



Parental Mental Health Association with Preschoolers' Social Skills in Urban Indonesia

Hilda Meriyandah¹, Yuri Nurdiantami², Smarika Shresta³, Xiang Li⁴, Zhu Zhu⁵, Maiko Shigeeda⁶, Tokie Anne⁷, Rotua Suryani⁸, Dinda NF Hidayati Bunga⁹, Lisna Agustina¹⁰

^{1,2,3,6}University of Tsukuba

^{4,5}University, Hangzhou, China

^{8,9,10}STIKes Medistra Indonesia

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*Correspondence: Tokie Anne

Email: anmet@md.tsukuba.ac.jp

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Abstract: Children's social development is an important aspect that influences their later life; hence it is important to optimize their development from an early age. This study investigates the correlation between development of social skills in preschool-aged children and parental mental health in Indonesia. Utilizing a cross-sectional observational methodology, data were gathered from 343 parents and teachers within nine private kindergartens located in SJ Ward, B City. The mental health of parents was examined with the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), whilst the social abilities of children were measured with the Social Skill Scale (SSS). Findings revealed a negative correlation between parental stress and anxiety with children's assertion, self-control, and cooperation. Nonetheless, depression did not exhibit significant correlations with social skills, which might be influenced by the study's cross-sectional design. The results underscore the necessity for early interventions aimed at alleviating parental stress and anxiety to enhance children's social skills. This research is the first application of the validated SSS for preschoolers in Indonesia, enhancing the comprehension of early childhood social development.

Future investigations should examine long-term consequences via longitudinal studies. These findings offer significant insights for educators and mental health experts in formulating parenting support programs that promote healthy child development.

Keywords: Mental Health, Preschoolers, Social Skills Development

Introduction

Crucial stage may heighten a child's vulnerability to significant developmental challenges (Maleki et al., 2019). The Indonesian Ministry of Education outlines child development as encompassing several key aspects: (1) Religious and Moral Values, (2) Physical-Motoric, (3) Cognitive, (4) Language, (5) Social-Emotional, and (6) Art (Ministry of Education, 2014). Each of these dimensions plays a vital role in shaping a well-rounded individual.

Recent studies have found that there are several social skills challenges among children in Indonesia. Many preschoolers exhibit tendencies toward isolation, shyness, difficulty managing emotions, reluctance to share, and an inability to cooperate with peers (Puspita Ria, 2019). These social skills deficits can have long-lasting implications, potentially leading to challenges in future social interactions and academic performance (Asyari & Astuti, 2022; Maleki et al., 2019). Conversely, children who develop strong social skills are more likely to thrive both in school and within their communities, highlighting the importance of early intervention and support (Asyari & Astuti, 2022).

The development of social skills in children is influenced by a multitude of factors, including demographic characteristics such as age and sex, as well as the family environment. Key elements include the quality of attachment between parents and children, parenting styles, and the mental health of parents (Ip et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2018; Solihah et al., 2021). Yet, many evidences emphasized that home environment plays an important role in children social-emotional development (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Lehl et al., 2020).

Parents who experience depression have difficulty showing affection or emotion as they should, so it has an impact on children's behaviour which eventually imitates their parents (Ip et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2018). Some previous studies have explored the impact of parenting stress on children under 10 years of age and have found links with child development and behavioural problems (Dong et al., 2023; Hattangadi et al., 2020). Parental anxiety is generally associated with a child's upbringing style in a hyper-protective manner, which subsequently generates symptoms of typical or late psychosocial development (Andrioni et al., 2022).

Recent studies conducted in specific areas, such as the SJ ward, have identified concerning prevalence rates of mild mental health disorders among parents, with 7% experiencing mild stress and 10% exhibiting mild anxiety (Agil et al., 2023). While prior research in Indonesia has investigated the factors influencing children's social skills, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the impact of parents' mental health on child development. Given the established connections between parent's mental health and children's social outcomes, further exploration in this field is not only warranted but essential for developing effective interventions aimed at fostering healthier social environments for children.

Recently, in the current research area (SJ ward) was found the prevalence of the mental health conditions of parents who experience mild stress disorders and mild anxiety at 7% and 10%, respectively (Agil et al., 2023). Previous studies in Indonesia discussed the

determining factors of children's social skills, but limited one focused on parents' mental health. Therefore, a study in this field was needed to clarify the associations between parental mental health, parenting style, and preschoolers' social skills.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional observational design and was conducted across all nine private kindergartens located in SJ Ward, B City, Indonesia. Data collection involved both parents and teachers, with parents providing demographic and mental health status, while teachers assessed the social skills of the children under their care.

