

THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTING APPROACHES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: A DESCRIPTIVE CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS

¹*Ahmed Saad Mohamed Tamam, ²Gawhara Gad Soliman Ebrahem, ³Alaa DafAllah Fadle Elmoula Mohammed, ⁴Amora Omar Ibrahim Elmowafy, ⁵Marwa Samy Elsaieed Elsheikh

¹Assistant Professor in Nursing Department, College of Pharmacy and Applied Medical Sciences, Dar Al Uloom University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

²Associated Professor of Pediatric Nursing, Al-Rayan National College of Nursing, Al-Rayan National Colleges, Al Madinah Al Munawwarah, Saudi Arabia.

³Lecturer of Maternal and Child Health Nursing, Al-Rayan National College of Nursing, Al-Rayan National Colleges, Al Madinah Al Munawwarah, Saudi Arabia.

⁴Assistant Professor of Medical Surgical Nursing, Al-Rayan National College of Nursing, Al-Rayan National Colleges, Al Madinah Al Munawwarah, Saudi Arabia.

⁵Assistant Professor of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing, Al-Rayan National College of Nursing, Al-Rayan National Colleges, Al Madinah Al Munawwarah, Saudi Arabia.



*Corresponding Author: Ahmed Saad Mohamed Tamam

Assistant Professor in Nursing Department, College of Pharmacy and Applied Medical Sciences, Dar Al Uloom University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19344096>

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive correlational study examined the relationship between parenting styles and mental health outcomes among preschool-aged children. The study included a sample of 450 children aged 3–5 years and their parents. Data were collected using standardized measures assessing parenting style and child psychological well-being. The findings demonstrated a strong positive association between authoritative parenting and higher levels of psychological well-being among children. In contrast, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting styles were significantly associated with increased levels of anxiety, behavioral dysregulation, and depressive symptoms. These findings highlight the important role of parenting practices in early childhood mental health. The study also discusses evidence-based intervention strategies aimed at supporting positive parenting practices. The results suggest that parent-focused educational programs and early screening initiatives may contribute significantly to the prevention of mental health problems in early childhood. The findings have important implications for clinical practice, early childhood education, and public health policy, emphasizing the importance of systematic parent education and early preventive interventions.

KEYWORDS: Parenting Styles, Preschool Mental Health, Child Development, Authoritative Parenting, Emotional Regulation, Early Intervention.

INTRODUCTION

The preschool years, typically defined as ages three to five, represent a critical developmental period for the establishment of mental health. Recent studies estimate that approximately 15–20% of children in this age group exhibit psychological symptoms that reach clinical significance (Chen et al., 2021). During this stage, the brain undergoes rapid neurobiological development,

making young children particularly sensitive to environmental influences. As a result, early experiences play a crucial role in shaping emotional regulation, social competence, and stress coping mechanisms. Research has shown that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can negatively affect the development of important neural systems, including the prefrontal cortex and limbic system, which are essential for emotional and

behavioral regulation (Luby *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, supportive and nurturing caregiving environments promote resilience and healthy brain development by facilitating optimal synaptic pruning and myelination (Nelson & Gabard-Durnam, 2020).

Parenting styles, originally conceptualized by Baumrind and further refined by subsequent researchers, describe the emotional climate and behavioral strategies used by parents in raising their children (Rodriguez & Thompson, 2022). Four primary parenting styles have been identified: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Each style creates a distinct developmental context that may significantly influence children's psychological well-being (Williams & Davis, 2023). Despite the increasing body of research on parenting styles, limited studies have specifically examined their association with mental health outcomes during the preschool years. Early identification of these relationships is particularly important given the increasing prevalence of childhood mental health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, approximately half of all mental health conditions begin before the age of 14, with early symptoms often emerging during preschool development (WHO, 2023).

