Hence, the present study aims to determine the relationship between maternal negative parenting style and social-emotional development, as well as differences in social-emotional development between male and female young children from low-income households in Lembah Klang, Malaysia. Using a cluster sampling method, 360 mothers of young children (aged 3 to 4 years old) were selected for this study. The Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ) Short-Form was used to assess negative maternal parenting styles, while the Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional (ASQ) measured social-emotional development. The findings indicated that children whose mothers exhibited higher levels of negative parenting styles tended to display more challenges in social-emotional development. Additionally, results also revealed that boys presented with more challenges in social-emotional development than girls. In conclusion, the present study suggests that negative parenting styles adopted by mothers may contribute to greater challenges in children's overall social-emotional development, with boys being particularly vulnerable to these effects. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for improvement for parental education programs and targeted interventions particularly for boys.

Keywords: Maternal, Negative Parenting Style, Social-Emotional Development, Young Children

Introduction

Social-emotional development is defined as the ability to "form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn—all within the context of family,

community, and culture" (Yates et al., 2008). Research in this field has focused on various aspects of social-emotional development and its constituent elements. These include behavioural problems, internalizing and externalizing behaviours, self-regulation, empathy, social behaviours, friendship, and theory of mind.

Significantly, parenting practices have been extensively studied and linked to social-emotional outcomes in children. Specifically, research has explored the influence of both positive and negative parenting practices on children's social-emotional development, revealing diverse outcomes. Positive parenting practices, for instance, have been associated with positive outcomes such as heightened social self-efficacy (Leidy et al., 2010), social-emotional competence (Altschul et al., 2016; Denham, 1993), improved social competence with peers (Lindsey & Mize, 2001), and increased prosocial behaviour (Daniel et al., 2016). In contrast, negative parenting practices have been found to predict adverse outcomes such as externalizing behaviours (Bayer et al., 2008; Bender et al., 2007), aggression (Altschul et al., 2016), and depression (Bender et al., 2007). Therefore, undoubtedly, early social interaction, especially during the first five years of life, has a particular impact on children's later social-emotional development. Positive experiences foster children's positive personal growth, while negative experiences may be detrimental to children's capabilities to develop essential social-emotional skills (Schaefer & DiGeronimo, 2000).

However, research has found that social-emotional development in young children can also be threatened by exposure to elevated stresses of many kinds, such as living in low socioeconomic households. It is reported that 250 million, or 43 percent, of children in their early childhood years from low- and middle-income countries failed to achieve their full developmental potential due to poverty (World Health Organization, 2016). It is also worth noting that almost 90% of children and adolescents in the world live in low- or middle-income countries such as Malaysia (United Nations, 2011, as cited in Zhou et al., 2020). Research also has found that low socioeconomic status directly impacted children's social-emotional development by increasing risk factors and limiting protective factors. For example, economic challenges was found to cause stress in the family due to the economic hardship that families must bear. Consequently, it affects parental emotional well-being and mental health, which resulted in their opting for harsher parenting styles that are prone to causing negative developmental outcomes in children (Engle & Black, 2008).

Research indicates that children from low-income backgrounds are more prone to behavioural issues (Holtz et al., 2014). They also tend to experience neurocognitive deficits and difficulties with self-regulation (Liu et al., 2004; Li et al., 2017). A similar pattern was observed in Malaysia, where children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds exhibited lower levels of social-emotional development compared to their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Mohamed & Toran, 2018).

Given these findings, further investigations into factors influencing young children's social-emotional development in urban low-income contexts are crucial. Parenting research emphasizes that parenting is sensitive to contextual variations, highlighting the need for examination within specific settings (Mak et al., 2020; Smetana, 2017). Urban low-income settings pose unique challenges for parents and children, as evidenced by prior research highlighting their adverse impact on children's outcomes. Moreover, prior research has primarily focused on specific parental behaviours—such as emotional support, parental role

modelling, and disciplinary approaches—while giving less attention to broader parenting styles like authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian styles (Carapito et al., 2018).

Thus, it is essential to further investigate the relationship between negative maternal parenting style and social-emotional development of young children from low-income households in Malaysia urban areas.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are first, to determine the relationship between negative maternal parenting style and social-emotional development of young children from urban low-income households in Malaysia and second, to determine the differences in social-emotional development between male and female young children.