A total sampling method was utilized, ensuring that all eligible participants from the selected kindergartens were included in the study. The inclusion criteria required that parents have preschool-aged children (4 to 6 years old) enrolled in SJ ward area kindergartens, consent to participate in the study, and allow their children to be evaluated by teachers. Teachers were responsible for assessing children's social skills. Participants were excluded if the child had special needs or if they or their parents declined to participate.

Demographic information was gathered from parents using a structured questionnaire. The collected data included the age of both the parent and the child, parent-child relationship (e.g., mother or father), household income, educational background of both parents, occupational status of both parents, child's gender, and number of children in the household. These demographic factors were considered potential influencing variables in the study's analysis.

Parents' mental health was assessed using the validated Indonesian version of the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale or known as DASS-21 (Ifdil et al., 2020). This self-report questionnaire consists of 21 items divided into three subscales: depression, anxiety and stress. Each item was rated on a 4-point Likert scale: 0 = Didn't apply to me at all; 1 = Applied to me to some degree; 2 = Applied to me to a considerable degree; 3 = Applied to me very much. The total score for each subscale was doubled, with higher scores indicating more severe negative emotional states, while lower scores reflected lower mental health problems.

Children's social skills were assessed by teachers using the Social Skills Scale (SSS), which evaluates children's ability to interact effectively in social environments. SSS originally developed and tested in Japanese children's population and obtained Cronbach alpha range 0.91 to 0.93 (Anme et al., 2013). The SSS focuses on three core aspects of social interaction: 1) assertions (items 1–8) – the ability to express needs and opinions appropriately; 2) self-control (items 9–16) – the capacity to regulate emotions and behaviours in various situations; 3) Cooperation (items 17–24) – the ability to work harmoniously with peers and adults. Teachers rated each item on a 3-point Likert scale: 0 = Never, 1 = Sometimes, 2 = Always. The Indonesian version of the SSS has been validated and demonstrated strong reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.907 (Agil et al., 2023), indicating high internal consistency.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Prima Health College Ethical Committee (No. 243/EC/KEPK/STIKES-PI/III/2023) and the University of Tsukuba Ethical

Committee (No. 1657-1). Written informed consent was obtained from all participating parents before data collection, ensuring ethical compliance and voluntary participation.

Result and Discussion

In results, for 343 parents consented to join the study and the average of the parents age was 34 years categorized as middle-age adults (see table 1). In addition, mostly mother participated in the study (88.6%) and stay as housemother (43.6%).

Since the current study was conducted in the urban area, the characteristics of people who graduated from university, and having household income equal or more than City Standard Salary (UMR) were majority, 56.6% and 68.8% respectively.

In Indonesia, the rule stated that children aged 4 to 6 years old can enter preschool education and enter elementary school at 7 years old. Hence, the current study included children 4 to 6 years old who go to kindergarten. The majority of participants in the study were 6-year-old children (46.6%), girls (52.8%), and kindergartens with a B accreditation score (57.7%).

Table 1: Demographic of Participants

Variables	Categories	n	%
Parents' age*		(34.9±5.67 (M±SD)	
Relationship with children	Father	39	11.4
	Mother	304	88.6
Parents' Education	Elementary	7	2.0
	Junior High school	27	7.9
	Senior High School	97	28.3
	University	194	56.6
	Postgraduate	18	5.2
Parents' Job	Government employee	23	7.9
	Entrepreneur	31	10.2
	Housemother	175	43.6
	Private company	106	35.7
	Part-timer	8	2.6
Household's income	< City standard salary**	107	31.2
	= City standard salary	59	17.2

	> City standard salary	177	51.6
Children's Age	4 years old	36	10.5
	5 years old	148	43.1
	6 years old	159	46.4
Children's Gender	Boy	162	47.2
	Girl	181	52.8
School's Accreditation	A	82	23.9
	B	198	57.7
	C	63	18.4

As shown in Table 2, the baseline data found the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress of the parents in the current study were mostly in the normal state, 89.1%, 71.9%, and 87.5%, respectively. However, some parents also experience moderate to extremely severe mental health problems, which is in line with the previous study (Agil et al., 2023).

The social skills subcategory with the highest score was assertion, which was followed by cooperation and self-control (see table 3). This finding in line with the previous study using SSS among Japanese children (Takahashi et al., 2015). Since assertion just entails expressing one's thoughts or feelings, it usually develops earlier than other skills, whereas other skills call for more sophisticated social awareness and consideration of others' needs.

