

The Impact of Parent–child Relationships on Preschoolers' Emotional Expression and Emotional Regulation

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Abstract. The preschool stage is a key period for the rapid development of children's emotional abilities. As the earliest and most central socialization area, the parent–child relationship plays an important role in the development of emotional expression and regulation. This paper, based on empirical studies from the past ten years, reviews and compares findings from multiple perspectives, including parenting styles, emotional socialization strategies, emotional language communication, and co-parenting. The results show that warm, stable, and responsive parent–child interactions can significantly enhance the richness and appropriateness of children's emotional expression and indirectly strengthen emotional regulation by promoting self-control and improving the quality of peer interactions. In contrast, distant interactions or frequent conflicts are likely to limit emotional recognition and cause regulation difficulties. According to these findings, several suggestions are put forward, including improving the family emotional climate, balancing support and discipline, strengthening family–kindergarten cooperation, and paying attention to high-risk families. This study constructs a framework to explain how preschool children acquire emotional competencies. It also gives some suggestions for family education and early childhood teaching.

Keywords: Parent–child relationship; Preschool children; Emotional expression; Emotional regulation; Early childhood education.

1. Introduction

The development of emotional abilities is of fundamental significance to children's social adaptation, mental health and future academic performance. The preschool stage is a critical period for the formation and consolidation of emotional expression and emotional regulation abilities. During this stage, children gradually learn to identify, understand, and appropriately communicate emotions. This process not only affects the quality of their interpersonal interactions but also has long-term implications for self-awareness and emotional security.

Among the many influencing factors, the parent–child relationship, as the earliest and most enduring socialization environment, is widely recognized as a key determinant of emotional development. High-quality parent–child relationships not only provide children with stable emotional support but also shape children's emotional expression and regulation strategies through response, demonstration and guidance in daily interactions. However, current research still faces methodological and scope limitations. Many studies adopt cross-sectional data, making it difficult to capture the dynamic developmental process. Research samples often rely heavily on parental self-reports, with limited perspectives from teachers and children themselves. In addition, cross-cultural investigations remain insufficient, which restricts a deeper understanding of the long-term mechanisms through which parent–child relationships influence emotional development [1-4].

To address these gaps, this paper focuses on the theme of “The Influence of Parent–Child Relationship on Preschool Children's Emotional Expression and Regulation.” It systematically integrates empirical studies from the past decade, covering key variables such as parenting styles, emotional socialization, emotional language use, and co-parenting. By comparing differences and similarities across theoretical frameworks, data sources, and research findings, this paper seeks to construct a comprehensive model of how parent–child relationships affect preschool children's emotional competence. On this basis, it proposes recommendations for both families and early childhood education institutions, aiming to create a more supportive emotional environment for children through home-kindergarten collaboration. This study contributes to filling theoretical and

practical gaps and provides empirical references for future policy-making and educational interventions [6].

2. Research Subjects

2.1. Parent–Child Relationship

The parent–child relationship is an interactive connection between parents and children in the family, based on kinship or shared living. It involves both emotional communication and behavioral interaction and includes two main dimensions. Among them, intimacy is reflected in the intimate behavior between parents and children, while conflict refers to the occurrence of contradictory behavior between parents and children (Sun, 2003). Many scholars have studied the influencing factors of the parent–child relationship, such as family factors and child-related factors. Regarding family factors, Zheng Wenjing pointed out that parenting styles play an important role in the development of parent–child relationships (Zheng, 2013). The use of authoritarian or strict approaches in dealing with problems and conflicts often leads to negative consequences. Different parenting styles in the family have significant effects on the emotional regulation and adjustment abilities of children with different temperament traits. Regarding child-related factors, according to the study of Wang Meiping et al., the mother–daughter relationship is characterized by higher intimacy but lower harmony; the mother–son relationship shows lower interaction but higher harmony and conflict; while the father–child relationship is relatively equal, with fewer interactions between fathers and daughters (Wang, 2002) [7-10].