Literature Review

Negative maternal parenting styles and Social-Emotional Development

Parenting styles are defined as "a constellation of parents' attitudes and behaviours toward children and an emotional climate in which the parents' behaviours are expressed" (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). According to Baumrind (1967), parenting styles can be categorized into dimensions, with authoritarian and neglectful parenting are categorized as negative parenting style. Specifically, authoritarian parenting is defined by high control and low warmth and responsiveness, characterized by strictness, punishment, and demanding obedience without explanation. Research indicates that children raised by parents who opted for negative parenting style are more likely to experience developmental challenges.

Mothers' parenting style was one of the important factors that affect children's social-emotional development. Particularly, negative maternal parenting style has been found to cause more deficits in children's social-emotional development such as more externalizing and internalizing behaviours (Acar et al., 2017; Braza et al., 2013; Hosokawa & Katsura, 2018; Vučković et al., 2020), lower emotional regulation (Haslam et al., 2020; Alegre, 2011), more behavioural problems (Haslam et al., 2020; Braza et al., 2013; Luo et al., 2021), and low social skills (Luo et al., 2021).

Researchers worldwide have extensively studied how parenting styles impact children's social-emotional development across different cultural contexts. Studies have consistently shown that adverse parenting practices, such as hostile and aggressive behaviours, contribute to externalizing behaviours in children. For instance, research in Croatia demonstrated through structural equation modelling that negative parenting styles hinder children's self-regulation skills, leading to social conflicts and behavioural problems (Vučković et al., 2020). Furthermore, investigations into emotional intelligence have highlighted that parental responsiveness and positive parenting dimensions are associated with higher emotional intelligence in children, whereas negative demandingness, like punitive discipline, may impair children's emotional understanding and regulation (Alegre, 2011).

In Turkey, studies on low-income families revealed that authoritarian parenting styles correlate with both internalizing and externalizing behaviours in children, particularly when coupled with low parent-child closeness (Acar et al., 2017). Similarly, a comparative study between Australia and Indonesia found that authoritarian parenting was linked to poorer

emotional regulation and increased behavioural problems in children across diverse cultural settings (Haslam et al., 2020).

Moreover, longitudinal research in Japan involving preschool children indicated that authoritarian discipline was associated with externalizing problems, regardless of gender, while permissive discipline showed a specific link to externalizing issues in boys (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2018). Concurrently, in urban Chinese families, authoritative parenting styles were linked to better social skills and fewer behavioural problems in children, whereas authoritarian styles were associated with the poorest outcomes in both home and school environments (Luo et al., 2021).

Collectively, these studies underscore the universal impact of negative parenting styles on children's developmental outcomes, emphasizing the importance of nurturing and supportive parenting practices for fostering positive social- emotional development across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

Social-Emotional Development between Boys and Girls

The development of children's social-emotional outcomes is influenced by various factors, including their gender. Research highlights differences in how boys and girls typically manifest behaviourally and emotionally. Boys tend to exhibit higher levels of externalizing behaviours compared to girls. For instance, a longitudinal study spanning 8 years and involving 405 children revealed that male children consistently displayed more externalizing behaviours reported by teachers than female children (Keiley et al., 2000).

Furthermore, findings from a meta-analysis encompassing 166 studies and over 21,000 participants indicated modest gender differences in emotion expression. Girls tend to express more positive emotions and internalizing emotions such as sadness and anxiety, whereas boys are more likely to express externalizing emotions such as anger (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). These trends are observable from early stages of development, as boys tend to exhibit more externalizing emotions during preschool and toddlerhood compared to girls (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Another study by Williford, Calkins, and Keane (2007) also found that girls have better emotion regulation than boys.

In summary, while child characteristics like temperament and age play roles in child development, gender differences in emotional and behavioural expression are notable, with boys generally showing higher levels of externalizing behaviours and girls demonstrating more internalizing emotions across various developmental stages.

