



Parental Involvement in Supporting Children's Independence and Providing a Balanced Understanding of Gender

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Abstract

This study examines parental involvement in fostering children's independence and promoting an early understanding of gender equality. Using a qualitative case study approach at SILO Makale Kindergarten, South Sulawesi, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings indicate that active parental involvement, particularly when grounded in gender-responsive practices, positively influences children's independence and their comprehension of gender equality. Children raised in such environments tend to demonstrate greater autonomy and a more equitable perspective on gender roles. Conversely, limited parental attention and engagement were associated with higher dependency in daily activities. The study also reveals that gender education at the preschool level remains underdeveloped, which may hinder children's understanding of gender roles. Based on these results, the study recommends that parents actively engage in practices that support both independence and gender equality, while preschool institutions should begin systematically integrating gender equality concepts into early childhood education.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Gender Education; Independence; Parenting

A. INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement in early childhood education plays a critical role in shaping children's independence and gender awareness. Previous studies have demonstrated that active parental participation, both at home and within educational institutions, strongly influences children's academic achievement, social competence, and emotional growth (Belsky et al., 2019; Kim & Hill, 2015). Regular communication between parents and educators, combined with direct engagement in the learning process, contributes significantly to children's cognitive development, autonomy, and perceptions of gender roles (Garbacz et al., 2017).

In the Indonesian context, particularly in Tana Toraja Regency, the integration of gender-sensitive parenting and education has not yet received adequate attention. Gender-responsive parenting, which emphasizes equality in daily interactions, has the potential to reduce stereotypes while fostering children's emotional well-being and independence. Nurhafizah and Ardi (2019) found a strong positive correlation between parental involvement and children's understanding of gender concepts, a finding reinforced by Suharti (2021) and Nurhidayah and Arifin (2022). Their analyses highlight several central themes, including communication patterns, emotional support, and equality-based practices in parenting.

Children who receive consistent encouragement from parents often display greater confidence in preschool, whereas those lacking emotional support tend to be more passive. These patterns emphasize the importance of emotional reinforcement from both home and school in strengthening independence and reducing socio-emotional difficulties. Research also indicates that households practicing gender-sensitive parenting are more likely to challenge traditional gender roles and promote inclusive early gender education, which in turn reduces discriminatory attitudes (Gonzalez et al., 2018; Martin & Torres, 2020). Nevertheless, deeply rooted cultural norms continue to present challenges in achieving these outcomes.

Interviews with parents and educators in this study further revealed practical strategies that align with existing theories on the benefits of empathetic communication, inclusive parenting, and gender-responsive practices (Kusumaningrum & Hartanti, 2019). These findings affirm the broader theoretical consensus that consistent parental involvement across home and school environments is essential for fostering both independence and equitable gender perspectives in children (Sari & Widodo, 2019).

By situating the study within the SILO Makale Kindergarten context, this research contributes new insights into how parenting practices and early gender education intersect in culturally diverse settings. It underscores the importance of emotional support, open communication, and parent-educator collaboration in creating inclusive learning environments. Beyond highlighting current practices, this study also provides actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers to promote gender equality and independence in early childhood education. Ultimately, it lays the groundwork for future research aimed at advancing equitable child development and reducing gender disparities in Indonesia's early education landscape.

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine parenting practices and children's gender understanding in early childhood. The case study design was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of phenomena within their real-life context, particularly the social and environmental interactions that shape gender development in preschoolers (Yin, 2018). This approach enabled the researcher to capture situational dynamics and generate nuanced insights into the processes of early gender socialization.

The research design was exploratory, focusing on how interactions between parents, teachers, and children influence the development of independence and gender awareness. The study concentrated on parenting practices at home and gender-related approaches in educational settings, providing a basis for understanding the relationships that shape children's perceptions and behaviors.

Participants were selected purposively to match the research objectives. The sample comprised 20 parents (10 fathers and 10 mothers) and 20 children (10 boys and 10 girls) aged 4–6 years, all from SILO Kindergarten in Tana Toraja Regency. Parents were included if they actively participated in their children's upbringing and educational experiences. This purposive sampling ensured a holistic view of parenting dynamics and their implications for children's gender development.

Data collection followed systematically organized stages. In the preparatory phase, research proposals were approved, permissions were secured from the kindergarten, and participants meeting the criteria were identified. Instruments such as semi-structured interview guides and observation sheets were also prepared.