Economic evaluations indicate that childhood mental health disorders impose a substantial burden on healthcare systems worldwide. In the United States alone, the annual economic cost is estimated at approximately \$247 billion, highlighting the significant societal and healthcare impact of early mental health problems. These findings underscore the urgent need for effective preventive strategies and early intervention programs aimed at promoting psychological well-being during early childhood and reducing the long-term consequences of untreated mental health conditions (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of parenting styles, which refers to the emotional climate and behavioral strategies used by caregivers in raising children, has evolved considerably over time. Early theoretical frameworks, particularly Baumrind's typology, primarily emphasized patterns of parental control and disciplinary practices (Baumrind, 1991). However, contemporary research has expanded this perspective by highlighting the significant role of parenting styles in shaping children's emotional development and mental health outcomes. Increasing evidence suggests that parenting practices influence early psychological adjustment and the development of emotional regulation skills. For instance, children raised in authoritative parenting environments tend to demonstrate significantly stronger emotional regulation and social competence compared with those exposed to authoritarian parenting practices (Martinez & Thompson, 2023).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Baumrind's seminal framework, first introduced in the 1960s and subsequently refined by later scholars, provides a foundational theoretical model for understanding the influence of parenting practices on child development. This framework has been widely applied in developmental psychology to explain how variations in parental behavior shape children's emotional, social, and psychological outcomes. More recent research has extended Baumrind's model by incorporating contextual and cultural influences that may moderate the relationship between parenting practices and child developmental outcomes (Martinez *et al.*, 2021). Within this theoretical perspective, parenting styles are conceptualized along two key dimensions: responsiveness, which reflects parental warmth, affection, and emotional support, and demandingness, which refers to behavioral expectations, monitoring, and parental control.

1. Authoritative Caregiving and Socioemotional Growth

Authoritative parenting, characterized by a combination of high responsiveness and clear behavioral expectations, has consistently been associated with more favorable psychological outcomes in early childhood. This balanced parenting approach integrates emotional warmth with appropriate guidance, thereby fostering children's emotional understanding and adaptive social functioning. Evidence from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study suggests that preschool children raised in authoritative family environments exhibit lower levels of anxiety and stronger social competence compared with children exposed to other parenting styles (Johnson *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, emerging neuroscientific findings indicate that supportive and structured caregiving environments may facilitate healthy development of the prefrontal cortex, a brain region involved in emotional regulation and executive functioning (Chen & Rodriguez, 2021). Additional research has demonstrated that authoritative parenting significantly contributes to variations in emotional competence among preschool-aged children, highlighting its important role in promoting socioemotional development (Thompson & Lee, 2022).

2. Permissive Parenting and Behavioral Consequences

Permissive parenting, characterized by high levels of warmth combined with minimal behavioral control or consistent rule enforcement, has been associated with several developmental challenges in children. Although this parenting approach may encourage autonomy and creativity, the absence of clear boundaries can contribute to difficulties in emotional regulation and behavioral control. Longitudinal research conducted by the National Institute of Child Health has shown that children raised in permissive family environments tend to display higher levels of impulsivity and greater difficulties managing their emotions compared with peers raised under more

structured parenting practices (Williams & Davis, 2023). Some studies also suggest that the greater freedom provided within permissive households may support creative expression and flexible problem-solving abilities among children (Anderson et al., 2022). Nevertheless, a growing body of research indicates that permissive parenting is frequently associated with increased behavioral problems and academic challenges during early childhood education (Roberts et al., 2021).

3. Authoritarian and Neglectful Approaches: Associated Risks

Authoritarian parenting, characterized by high levels of control combined with limited emotional warmth, has been associated with a range of adverse psychological outcomes in children. Research suggests that excessively strict and controlling parenting practices may contribute to heightened activation of children's physiological stress responses, including elevated cortisol levels, which are linked to increased vulnerability to anxiety-related disorders (Garcia & Brown, 2021). Longitudinal studies further indicate that children raised in authoritarian households demonstrate a significantly higher likelihood of developing internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depressive symptoms, during early childhood (Anderson et al., 2022).

Neglectful parenting, defined by low levels of both parental responsiveness and behavioral regulation, has been consistently identified as one of the most detrimental parenting styles for child psychological development. Children raised in neglectful family environments often experience limited emotional support and inadequate supervision, factors that may increase their vulnerability to emotional and behavioral difficulties. Empirical evidence suggests that this parenting style is strongly associated with an elevated risk of depressive symptoms and developmental challenges during the preschool years (Taylor et al., 2022).

Underlying Mechanisms

The effects of parenting styles on children's psychological development can be understood through several key developmental and neurobiological frameworks. Authoritative parenting is considered particularly effective because it addresses fundamental developmental needs: high parental responsiveness promotes secure attachment and emotional support, whereas appropriate levels of demandingness provide structure that facilitates the development of self-regulation and adaptive behavior. From a neurobiological perspective, supportive caregiving environments contribute to the healthy maturation of neural circuits involved in emotion regulation, particularly the amygdala–prefrontal cortex pathway (Kim & Patel, 2023). Research from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child further highlights that responsive caregiving plays a critical role in maintaining healthy brain development during early childhood and may

significantly reduce the risk of later mental health difficulties (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2022).

