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Single Mother Parenting in Preschool Children's Social- Emotional Development

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ABSTRACT

Single-parent families, particularly those led by single mothers, are becoming more common in society. These mothers often face dual responsibilities of caregiving and providing financially, which can affect the social-emotional development of their children. This study aims to examine the parenting process, type, and its impact on preschool children's social-emotional development because early childhood is a critical period for forming emotional and social skills. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through interviews and observations involving two single mothers and their children's teachers. The results show that democratic parenting encourages positive outcomes such as confidence, empathy, socialization, and rule-following. However, permissive elements within parenting may lead to aggression, low empathy, and difficulty following rules. Because parenting directly influences a child's development, single mothers need support and guidance. This study highlights the importance of promoting democratic parenting to help single mothers nurture preschool children's social-emotional growth in line with developmental indicators.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Family plays a very important role in the formation and development of a child's personality. Humans first learn about forms of interaction, particularly among family members, to cooperate, help each other, and pay attention to the wishes of others. In the family environment, children initially learn to act as social beings through family institutions that possess certain norms and skills used to interact with others (Syakhrani & Aslan, 2024; Rahimah & Koto, 2022; Rohmalimna et al., 2022). Everyone desires a complete and strong family where both parents are present, but this ideal is not always attainable due to various factors, one of which is becoming a single parent (Ulfah & Fauziah, 2020).

In general, single parents are those who raise their children alone without the presence, support, or responsibility of a spouse (Afi et al., 2024). Single parents must be independent in fulfilling their roles as both mother and father. In Indonesia, there are more single mothers than single fathers, with single mothers comprising 14.93% of households, while single fathers make up only 1.17%.

Data on single parents by gender show a global trend where women are more likely than men to become single parents, with 84.3% being single mothers and only 15.7% single fathers. This indicates that women are more often burdened with the main responsibility for childcare and family economic survival (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023).

The parenting practices applied by single parents differ from those in intact families (Asriyani et al., 2023). Research has found differences in parenting and social-emotional development between children from intact and non-intact families. Children in intact families tend to show well-developed social competence, easily adjust at school, obey rules, play and share with peers, and demonstrate empathy. In contrast, children from non-intact families may display more aggressive behavior, reluctance to compromise, preference for solitude, difficulty concentrating in class, and a tendency to disturb others (Ge, 2024).

Social-emotional development is increasingly recognized as a developmental crisis in children because it is shaped by learning processes that affect later stages of growth. This development includes a child's ability to interact, respond, and act according to societal norms, seen through behaviors such as sharing, independence, and rule-following, or negatively through aggression, isolation, and lack of confidence (Hayati & Mamat, 2019). It is also a key factor in preschool children's relationships with peers (Aryani et al., 2018; Yakubova, 2021; Hu & Feng, 2022).

Preschool-aged children (4–6 years) are in a crucial stage of rapid physical and mental development (Jia et al., 2021; Yuningsih et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2022). This golden age enables them to respond better to stimuli and interactions (Nurmalitasari, 2015; Eun et al., 2014). Social-emotional skills developed during this period are strong predictors of future mental health. Poor development in this area can lead to depression, substance abuse, and criminal behavior in adulthood (Yulisetyaningrum, 2019).

Studies have shown that between 9.5% and 14.2% of preschool children experience social and emotional difficulties that hinder school readiness, adaptability, and communication, leading to emotional dependence on parents and behavioral challenges (Brauner & Stephnes, 2006). Initial observations in this study also revealed that single mothers expressed concern over their children's low self-confidence due to the absence of a father figure. One mother reported emotional exhaustion after work, feeling overwhelmed by her child's need for attention, which sometimes resulted in both mother and child crying together.