Multiple methods were used to capture diverse perspectives. In-depth interviews with parents explored their experiences and views on parenting and gender education. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes, conducted face-to-face with participant consent. Participant observations were carried out over five consecutive days within the kindergarten, focusing on children's play patterns, social interactions, and responses to teacher guidance. Documentation, such as photographs, teacher diaries, activity records, and child development reports, was also collected to enrich the data.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved familiarization, coding, theme generation, and refinement. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentation enhanced validity by cross-verifying findings. This process ensured that conclusions reflected the complexity of the studied phenomena.

Ethical protocols were strictly observed. Participants were informed of the study's aims, their right to withdraw, and the academic use of their data. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, identities were anonymized, and all data were securely stored to protect confidentiality.

The study was conducted at SILO Kindergarten in Makale, chosen for its inclusive and innovative practices in character education and gender-sensitive programs. The involvement of both children and parents provided comprehensive insights into how parenting practices influence children's independence and gender understanding, underscoring the study's contribution to early childhood education research.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Result

This study examined the impact of parental involvement on children's independence and gender understanding in early childhood education (ECE) in Tana Toraja. The findings revealed a notable gap in parental participation, particularly in supporting children's independence during formative years. Many parents, preoccupied with traditional work and household responsibilities, unintentionally overlooked their critical role in fostering autonomy. As a result, children in such contexts often became overly dependent on others for daily tasks, decision-making, and problem-solving.

a. Communication and Emotional Support in Parenting

Analysis showed that communication and emotional support are central to developing children's independence. Teachers and parents highlighted how limited parental engagement often resulted in children's reliance on others.

"Children whose parents do not engage with them in daily tasks tend to rely on others, and this can hinder their development of autonomy. They need emotional and verbal support to take on simple tasks independently" (T1).

This echoes findings by Belsky et al. (2019) and Garbacz et al. (2017), who stress the importance of active communication and emotional reinforcement. Parents also acknowledged similar challenges:

"Sometimes, I find it difficult to find time to help my child with tasks at home due to my work commitments. I notice that my child is often hesitant to try doing things independently" (P1).

"I always try to provide emotional support to my child, especially in completing simple tasks. However, I also worry that if I intervene too much, my child will become overly dependent on me." (P2).

"I always try to make time to discuss small things with my child, such as how their day went. This makes them feel valued, and I see them becoming more confident" (P3).

"As a father, I want my child to be independent. However, I sometimes find it difficult to provide the right guidance. I believe it's important to give space for the child to learn on their own, though I still need to be present to support them" (P4).

These reflections indicate that children with consistent parental support develop greater confidence and independence, while those lacking it often avoid challenges due to fear of failure.

b. Gender Education in Early Childhood

The study also revealed limited awareness among parents and educators regarding gender education. Teachers reported that gender topics were absent from the preschool curriculum:

"We have never taught gender education in the classroom. We were not trained to address this issue, and there is no curriculum that includes gender education for young children" (T2)

This is consistent with Suharti (2021) and Kusumaningrum & Hartanti (2019), who emphasize that early gender education is vital for shaping balanced perceptions of gender roles. Parents similarly expressed uncertainty:

"I want my child to understand that there is no limit to what boys or girls can do, but I don't know how to start this conversation at home" (P1).

These findings highlight a gap in parental and institutional capacity to guide children in developing gender equality perspectives during early childhood.

c. Parenting and Gender Understanding

Evidence from this study confirms that early gender education contributes to children's equitable understanding of roles and responsibilities. Active engagement from parents and teachers enhanced children's awareness of equality, as illustrated by the following statements:

"When children see that both girls and boys are encouraged to do the same activities, it helps them understand that abilities are not determined by gender" (P1).

"I always strive to teach my child that there is nothing that only boys or girls can do. I support my child in exploring whatever interests them, regardless of gender." (P2).

"It's important for me to teach my children that there are no limitations for them simply because of their gender. I often involve them in activities that don't have gender boundaries, like playing soccer or cooking, depending on what they enjoy" (P3).

"Children must grow up with a fair understanding of gender. At home, I always emphasize that both boys and girls have the same opportunities to be whatever they want. I want them to feel free to pursue their dreams without being afraid of gender stereotypes" (P4).