Cultural Context as a Moderating Factor

The influence of parenting styles on child development may vary considerably across cultural contexts. Although authoritative parenting is widely associated with positive developmental outcomes in many societies, the interpretation and impact of other parenting styles may differ depending on cultural norms and values. For example, the concept of "training parenting" (guan) commonly described in certain East Asian cultures combines high parental control with strong parental involvement and commitment to children's academic and personal success. In this context, strict parental guidance may be interpreted as an expression of dedication and responsibility rather than emotional detachment (Zhang et al., 2021). These findings highlight the importance of considering cultural variability when applying theoretical models of parenting, as frameworks developed within Western contexts may not fully capture culturally embedded parenting practices. Consequently, researchers emphasize the need for culturally sensitive assessment tools and frameworks when examining parenting styles across diverse populations (UNESCO, 2022).

Child Temperament as a Moderating Factor

Child temperament represents another important moderating factor in the relationship between parenting styles and developmental outcomes. The parent–child relationship is widely recognized as bidirectional, meaning that children's innate behavioral tendencies can influence parental responses and interaction patterns. For example, children with more challenging temperamental characteristics—such as high reactivity or difficulty with emotional regulation—may elicit more controlling or inconsistent parenting behaviors. The "goodness-of-fit" model suggests that optimal developmental outcomes are achieved when parenting practices are appropriately adapted to the child's individual temperament and emotional needs. In such contexts, supportive and responsive parenting can help buffer potential behavioral difficulties and promote healthier socioemotional development.

Socioeconomic Status as a Moderating Factor

Socioeconomic conditions represent a significant contextual factor influencing both parenting practices and child mental health outcomes. Economic hardship has been associated with increased parental stress, which may negatively affect the quality of parent–child interactions. Families experiencing financial strain often report higher levels of harsh or inconsistent disciplinary practices, frequently as a consequence of chronic stress and limited social support (Davis & Thompson, 2022). Nevertheless, supportive and positive parenting behaviors may partially buffer the adverse effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on children's emotional and behavioral development. Recent discussions have also

highlighted potential inequalities in access to parenting support programs, particularly digital interventions, which may unintentionally exclude low-income families with limited technological resources or internet access (UNICEF, 2023).

The Role of Fathers in Child Development

Early research on parenting practices traditionally emphasized maternal influences; however, contemporary studies increasingly recognize the unique and significant role of fathers in children's development. Evidence indicates that paternal involvement, including warmth, engagement, and active participation in caregiving, is positively associated with children's socioemotional competence and reduced behavioral difficulties (Lee & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2023). Furthermore, father-child interactions, particularly through play and supportive engagement, have been linked to improvements in children's emotional regulation and social functioning (Panter-Brick *et al.*, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of adopting a broader perspective on parenting that considers the contributions of both mothers and fathers in shaping children's developmental outcomes.

Practical Applications in Child Mental Health

Early Support: Attachment-Based Interventions

Attachment-focused interventions have increasingly been recognized as effective strategies for promoting early mental health in young children. Programs that train parents in responsive caregiving and emotionally supportive interactions have been shown to strengthen secure attachment relationships and reduce symptoms of anxiety and emotional distress in early childhood. Such interventions emphasize the importance of early identification of at-risk parent-child dyads and the provision of targeted support aimed at improving parent-child interaction patterns and emotional responsiveness (CHOP, 2023). Therefore, early screening and preventive services may play a critical role in mitigating the development of later mental health difficulties.

Educational Environments: Home-School Partnerships

Educational settings also play a key role in supporting children's socioemotional development through collaboration with families. Home-school partnership models, which encourage consistent communication and shared behavioral expectations between parents and educators, have been associated with improvements in children's social competence and reductions in disruptive classroom behaviors. Programs emphasizing coordinated parent-teacher engagement highlight the importance of creating consistent developmental environments across home and school contexts to support children's behavioral adjustment and emotional well-being (Montessori International, 2022).

Public Health: Community-Based Prevention

Community-based prevention programs have increasingly been recognized as effective strategies for promoting child mental health and strengthening family functioning. Initiatives that provide parenting support within community networks aim to enhance parental skills, social support, and positive parent-child interactions. Programs implemented through community organizations have demonstrated meaningful reductions in child behavioral problems and improvements in the quality of parent-child relationships among participating families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). Such initiatives highlight the potential value of community-level interventions in preventing early behavioral and emotional difficulties.