Although single-parent households are fewer in number, the responsibilities they bear (particularly single mothers) are demanding. These mothers play dual roles within the family

and in society. Therefore, the parenting role of single mothers is crucial for educating and guiding preschool-aged children through optimal social-emotional development. This study aims to explore how single mothers parent their preschool children, the types of parenting styles they adopt, and the impact these styles have on children's social-emotional development. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the dual role of single mothers and its emphasis on identifying parenting strategies that support positive social-emotional outcomes in early childhood.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the parenting practices of single mothers concerning the social-emotional development of preschool children. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research focus. The study involved four informants: two key informants: (i) single mothers who are the sole caregivers of their first child aged 4-6 years; and (ii) two supporting informants as preschool teachers who directly observe and interact with the children of the key informants in educational settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observations. Interview questions focused on parenting styles, strategies, and challenges in fostering social-emotional development. Observations were conducted in both home and school environments to gain insight into the children's behaviours. Data analysis involved three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This approach allowed for a rich understanding of the parenting processes and their impact on children's social-emotional outcomes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Demography of participants

This study involved participants to obtain data from interviews related to single-mother parenting in the social-emotional development of preschool children. Interviews were conducted with two participants, namely single mothers who only had their first child of preschool age (4-6 years). The identity of the research participants is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Identity of participant data.

Participant's initials	Age (Years)	Work	Last Education	child's initials	Child's Age (Years)	Child gender	Code
HI	37	Teacher	Undergraduate	AKS	5	Female	R1
ER	34	Self Employed	Senior high school	JSI	6	Male	R2

3.2. Interview Results

The results of the interviews are presented in **Tables 2-4**, including a list of questions and answers categorized or grouped based on research indicators. The symbol "Q" refers to the Question (questions posed by the researcher), while the symbol "R" refers to the Respondent (answers from research participants). If there is more than one question within a particular indicator, the "Q" symbol is followed by a number (Q1, Q2, Q3, etc.), and if there is more than one response to a question, the "R" symbol is also numbered accordingly (R1, R2, R3, etc.).

Table 2. Interview results: self-awareness.

No	Indicator	Main Idea	Keywords	Coding
1	Showing confidence	How to cultivate confidence	Growing Confidence	Q1; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Confidence
2	Attitude of independence	How to teach independence	Teaching Independence	Q2; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Independence
3	Have an attitude that does not give up easily	How to cultivate a never-say-die attitude and not give up	Not giving up	Q3; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; not giving up
4	Have an attitude of discipline	How to teach discipline	Teaching discipline	Q4; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; discipline
5	Showing an attitude of caution toward unfamiliar people	How to be careful with strangers	Being careful of unfamiliar people	Q5; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Be careful
6	Recognize and control one's feelings	How to express feelings How to calm tantrums	Expressing Feelings Calming Tantrums	Q6;a; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; feelings Q6;b; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Tantrum
7	Demonstrate the ability to adjust to the situation	How to adapt to the situation/ environment	Adjusting the Environmental Situation	Q7; R1; R2; <i>What</i> ; Adjusting the situation
8	Be proud of your work	How to cultivate a sense of pride in one's work by yourself	Cultivating a sense of pride in one's work food	Q8; R1; R2; <i>What</i> ; Proud of your work

Table 3. Interview results: sense of responsibility for self and others.

No	Indicator	Main Idea	Keywords	Coding
9	Comply with applicable rules.	How children listen What to do when your child makes a mistake	How to listen Making mistakes	Q9;a; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Listen Q9;b; R1; R2; <i>What</i> ; mistakes
10	Willing to help and assist	How to teach to be helpful and supportive	Teaching and helping	Q10; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; helping Q11;a; R1; R2;
11	Take responsibility for his behavior.	How to teach responsibility to tasks Dealing with children not finishing food	Teaching responsibility and duty Dealing finishing food	<i>How</i> ; Responsibility Q11;b; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Finishing Food
12	Knowing his rights	How to teach which is your right	Teaching rights of self	Q12; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Right of self
13	Protect yourself from the environment	How to teach self-care	Teaching taking care of yourself	Q13; R1; R2; <i>What</i> ; take care of yourself <i>How</i> ; respect

Table 4. Interview results: prosocial behaviour.

No	Indicator	Main Idea	Keywords	Coding
14	Recognize manners and politeness according to local cultural values	How to teach manners	Teaching good manners	Q14; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; manners
15	Showing empathy	How to cultivate empathy	Cultivating empathy	Q15; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Empathy
16	Able to share with others	How to teach share	Teaching and sharing	Q16; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Sharing
17	Able to socialize and play with peers	How to be able to socialize	Socializing	Q17; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; Socialize
18	Cooperative attitude	Involves doing homework together	Doing homework together	Q18; R1; R2; <i>What</i> ; Working together
19	Showing enthusiasm for playing or learning	How children are enthusiastic about learning	Enthusiastic learning	Q19; R1; R2; <i>What</i> ; enthusiastic
20	Respect for others	How to teach respect for others	How to teach respect for others	Q20; R1; R2; <i>How</i> ; respect