2.2. Preschool Children’s Emotional Expression

Preschool children’s emotional expression refers to how children display their inner emotions through various means, such as language, facial expressions, and body movements, turning them into clear and observable behaviors. It mainly includes tendencies of emotional expression (such as willingness to express or suppression of expression), modes of expression, and the appropriateness of emotional expression. Shen Yan stated that preschool children’s emotional expression is direct and changeable (Shen, 2004). Good expressive ability not only helps to release stress and maintain physical and mental balance but also promotes the development of positive emotions, enhances social competence, and builds self-confidence.

2.3. Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the process by which individuals purposefully adjust their emotional responses in order to achieve specific goals, leading to changes in physiological arousal, internal experience, and external behavioral performance so as to adapt to the current social context (Zheng, 2024). In real-life situations, emotional regulation tasks include suppressing or reducing excessive negative emotional responses (such as anger, anxiety, and fear) to prevent their negative impact on social interactions and task completion. It also includes appropriately enhancing positive emotional experiences (such as confidence and joy), which contribute to maintaining motivation and facilitating smooth social interactions.

3. The Influence of Parent–Child Relationship on Preschool Children’s Emotional Expression

The preschool period is not only a critical stage for the rapid development of children’s emotional cognition and expression ability, but also an important phase for the accelerated maturation of the brain’s emotional centers (such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex) and social cognitive functions. During this stage, children gradually acquire the ability to recognize, understand, and appropriately express emotions. The early development of these abilities lays the foundation for their subsequent

social adaptation, peer interaction, and mental health. As the earliest and also the most important social interaction environment, the parent–child relationship is regarded as the “first classroom” for children to learn emotional expression. Through daily interaction, emotional support, and behavioral modeling, the parent–child relationship exerts a profound influence on children’s emotional expression. In recent years, more and more empirical studies have explored the mechanisms by which the parent–child relationship affects children’s emotional expression, and have yielded substantial findings.

A representative large-scale empirical study, which selected 2,303 preschool children aged 3–6 years from several provinces and cities in China, used multi-source questionnaires and structural equation modeling to examine the mechanism by which parenting style influences children’s emotional expression ability (Li, Li & Zhu, 2023). The main purpose of the study was to explore whether parenting style indirectly influences children’s emotional expression through self-control and peer interactions. To ensure data quality and measurement validity, the research team used localized and well-validated scales, including the Preschool Children’s Emotion Management Skills Scale, the Children’s Self-Control Scale, the Peer Interaction Assessment Scale, and the Parenting Style Questionnaire. The path analysis model was constructed and tested with Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) software.

The main findings included: first, authoritative parenting style (combining emotional support and appropriate behavioral regulation) significantly positively predicted children’s emotional expression ability. Children in such family atmospheres were more inclined to actively express their inner feelings, understand others’ emotions, and make appropriate responses. In contrast, in authoritarian families with high control and low responsiveness, children’s emotional expression was often restricted, and even appeared as suppression, withdrawal, or vague expression. Further mediation analysis showed that self-control played a partial mediating role between parenting style and emotional expression. This means that a positive family environment, through secure attachment and positive feedback, helps children establish stable emotional regulation mechanisms. In addition, the quality of peer interaction was also confirmed as an important factor in the model, indicating that in positive social situations, children could practice and expand their emotional expression ability more effectively.

A core theoretical contribution of this study lies in placing children’s emotional expression into a multi-level developmental path: parenting style → psychological ability (self-control) → social interaction → emotional behavior. This framework provides a holistic understanding of how the parent–child relationship influences emotional expression. The researchers also emphasized that emotional expression is a complex behavior embedded in cognition and social experience, and its developmental process cannot be fully explained by parenting style alone, but should be examined from an ecosystem perspective.

However, although this study has advantages in sample size, theoretical model construction, and data analysis, it also has limitations. First, all scales were filled out by parents, which may bring subjective bias and limit the accurate reflection of children’s actual behavior. Second, since a cross-sectional design was adopted, the study could not track the dynamic changes in emotional expression across different age stages, thereby limiting in-depth understanding of the developmental trajectory.