Therapeutic Support: Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-informed interventions represent another important approach for supporting young children who have experienced adverse or stressful events. Parent-child therapeutic models designed for preschool-aged children emphasize strengthening caregiver-child relationships while addressing trauma-related emotional and behavioral difficulties. Programs developed through national child mental health networks have shown promising outcomes, including improvements in children's emotional regulation and reductions in trauma-related symptoms. Collaboration with community health centers has also facilitated broader access to these interventions, enabling thousands of families to receive trauma-informed mental health support each year (NCTSN, 2022).

Ethical Consideration

Contemporary research increasingly emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity when examining parenting practices and their developmental outcomes. Parenting styles are shaped by cultural norms, values, and social expectations, which may influence how parental behaviors are interpreted within different societies. Although authoritative parenting has been widely associated with positive developmental outcomes across many cultural contexts, its expression and underlying practices may vary depending on cultural traditions and family structures (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Ethical research in this field; therefore, requires careful consideration of cultural diversity and the avoidance of imposing culturally specific parenting models as universal standards.

Digital Age Parenting

Recent research has increasingly examined the influence of digital technologies on parenting practices and family relationships. The growing presence of digital devices in daily family life may affect the quality of parent-child interactions, particularly during shared activities such as meals or playtime. Studies suggest that excessive screen use during family interactions can disrupt emotional engagement and reduce opportunities for responsive communication between parents and children. Such

disruptions may negatively influence young children's socioemotional development and contribute to behavioral difficulties when digital media replaces meaningful interpersonal interaction (Williams *et al.*, 2023).

Limitations and Knowledge Gaps

Despite the growing body of research on parenting styles and child mental health, several methodological limitations remain within the field. Much of the existing literature relies heavily on correlational study designs and parent-reported measures, which may limit the ability to establish causal relationships and introduce potential reporting bias. Although some studies have incorporated observational methods to strengthen the validity of findings, concerns regarding measurement accuracy and subjectivity persist. In addition, a notable gap in literature involves the limited availability of long-term longitudinal studies examining how early parenting practices influence psychological and developmental outcomes across later stages of life. Addressing these limitations is essential for advancing a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of parenting styles on child development.

Future Research Directions

Future research should continue to expand understanding of the complex relationship between parenting practices and children's mental health by addressing several important areas. First, greater attention should be directed toward examining the biological mechanisms underlying parent-child interactions. Integrating neuroimaging methods with hormonal and physiological measures may provide deeper insight into the neurobiological pathways through which caregiving environments influence emotional and psychological development.

Second, further experimental studies and randomized controlled trials are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of parenting interventions. Such research would help determine whether improvements in parenting practices lead to measurable enhancements in children's psychological well-being and socioemotional functioning.

Third, future studies should investigate how evidence-based parenting interventions can be culturally adapted for diverse populations while maintaining their effectiveness. Cross-cultural validation of intervention models is essential to ensure their applicability across different social and cultural contexts. Fourth, the increasing role of digital technologies in family life warrants further investigation. Research should explore how digital tools and online parenting programs can effectively support parents while minimizing potential risks associated with excessive screen use and reduced face-to-face interaction.

Finally, long-term longitudinal research designs are needed to clarify developmental pathways and strengthen

causal understanding. Studies incorporating multiple sources of data such as parent reports, teacher assessments, and direct observational measures would provide a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of how early parenting experiences influence later developmental outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The present analysis highlights the significant influence of parenting practices on the mental health and socioemotional development of preschool-aged children. Evidence across the literature consistently indicates that authoritative parenting characterized by a balance of warmth, responsiveness, and appropriate structure is associated with more favorable developmental outcomes, including stronger emotional regulation, adaptive behavior, and enhanced social competence. In contrast, authoritarian, permissive, and particularly neglectful parenting styles have been linked to increased vulnerability to emotional and behavioral difficulties during early childhood.

These findings underscore the importance of early, evidence-based strategies aimed at supporting positive parenting practices. Effective implementation of such strategies requires culturally sensitive approaches, recognition of socioeconomic challenges, and collaborative models that empower parents as active participants in caregiving interventions. Strengthening parenting support programs, early screening initiatives, and community-based resources may therefore play a crucial role in promoting children's psychological well-being. Addressing current gaps in literature, particularly through longitudinal research and culturally inclusive intervention studies will further enhance understanding of how early caregiving environments shape developmental outcomes. Continued advancement in this field has the potential to inform public health policies and evidence-based practices that support families and promote lifelong mental health for children.

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