Such practices, when combined with supportive parenting, allow children to form identities free from restrictive stereotypes and foster confidence in pursuing diverse interests.

d. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

The findings align with Holistic Development theory (Sari & Widodo, 2019) and Gender-Responsive Parenting (Kusumaningrum & Hartanti, 2019). These frameworks emphasize that autonomy and gender equality are interconnected aspects of children's growth. From this perspective, development must extend beyond cognitive skills to encompass emotional, social, and moral domains shaped by the family environment.

Martin and Torres (2020) similarly demonstrate that parental involvement, particularly when challenging traditional gender norms, strengthens children's independence and social competence. Consistent with Gonzalez et al. (2018), this study confirms that early interventions in gender education reduce discriminatory attitudes and prepare children to navigate social expectations with confidence.

This study also contributes to the growing body of evidence that suggests that early interventions in both gender education and the promotion of independence can have lasting positive effects. By providing children with the tools to understand gender equality, parents not only help them navigate societal expectations but also empower them to be more self-reliant. This empowerment is pivotal in helping children develop the confidence needed to challenge stereotypes and actively engage in behaviors that reflect their true capabilities, irrespective of gendered limitations. In this way, the dual

focus on independence and gender equality, as articulated by both theoretical frameworks, provides a comprehensive approach to fostering children's overall development.

e. Contributions and Practical Recommendations

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. It reinforces the importance of integrating gender-responsive parenting with strategies that promote autonomy, demonstrating their combined impact on children's independence and gender awareness. Practically, parents encourage children to complete tasks independently, provide positive reinforcement, and create opportunities for problem-solving. Early introduction of gender education is equally critical, requiring parental guidance and institutional support. Training for parents and teachers can strengthen their capacity to engage children in conversations that challenge stereotypes and foster inclusivity.

2. Discussion

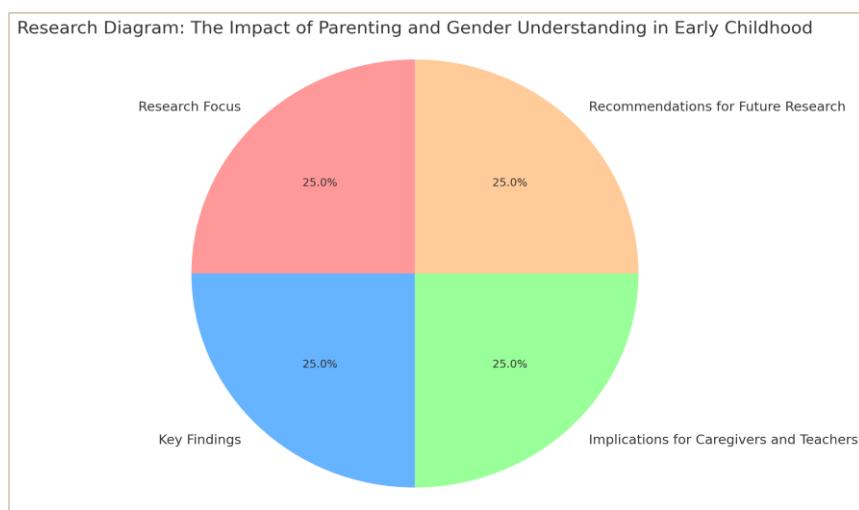


Figure 1. The Impact of Parenting and Gender Understanding in Early Childhood

This study examined how parenting styles influence the development of independence and gender understanding in early childhood. The findings emphasize the critical role of parental involvement in fostering children's confidence, decision-making abilities, and balanced comprehension of gender roles. Parenting styles such as authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian were analyzed for their impacts on children's character development.

Balanced parenting, which combines freedom with appropriate control, was found to be particularly effective in cultivating children's independence. Supportive parenting approaches—characterized by open communication and empathy—contribute to children's confidence and respectful understanding of gender differences. These findings underscore the value of adaptive and responsive parenting, which outperforms both overly rigid and excessively permissive styles in promoting holistic child development.

In practical terms, caregivers are encouraged to provide emotional support while fostering decision-making skills in children and offering clear guidance. This approach helps children develop independence and responsibility. Teachers also play a pivotal role in creating inclusive and gender-neutral learning environments. By ensuring equal opportunities for children to explore roles free from stereotypes, teachers contribute significantly to a balanced understanding of gender. Enhanced training for caregivers and educators is therefore recommended to strengthen awareness of gender equality in early childhood education.