Therefore, some scholars have proposed that future research should combine children’s interviews, teacher evaluations, and natural observation methods to expand data sources, and adopt longitudinal designs (Li, Li & Zhu, 2023).

Chan et al. (2022) examined the potential impact of parents’ use of emotional language in daily interactions on children’s emotional expression in natural life contexts. The research subjects were 75 Chinese families with children aged 3.2–7.4 years, and a structured “parent–child shared reading” task was designed, in which parents and children jointly read the same picture book. The whole process was recorded, transcribed, and semantically coded, in order to capture the characteristics of emotional language in parent–child interactions.

The results showed that in the shared reading process, the frequency and diversity of parents' use of emotional vocabulary significantly positively predicted children's emotional vocabulary reserve and expression flexibility, especially the effect of positive emotional vocabulary was more significant. In such a language environment, children were not only able to more accurately recognize and label their own emotional states, but also showed the ability to actively and appropriately use emotional vocabulary in non-family situations. Further multilevel regression models confirmed the predictive effect of parents' emotional language diversity on children's frequency of emotional word use. Suggesting that the impact of such language input is not limited to vocabulary learning, but extends to children's social adaptation and emotional regulation.

Cultural analysis revealed that Chinese American families and Taiwanese families were more inclined to openly discuss emotions and encourage children to express inner feelings; whereas some China's mainland families tended to avoid or even suppress discussions of negative emotions such as anger or sadness. This tendency is related to traditional cultural values that emphasize emotional restraint, with the underlying concern that overt expression may exacerbate negative experiences. Children growing up in such emotion-avoiding environments may develop a limited emotional vocabulary, showing vague or unclear expression.

The methodological advantage of this study lies in combining natural observation with language behavior coding, breaking through the limitations of questionnaire-based research, and revealing the micro-mechanisms by which parent-child communication influences emotional socialization. Based on this, the researchers suggested that family education should consciously integrate diverse emotional expressions into shared reading and daily communication, guiding children to accurately describe emotions through language. At the same time, they suggested cooperation with teachers and early education institutions to raise parents' awareness of the importance of emotional language, so as to jointly promote children's comprehensive development of emotional understanding and expression in both family and educational systems (Chan, Williams, Teng, & Zhou, 2023) [11-13].

A study published in *Acta Psychologica Sinica* in 2021, based on the concept of meta-emotion, explored how parents' emotional cognition influences children's tendency of emotional expression. The research subjects were 341 families with children aged 3–6 years, and the revised Parent Meta-Emotion Interview Scale was used to quantitatively assess parents' emotional cognition, coping styles, and emotional education methods. The results showed that parents who held the "emotion coaching" belief (that is, valuing emotion recognition and guidance) had children who displayed higher emotional expression ability in school, family, and public settings. These children were more likely to clearly articulate emotions, accurately label emotional states, and use language to regulate emotional fluctuations. In contrast, children of parents with "emotion-suppressing" or "emotion-dismissing" beliefs were more likely to show restricted expression, strong suppression, or disorganized emotional patterns. Here, "disorganized" means unstable and inconsistent ways of showing feelings, such as mixed signals, sudden crying, or withdrawal. These patterns reflect poor emotion regulation and may hinder children's social relationships.

The study pointed out that parents' meta-emotion beliefs not only shape the current interaction style, but also influence children's emotional attitudes and expression habits. Children growing up in suppressive family atmospheres may gradually weaken their emotional awareness and regulation ability. The authors suggested that future research could combine natural observation and children's self-reports to further clarify how meta-emotion beliefs influence emotional expression through daily interactions (Liang, Zhang, Chen, & Zhang, 2012).

In summary, the three studies revealed from different perspectives the mechanisms by which the parent-child relationship influences preschool children's emotional expression: behavioral pathway (parenting style), daily language interaction (use of emotional vocabulary), and family educational beliefs (meta-emotion attitudes). Li Dan et al. emphasized the structured chain mediation path. Chan et al. emphasized the practical role of daily communication, while the *Acta Psychologica Sinica* study highlighted the influence of parents' cognitive stance on children's expression patterns. Overall, a positive and close parent-child relationship can provide a safe and supportive emotional environment,

promote the diversity of children's emotional vocabulary and their initiative in expression, and thereby lay the foundation for future social adaptation and academic development.