Theoretical perspective

This study adopts Baumrind's parenting styles theory and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory. The early research on parenting began with the work of Diana Baumrind, who classified parenting into a typology of parenting styles (Baumrind, 1967). Parenting was first classified into three categories: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. The classification of the types was based on the function of the control that parents exert over their children. The control that parents exert determines their willingness and effort to socialise and integrate their children into the family as well as society (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). According to the parenting dimensions proposed by Baumrind, the authoritarian and neglectful parenting dimensions are regarded as negative parenting. This is due to the fact

that the authoritarian parenting style is specifically characterised by high levels of control and low levels of warmth and responsiveness. These parents are typically strict punitive and impose obedience without explanation. In contrast, neglectful parenting is marked by low levels of both control and warmth and responsiveness. Uninterested and indifferent to their children's needs, neglectful parents may fail to provide adequate emotional and physical care to their children. Consequently, children raised in these two types of environments are more likely to exhibit developmental deficits.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory specifically utilizing the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) supports the above-mentioned theory. According to this theory, child development is shaped by reciprocal interactions between the child and their environment (Bjorklund & Hernandez-Blasi, 2012; Krishnan, 2010). Particularly, the theory underscores how the relationship between an individual child and their environment influences developmental outcomes. Growing up in low-income households presents unique challenges that impact both parenting practices and child outcomes. The stressors associated with limited financial resources often lead parents to employ less effective parenting strategies, thereby adversely affecting child development. Therefore, in the current study, social-emotional development of young children from urban low-income households were hypothesized to be affected by the level of negative maternal parenting style.

Methods

Research Design

A quantitative correlational design was utilized to examine the relationship between negative maternal parenting style and children's social-emotional development. The data was collected from 21 PERMATA KEMAS childcare centre located in Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur and Selangor urban areas.

For data collection, established instruments previously used in research were adapted for use in this study after obtaining permission from the original authors. The instruments were translated from English to Malay through a rigorous forward-backward translation process conducted by experts. Ethical approval for conducting the study involving human participants was obtained from the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Ethics Committee. Subsequently, permission to conduct research at Taska PERMATA KEMAS was sought from Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS) or Department of Community Department, and formal approval was received through an official letter.

Once approved, an official permission letter was sent to all selected PERMATA KEMAS childcare centre requesting their cooperation. The principals of the childcare centres were briefed about the research objectives and procedures. Questionnaires were then distributed to mothers, collected within a week, and returned to the childcare centres as per the agreed procedure.

Variables and Measurements

The social-emotional development of children in this study was assessed using the Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional (ASQ) (Squires et al., 2002). This instrument evaluates seven domains of social-emotional development in young children: self-regulation, compliance, social communication, adaptive functioning, autonomy, affect, and interaction

with people. Specifically, the questionnaire for 48-month-old children (covering ages from 42 months 0 days to 53 months 30 days) was utilized, translated into Malay.

Parents responded to 36 questions rating their child's behaviour as "often or always," "sometimes," or "rarely or never." Additionally, the questionnaire included three open-ended questions inviting parents to share any concerns related to their child's behaviour. The Malay adapted version of ASQ has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80) in previous research (Mohamed & Toran, 2018).

Negative maternal parenting style in this study was assessed using the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ) Short-Form, which has been translated into Malay. This questionnaire consists of 32 items and evaluates three parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Specifically, the authoritarian parenting style subscale was used to measure negative maternal parenting style.

Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), indicating the frequency of behaviours associated with authoritarian parenting. A higher total score on this subscale indicates a higher level of authoritarian parenting style. The reliability of the Authoritarian Parenting Style subscale, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was found to be 0.82 in previous research (Robinson et al., 2001).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using SPSS version 22 and the inferential statistic which was Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between negative maternal parenting style and social-emotional development of young children from urban low-income households. Then, the independent sample t-test analysis was utilized to determine the differences in social-emotional development between boys and girls in the present study.

Results

Negative Maternal Parenting Style and Social-Emotional Development

Pearson correlation analysis was utilized to analyse the relationship between negative maternal parenting style and social-emotional development of preschool children. Table 1 shows that there was a significant positive relationship between negative maternal parenting styles and challenges in children's social-emotional development ($r = .26$, $p < .01$). This correlation indicates a moderate effect size, suggesting that higher levels of negative maternal parenting, specifically characterized by authoritarian practices, are associated with more pronounced challenges in children's social-emotional development.

Table 1

Pearson's correlation between maternal authoritarian parenting style and children's social and emotional development

Variables		Social and Emotional Development	
		r	p
Maternal Authoritarian Parenting Style		.26	.000

Therefore, in conclusion, there is a significant relationship negative maternal parenting style and social-emotional development of young children from urban low-income households in Malaysia.