3.3. Discussion

Parental care is an action taken to guide children in becoming individuals with good character. For single parents, childcare is certainly not an easy task, as they must take on multiple roles simultaneously (Kartila *et al.*, 2022). The parenting style adopted by single mothers significantly impacts their children's social-emotional development. This impact emphasizes the importance of educating and guiding children, especially during the preschool years. The parenting approach of single mothers in the social-emotional development of preschool children in this study refers to Permendikbud No. 137 of 2014, which includes indicators of self-awareness, a sense of responsibility for oneself and others, and prosocial behaviour.

3.3.1. Single mother's parenting process in the social-emotional development of preschool children

The interviews with Mrs. HI revealed that to foster self-confidence in children, she praised them and allowed them to explore their abilities freely, ensuring they did not feel restricted in their actions (Q1; R1). Meanwhile, Mrs. ER nurtured self-confidence by not placing too many demands on her child's actions (Q1; R2). Children's independence grew because of necessity, especially when the mother was working outside the home or preoccupied with other tasks. The children were encouraged to try completing tasks on their own, even by initially being ignored when asking for help.

To instil discipline, Mrs. HI emphasized giving examples accompanied by verbal instructions, followed by consistent routines and repetition (Q4; R1). Similarly, Mrs. ER implemented daily habits, such as setting time limits for watching TV or encouraging her child to tidy up toys after use (Q4; R2).

To develop a sense of pride, Mrs. HI praised her child's work and displayed it on the wall, regardless of the result (Q8; R1). Mrs. ER used similar strategies, offering verbal praise and rewards such as gifts or outings (Q8; R2). In fostering helpfulness, both mothers used

storytelling, joint activities, and direct examples. Occasionally, they gave firm instructions, although the child's mood and willingness still played a role.

Regarding finishing meals, Mrs. HI admitted to being indifferent, not forcing her child to eat, reasoning that she did not eat much (Q11b; R1). In contrast, Mrs. ER explained the importance of food, relating it to farmers' hard work, so that the child could understand the value of finishing meals and develop responsibility (Q11b; R2).

Both mothers taught polite behaviour by starting with basic respect, such as greeting older people (Q14; R1; R2). They also encouraged sharing through example, without forcing it, believing that the willingness to share would naturally develop over time.

To support socialization, they involved their children in community events, such as flash pesantren during Ramadan or August competitions. They also encouraged children to greet friends and interact with their environment, supporting the idea that wise parents introduce children to social interaction early (Mukharis et al., 2019). Mrs. HI emphasized that to teach children to respect others, parents must first respect their children (Q20; R1). This aligns with the view that role modelling is the most effective method of education (Abry et al., 2015).

3.3.2. Types of single mother parenting in preschool children's social-emotional development

The results of interviews with both single mother participants revealed that the predominant parenting style applied in their children's social-emotional development is democratic parenting. This type of parenting is characterized by high levels of affection and control, where parents encourage and appreciate children's behaviour, invite children to express opinions and implement clear rules based on mutual agreement (Candra et al., 2017).

To support their children's social-emotional development, the mothers used fundamental verbal approaches such as giving advice, offering suggestions, and telling stories accompanied by illustrations. They also established daily routines of open communication, such as heart-to-heart conversations in the evening, to understand their children's emotions and experiences throughout the day. This approach ensures emotional openness and prevents children from suppressing their feelings, particularly important for children growing up without a father figure who may experience bullying but hesitate to confide in their mothers.

In addition to verbal strategies, they practiced modelling behaviour, daily habituation, involvement in household tasks, providing space for exploration, avoiding excessive demands, and engaging children in hands-on activities.

When dealing with disobedience or repeated mistakes, the mothers often struggled to regulate their emotions. As Mrs. HI explained, single mothers differ from women with spouses because they have no one to share their emotional burdens with (Q9; a; R1). In emotionally charged situations, they tended to issue punishments to promote discipline. However, they also expressed appreciation when children succeeded, in the form of praise, gifts, or rewards.