Table 2: Descriptive Results of Parents' Mental Health

Variables	Categories	n	%
Depression	Normal	303	89.1
	Mild	27	7.6
	Moderate	10	2.3
	Severe	2	0.7
	Extremely severe	1	0.3
Anxiety	Normal	248	71.9
	Mild	31	9.6
	Moderate	54	15.5
	Severe	5	1.3
	Extremely severe	5	1.7
Stress	Normal	300	87.5

	Mild	31	9.0
	Moderate	12	3.5
	Severe	0	0.0
	Extremely severe	0	0.0

Table 3: Descriptive Results of Children's Social Skills

Variables	Mean \pm SD
Assertion	13.22 \pm 2.75
Self-control	12.38 \pm 2.74
Cooperation	10.71 \pm 3.24
Total score of SSS	36.31 \pm 6.92

Table 4 shows the correlation results between parents' mental health and social skills. Anxiety negatively correlated with children's self-control, cooperation, and total score of social skills. In addition, parents' stress also correlated with children's assertion and self-control. However, depression didn't show any significant results with subscales and total scores of social skills.

Table 4: Correlation Results of Parents' Mental Health and Children's Social Skills

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Depression	1.0						
2. Anxiety	0.39**	1.0					
3. Stress	0.44**	0.48**	1.0				
4. Assertion	-0.01	0.06	-0.13*	1.0			
5. Self-control	-0.04	-0.11*	-0.17**	0.45**	1.0		
6. Cooperation	-0.01	-0.14**	0.05	0.43**	0.42**	1.0	
7. SSS Total	-0.02	-0.11*	0.00	0.76**	0.77**	0.80**	1.0

The study revealed that parents' anxiety and stress were negatively associated with several aspects of children's social skills, particularly self-control and cooperation. This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that parents experiencing mental health challenges often struggle to display affection, regulate emotions, engage in positive interactions with their children, and tend to some abuse to the child (Ip et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2018). As children tend to model their parents' behaviours, those raised by anxious or stressed parents may develop difficulties in managing their emotions and social interactions.

The Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction (British Columbia, n.d.) has also highlighted that mood disorders can significantly impact individuals' feelings, thoughts, and behaviours, leading to pessimism, withdrawal from daily activities, and reduced engagement in social interactions, including time spent playing with children. This lack of positive engagement may hinder the development of essential social skills in young children.

Parents' mental health determine parenting style which is a habit or behaviour of parents in taking care of and guiding children, and it's usually shown in daily habits. Parents with mental health problems tend to show negative acts toward the children since they have difficulties to manage their emotions. The parent's behaviour also determines children's social skills since children emulate their parents' conduct due to their high observation, imitation, and underdeveloped judgment skills (Zhu, 2021). Many previous studies highlighted nurturing relationship between parents and children give direct positive outcomes to the children's social skills development (Huang et al., 2024; Salavera et al., 2022).

Interestingly, depression did not show a significant relationship with children's social skills in this study. It might be determined by the one-time point data collection method used. Given that a clinical diagnosis of depression requires symptoms to be present for at least two weeks (British Columbia, n.d.), it is possible that the study did not capture long-term depressive states in parents. Future research could employ longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of parents' depression on children's social skill development.

Overall, this study underscores the critical role of parents' mental health in shaping children's social skills. It is essential to promote mental health support for parents and encourage parenting strategies that foster healthy emotional and social development in children. Policymakers and educators should consider interventions aimed at reducing parental stress and anxiety, especially in child-rearing.

This study has several originalities; it is the first study using the Social Skills Scale (SSS) in Indonesian preschoolers – This research is the first to apply the validated Indonesian version of the Social Skills Scale (SSS) to evaluate the social skills of preschool-aged children, contributing to a deeper understanding of early childhood development in Indonesia. Second, this study used an international standardized measurement tool: DASS-21 and SSS-24. In addition, the study employed numeric analysis of the Social Skills Scale (SSS) and categorical analysis of DASS-21, using standardized Indonesian versions, ensuring cultural relevance and validity of the findings.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. Firstly, the relatively small sample size and missing responses in some questionnaires may have affected the statistical power and generalizability of the findings. Second, the study employed a cross-sectional design, which only captures a single point in time, limiting the ability to assess long-term trends or causal relationships. Future studies could adopt a longitudinal approach to better evaluate the long-term effects of parenting styles and parent mental health on children's social development.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that parent stress was significantly associated with children's assertion and self-control, while anxiety levels showed significant correlations with children's self-control, cooperation, and overall social skills score. These findings underscore the critical role of parents' mental health in shaping children's social competence. Given these associations, there is a strong need for further research and targeted interventions to support parents in managing stress and anxiety. Additionally, these findings offer practical guidance for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers to develop parenting education programs and mental health interventions aimed at improving both parent well-being and children's social skill development.

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