Gender differences in Social-Emotional Development

Independent sample t-test analysis was conducted to determine the differences in children's social-emotional development between boys and girls in the present study. As shown in Table 2, there were significant differences in children's social-emotional development between boys and girls ($t=3.045^*$, $p < .05$). Boys (Mean=66.19, SD = 30.92) have been found to have higher level of challenges in social-emotional development compared to girls (Mean=56.90, SD = 26.13). Specifically, boys exhibited higher levels of deficits in social-emotional development compared to girls, as indicated by their higher mean score. In the column of equal variances not assumed from the SPSS output, it displayed the t-score of total scores for deficits in social-emotional development for both gender ($t = 3.045$), ($df = 322.5$), ($p < .05$).

Table 2

Independent sample t-test of children's social-emotional development

Variables	Mean	t	p
Social and Emotional Development		3.045	.000
Male	66.19		
Female	56.90		

Discussion

The present study aims to examine the relationship between negative maternal authoritarian parenting style with social-emotional development and the differences of social-emotional development between boys and girls. The results revealed that children with mothers who exert more negative parenting style had higher challenges in social-emotional development. Findings from this study align with previous research linking negative parenting styles in mothers to challenges in various domains of social-emotional development, such as high levels of externalizing behaviours (Acar et al., 2017; Vučković et al., 2020), lower emotion regulation (Haslam et al., 2020; Alegre, 2011), increased behavioural problems (Haslam et al., 2020; Braza et al., 2013; Luo et al., 2021), and reduced social skills (Luo et al., 2021). This supports Baumrind's parenting styles theory, highlighting the central role of parenting, particularly mothers, in shaping children's developmental paths. Additionally, factors associated with parents from low-income households, such as mental health status may further impact parenting effects which consequently will negatively influence children's outcomes (Belsky, 1984).

Results from the study also revealed that boys exhibited more challenges in social-emotional development compared to girls. This finding is consistent with previous research,

which shows that boys tend to exhibit more externalizing behaviours (Keyley et al., 2000) and express more externalizing emotions (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013) than girls. This difference is likely due to the fact that boys generally have poorer emotion regulation skills (Williford, Calkins, & Keane, 2007). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory provides a useful framework for understanding this by emphasizing the importance of examining development within the unique contexts where children interact with their environments at various levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to this theory, individual factors such as gender interact with broader environmental contexts to influence developmental outcomes. Therefore, the observed gender differences may contribute to more challenges in social-emotional development.

Overall, the direct interactions between children and their immediate surroundings, such as parenting styles, significantly influence social-emotional development. Furthermore, this effect varies between male and female children. In urban low-income contexts, stressors associated with living in low socioeconomic households, such as financial strain, family dynamics, and limited social support, can indirectly affect children through the adoption of negative parenting styles. This integrated perspective enriches our understanding and contributes to the literature on how environmental and parenting factors interact to influence children's outcomes across diverse socioeconomic contexts.

The current study also has practical implications, offering guidance specifically for practitioners and policymakers to effectively support children's social-emotional development. The findings underscore the importance of parenting styles and behaviours, aiming to help parents understand the significance of being mindful of their own approaches. In particular, the study's results can enhance the effectiveness of policies on Early Childhood Care and Education, suggesting improvements for parental education programs managed by government agencies such as the Department of Community Development. Additionally, the findings highlight the need for targeted interventions or support for boys who may face challenges in their social-emotional development.

Nonetheless, there are several limitations of the present study. First, this is a cross-sectional study that provides only unidirectional explanations for the variables. The present study only utilized correlational analysis and t-test analysis to analyse the data. Hence, the results lack robustness and are unable to determine the predictive factors of the variables. Future research would benefit from employing more advanced statistical analysis such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using comprehensive datasets to provide deeper insights into the relationships among variables. Second, the present study relied on self-and parent-report survey data as the primary source of information. This approach may restrict the depth of understanding of the relationships between the variables because it only informed children's behaviours from the perspective of mothers. Therefore, future research could consider employing other methods for data collection, such as direct observation, structured assessment, and physiological measures. These methods would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of relationships between variables.

Despite these limitations, the current findings significantly enhance our understanding of how negative parenting style influences the social-emotional development of young children from low-income households in urban areas of Malaysia. The choice of parenting styles by mothers has a profound impact on children's development. Moreover, boys in the

present study exhibit more deficits in social-emotional development compared to girls, highlighting the importance of supporting parents of boys to improve their parenting practices for the benefit of their children

In summary, these findings contribute to the growing literature on this topic within the specific context of urban Malaysia, extending our knowledge and understanding of the dynamics involved in social-emotional development within low-income settings.

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