However, existing research still has several limitations: (1) most studies adopt cross-sectional designs, lacking dynamic tracking of developmental processes; (2) data collection mainly relies on parent reports, lacking cross-validation from teachers or children's self-reports; (3) insufficient cross-cultural comparison. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs and multi-method approaches, in order to more comprehensively understand the long-term influence of parent-child relationship on emotional expression, and provide stronger empirical support for emotional education in families and kindergartens.

4. The Influence of Parent-Child Relationship on Preschool Children's Emotion Regulation

The preschool stage is a critical period for the rapid development of children's emotion regulation ability. In recent years, empirical studies have examined the influence of the parent-child relationship on emotion regulation from multiple dimensions, including family environment, parental socialization, and cooperative interactions.

A research team from Xi'an Jiaotong University, in more than 300 children aged 3-6 years and their primary caregivers, examined the association between parental emotion socialization, children's emotion regulation, and anxiety levels. It is worth noting that parental emotion socialization essentially reflects the strategies and styles of emotional interaction in the parent-child relationship, and therefore can be regarded as a functional dimension of parent-child relationship. Emotion socialization includes parents' attitudes and behaviors in perceiving, responding to, and guiding children's emotions; it not only involves details of emotional expression and responses in daily interactions, but also reflects the quality of the parent-child relationship and the degree of emotional bonding. Therefore, incorporating parental emotion socialization into the framework of parent-child relationship research helps to enrich theoretical explanations of children's emotional regulation development, and to refine the mechanisms of parent-child interaction in emotional socialization. The measurement tools used in the study included the Emotion Socialization Scale, the Children's Emotion Regulation Scale, and the Preschool Children's Anxiety Scale.

The results of structural equation modeling showed that higher levels of parental emotional acceptance and guidance significantly enhanced children's emotion regulation ability, thereby reducing their anxiety levels. The study emphasized that incorporating parental emotion socialization into parent-child relationship research helps to clarify the mediating role of family education in children's emotional development. However, since the data relied on parent self-reports, there was social desirability bias (that is, participants may have answered according to social norms, concealing or exaggerating certain behaviors), and the cross-sectional design limited conclusions on long-term effects (Wang & Wang, 2025).

In this study, "high-risk families" included not only those with crowded living conditions, frequent noise, and chaotic routines, but also migrant families who moved into cities due to household registration restrictions and financial constraints. In this context, parent-child conflict, as a core aspect of the parent-child relationship, was supported by empirical evidence.

A study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2025, using a sample of 940 migrant children, explored the relationships among family chaos, parent-child conflict, and children's self-regulation, and further examined the moderating role of mindful parenting. Using hierarchical regression and mediation-moderation models, the results showed that higher levels of family chaos were significantly associated with children's difficulties in emotion regulation, and parent-child conflict played a full mediating role in this relationship. At the same time, when parents demonstrated higher levels of mindfulness in interactions—that is, being more aware of and accepting children's emotions and needs—this significantly weakened the negative impact of parent-child conflict on children's self-regulation. This study suggested that interventions for high-risk families should focus on

reducing parent–child conflict and enhancing parents’ emotional support and mindful parenting abilities. However, since the sample was concentrated in a specific region, the applicability of its conclusions in families with different socioeconomic backgrounds still requires further verification (Zhu, Shu, Wang, & Xu, 2025).

A two-year longitudinal study published in *BMC Psychology* in 2025 tracked 496 parent–child families, using latent class analysis to distinguish three types of co-parenting. The results showed that high-quality co-parenting significantly promoted the development of children’s emotion regulation, reduced emotional instability, and further enhanced prosocial behavior. The study was relatively rigorous in design and path analysis, with clear logic, and provided empirical support for the mechanism by which consistent parent–child interaction promotes emotional development. However, the authors also pointed out that in the Chinese context, the concept and measurement of “co-parenting” still needed refinement, especially regarding the cultural and regional adaptability of the scales (Pan, Wang, Zhang, Wang, Xiao, & Li, 2025).