The study further outlines directions for future research. Investigations into how social and cultural contexts shape parenting styles and gender understanding across different regions are needed. Exploring the effects of technology-driven parenting, such as digital media exposure, could provide valuable insights into shaping children's perceptions of gender. Longitudinal studies would also help reveal the long-term effects of parenting styles on children's independence and gender awareness. In addition, examining family dynamics, including sibling interactions and co-parenting practices, may shed light on their roles in early child development.

The findings are consistent with previous studies. For instance, Smith et al. (2022) highlighted that nondirective parenting enhances effort control in infants, allowing greater independence. In contrast, Brown (2019) reported that authoritarian parenting, marked by strict rules and limited autonomy, undermines independence by reducing children's confidence in decision-making. Similarly, Garcia et al. (2016) and Lin et al. (2021) found that overly restrictive parenting hinders children's initiative and self-confidence.

In relation to gender understanding, Johnson et al. (2020) showed that gender-equal parenting significantly shapes children's perceptions of gender roles, reducing stereotypes. Miller and Zhang (2022) emphasized the positive impact of integrating equality principles into parenting, while Thompson et al. (2017) stressed that open family communication helps children reject rigid stereotypes and develop healthy self-identity. Lopez and Rivera (2021) further argued that exposure to inclusive environments enhances children's flexibility in understanding gender, and Kumar et al. (2023) found that parental involvement in promoting gender-fair norms strengthens children's social interactions.

Taken together, these findings highlight that parenting styles prioritizing independence, adaptive support, and gender equality are essential for nurturing children who are confident, responsible, and inclusive in their perspectives on gender roles. The broader social environment, including schools and communities, also plays a vital role in reinforcing these values, creating a supportive ecosystem for holistic child development (Nguyen et al., 2020; Arifin & Wahyuni, 2022; Singh & Patel, 2023).

a. The Effect of Parenting on Children's Independence

Children's early relationships with parents and caregivers greatly influence their independence and understanding of gender roles. According to attachment theory, secure emotional bonds provide the foundation for social development, including gender identity. Bosmans et al. (2022) emphasize that secure attachment not only offers emotional stability but also shapes how children internalize social expectations.

In early childhood education (ECE), strong attachment allows children to freely explore gender roles within supportive environments at home and school. Thompson, Simpson, and Berlin (2022) similarly noted that supportive caregiver relationships are central to shaping gender identity.

Parenting styles also play a decisive role. Kong and Yasmin (2022) found that parents' beliefs about children's abilities strongly influence gender equality learning. Martinez et al. (2020) demonstrated that authoritative parenting, balancing warmth with clear boundaries, helps children internalize equality values and build self-confidence. He, Liu, and Luo (2023) added that emotional warmth from caregivers, including grandparents, enhances socio-emotional development and gender understanding. In contrast, emotionally unsupportive parenting impedes these outcomes.

Opportunities for decision-making further strengthen independence. Smith and Jones (2019) showed that children given decision-making opportunities develop stronger confidence and problem-solving skills. Pomerantz and Grolnick (2019) stressed that guided decision-making fosters critical thinking and responsibility. Conversely, authoritarian parenting, marked by excessive control, often suppresses autonomy. Teuber et al. (2022) confirmed that autonomy-supportive parenting predicts greater self-confidence and academic resilience, whereas overly restrictive parenting denies children chances to develop problem-solving abilities (Levine & Munsch, 2021).

Recent studies also highlight the role of parenting in shaping broader social roles. Johnson (2022) argued that parenting influences children's perceptions of racial, ethnic, and gender norms, reflecting the complex intersection of identity development. Uddin et al. (2021) noted that family decision-making, shaped by social norms, even extends to health-related behaviors. Gimenez-Serrano, Garcia, and Garcia (2022) further found that authoritative parenting supports better social adjustment into adolescence, helping children resist rigid gender expectations (Hoffman, 2019). Tsai et al. (2021) also revealed that parenting that promotes both independence and gender equality equips children with stronger social and leadership skills. Overall, these studies affirm that balanced parenting, combining guidance with autonomy, fosters independence while strengthening inclusive gender understanding.

b. The Effect of Parenting on Children's Gender Understanding

Parenting that promotes gender equality positively shapes children's views of gender. Veijalainen et al. (2021) observed early differences in emotional expression and self-regulation, underscoring the need for sensitive parenting to counter stereotypes. McGuire et al. (2020) noted that stereotypes in STEM fields often emerge early, highlighting the importance of parental encouragement across all domains.