In Mrs. HI's case, however, parenting decisions were often guided by her child's mood. She avoided forcing behaviour, such as finishing meals and expressed indifference in such situations. In contrast, Mrs. ER explained the consequences of not finishing meals, helping her child understand the value and origin of food to foster responsibility. Regarding independence, Mrs. HI chose to initially ignore her child's requests for help to encourage autonomy, while Mrs. ER guided her child through demonstrations to teach self-reliance.

Permissive tendencies were also noted in Mrs. HI's parenting. Permissive parenting is often marked by inconsistency in administering punishment (Rohayani et al., 2023). In interviews, Mrs. HI admitted that while she occasionally scolded her child and threatened punishment, such consequences were rarely enforced. This inconsistency diminished the effectiveness of

discipline and reduced the child's understanding of behavioral boundaries, reflecting elements of permissive parenting.

3.3.3. Impact of single mother parenting on the social-emotional development of preschool children

Social-emotional development is one of the key developmental domains significantly shaped by parenting practices. It involves the ability of children to understand and manage emotions, interact socially, and navigate relationships with others. Parents play a crucial role in establishing behaviour patterns and emotional regulation in their children, as children often learn by observing and internalizing parental behaviour.

Through parenting, children acquire essential skills such as understanding different social situations, managing their emotions, and adapting to behavioural norms in diverse interactions. The impact of single-mother parenting observed in this study reflects these dynamics.

Children learn how to respond empathetically, cooperate with peers, and demonstrate emotional control based on the parenting style they experience. The findings of this study show that democratic parenting tends to foster positive outcomes in children's social-emotional development, including increased self-confidence, empathy, cooperation, responsibility, and the ability to follow rules. Conversely, permissive tendencies, such as inconsistent discipline, may lead to confusion in behaviour boundaries and hinder optimal social-emotional growth.

3.3.4. AKS – child of Mrs. HI

One of the key aspects of development that is significantly influenced by parenting is social-emotional development, which relates to how children learn to understand and navigate situations, regulate emotions, and engage in social interactions. Parents' behavior patterns and emotional control strongly influence this process. Children tend to model what they observe in their parents—how to interact with others, understand and regulate their emotions, and manage interpersonal differences.

This impact can be observed in the parenting practices of the single mother participants in this study. According to the interview with Mrs. HI, her child, AKS, shows the ability to share, demonstrate empathy, and engage in cooperative play with siblings at home. However, AKS's interactions outside the home differ significantly. Based on the observations conducted, it can be concluded that AKS has not fully met the expected indicators of preschool children's social-emotional development, particularly in broader social contexts beyond the home environment.

3.3.5. JSI – child of Mrs. ER

The results of this study, based on direct observations at JSI's school and interviews with the parents, indicate that democratic parenting positively influences the child's social-emotional development. The observed impacts include:

- (i) JSI is highly confident and demonstrates the courage to answer questions, narrate stories, and express personal opinions.
- (ii) JSI shows responsibility by completing assigned tasks and leading peers when asked.
- (iii) JSI displays empathy and willingly shares with teachers and classmates.
- (iv) JSI has a calm demeanor, which makes the child well-liked by peers.
- (v) JSI is socially adaptable and able to play with anyone, including boys.

- (vi) JSI possesses a resilient attitude, is eager to participate, and consistently volunteers to lead classroom activities.
- (vii) JSI obeys classroom rules; for instance, even when not fully focused, JSI remains seated during lessons and can respond accurately when addressed.

Overall, JSI's social-emotional development aligns well with the developmental indicators expected for preschool-age children, reflecting the effectiveness of democratic parenting in fostering these competencies.

4. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the parenting process carried out by single mothers in supporting the achievement of preschool children's social-emotional development includes three key indicators: self-awareness, a sense of responsibility for oneself and others, and prosocial behavior. This parenting process is implemented through simple yet consistent strategies such as verbal communication, modeling behavior, daily routines, involving children in household tasks, allowing exploration, minimizing demands, and direct engagement in activities. When children make mistakes, emotional reactions from mothers are common. Single mothers often apply discipline through punishment to instill responsibility but also offer praise, gifts, or other forms of appreciation to reward achievements. The parenting style practiced by single mothers significantly influences the achievement of social-emotional development indicators. Among the types identified, democratic parenting is the most effective, as it fosters children who are confident, responsible, empathetic, cooperative, resilient, and rule-abiding—traits aligned with optimal social-emotional development in the preschool years.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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