According to Gender Socialization Theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), children learn gender roles through observation and interaction. Diamond (2020) found that exposure to inclusive gender concepts fosters flexible perspectives, including openness to nonbinary and fluid identities. Sans façon et al. (2020) similarly emphasized that

children's gender identity development is shaped not only by self-awareness but also by social affirmation.

Sustained efforts are therefore needed from parents, schools, and policymakers. Sopian (2023) stressed the importance of integrating gender equality into educational practice. Hutami and Sobarna (2022) further showed that parenting quality is directly proportional to children's independence, whereas poor parenting reduces autonomy. Thus, gender-sensitive parenting benefits not only gender understanding but also independence.

c. The Importance of Open Communication and Active Participation of Parents

Open communication and active parental participation are crucial in fostering independence and gender understanding. Davis et al. (2020) noted that children around ages 5–6 begin transitioning toward independence and require supportive communication. Brown and Wilson (2019) stressed the role of attentive listening, while Miller (2021) emphasized the significance of active parental engagement.

Interpersonal Communication Theory (Griffin, 2015) highlights that honest and respectful exchanges build children's confidence. Similarly, Epstein's (1995) parental involvement theory underscores the importance of parent–school collaboration. From a developmental perspective, Erikson (1950) noted that autonomy is a key developmental task, supported by open communication and parental participation.

These dynamics also influence gender identity. Martin and Ruble (2010) emphasized how communication patterns shape children's responses to gender roles. Hill and Tyson (2009) found that parental involvement predicts independence, while Bos and Sandfort (2010) linked family communication to gender identity formation. Together, these findings highlight the interconnectedness of communication, parental involvement, independence, and gender identity.

d. Creating a Supportive Environment

Creating inclusive environments is critical for children's balanced development. Morawska (2020) found that gender-based parenting strongly influences early childhood outcomes. Tasker (2010) similarly emphasized that family role division matters more than parental gender in shaping children's gender equality perspectives.

Yaffe (2023) and Nomaguchi and Milkie (2020) noted that parental interactions are central to daily gender knowledge formation. Recent research also highlights the role of ethnicity and identity in shaping children's broader self-concept (Safa, Umaña-Taylor, & Martinez-Fuentes, 2024). Evans et al. (2020) added that gender differences in parent–child communication influence how children perceive sexuality and social norms.

Overall, a supportive environment requires active participation of both parents, opportunities for children's decision-making, and respect for individual preferences. As Smith (2017) argued, providing opportunities for children to safely explore diverse gender roles fosters better understanding. Jones et al. (2020) confirmed that respecting

children's choices promotes both independence and inclusive gender perspectives. This study reinforces that parenting which balances freedom with guidance, emphasizes open communication, and promotes gender equality plays a pivotal role in children's independence and gender understanding. Parents and educators must work together to provide inclusive, supportive environments that prepare children to thrive as confident, empathetic, and equitable individuals.

D. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that gender-responsive parenting plays a crucial role in fostering children's independence and shaping a healthy understanding of gender roles. Conversely, limited parental involvement often results in children becoming overly reliant on others in performing daily activities. The results also reveal that gender education remains underdeveloped in preschool settings, which in turn affects children's ability to form balanced gender concepts. These findings also underscore the importance of caregivers and teachers adopting parenting and educational practices that support both independence and gender equality from an early age. Strengthening collaboration between parents and educators is essential to create an inclusive environment that enables children to explore their autonomy while developing equitable views of gender.

In line with the frameworks of Holistic Development and Gender-Responsive Parenting, this study emphasizes the need for greater awareness and training among caregivers and teachers to implement practices that integrate autonomy-building with gender equality education. Future research should explore more deeply how preschool institutions can embed gender education within their curriculum and how partnerships between families and schools can reinforce children's inclusive gender understanding. Additionally, policy development that enhances parental involvement in early childhood education, particularly with regard to promoting gender equality, is critical to supporting more comprehensive child development.

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