Similarly, in daily life contexts, the role of parent–child interaction has also been confirmed in research on family reading environments. Scholars in Nanjing conducted a questionnaire survey of 1,626 preschool children and their families and found that the parent–child relationship played a mediating role between family reading resources and children’s emotion regulation. Specifically, a richer reading environment increased the frequency and closeness of parent–child communication, thereby enhancing children’s emotional self-management ability. This study provided practical evidence for understanding the influence of daily parent–child interaction on children’s regulatory behaviors. However, its measurement range was limited only to the number of books and reading frequency, and did not examine the reading content and quality of interaction (Zhang, Yao, Wang, Wang, Wang, Zhang, & Chi, 2023).

In summary, four studies, from the perspectives of emotion socialization, family structure, co-parenting, and parent–child conflict, highlighted the central role of the parent–child relationship in preschoolers’ emotion regulation. They further showed that children’s emotional growth is closely tied to the quality of parent–child interaction, whether expressed through supportive care, empathy, consistent behavior, or coping strategies in stressful contexts. Although relevant theoretical frameworks have gradually been established, existing research still has limitation in longitudinal design and multi-source data integration. Future research should strengthen the combination of longitudinal tracking and experimental methods and refine the “relationship–mechanism–ability” chain model, in order to provide more effective guidance for family parenting and children’s psychological development practices (such as targeted parent training and emotional education programs).

5. Discussion and Suggestions

5.1. Summary of Current Research Conclusions

This study focuses on the influence of parent–child relationships on preschool children’s emotional expression and regulation and reviews recent research findings in this field. Overall, the literature indicates the following conclusions:

First, the quality of the parent–child relationship directly affects children’s emotional expression ability. Close and supportive relationships provide an open and safe environment for preschool children, encouraging them to express emotions actively and enrich their emotional vocabulary. In contrast, when emotional expression is restricted or when parent–child interactions are indifferent and filled with conflict, children’s emotional recognition and external expression tend to be suppressed. Such conditions may even lead to “extreme expressive behaviors,” such as excessive crying, screaming, throwing objects, or aggression in response to minor stimuli. Alternatively, children may display long-term silence, avoidance, or withdrawal, or replace emotional expression with frequent complaints of physical discomfort (Chan, Williams, Teng, & Zhou, 2023; Li, Li, & Zhu, 2023; Liang, Zhang, Chen, & Zhang, 2012).

Second, parent–child relationships influence not only the external presentation of emotional expression but also deeply affect children’s internal emotional control systems through regulatory mechanisms. Positive parent–child interactions enhance the child’s ability to recognize emotional signals, manage negative emotions, and maintain behavioral stability (Pan, Wang, Zhang, Wang, Xiao, & Li, 2025, Wang & Wang, 2025, Zhang, Yao, Wang, Wang, Wang, Zhang, & Chi, 2023). Moreover, in risky environments such as household chaos, the stability of the parent–child relationship and positive parenting practices can buffer the negative impact on children’s emotional regulation (Zhu, Shu, Wang, & Xu, 2025).

Finally, research consistently shows that parents’ emotional socialization practices—including emotional responses, beliefs about emotional education, and the use of emotional vocabulary—serve as the central driving force in promoting children’s development of emotional expression and regulation. Through observing and imitating parents’ emotional expression styles and response patterns, children gradually develop their emotional regulation mechanisms, which include identifying emotions, selecting regulation strategies, and applying them flexibly.

5.2. Suggestions and Implications

Families should create an open parent–child emotional communication environment, encouraging children to express a wide range of emotions. Activities such as picture book reading and role-playing can support children in correctly recognizing and accepting their emotions.

Parents should pay attention to their parenting styles and emotional beliefs. Authoritative parenting, which balances emotional support with reasonable behavioral guidance, can promote children’s positive and appropriate emotional expression and regulation abilities.

Preschool education institutions can promote cooperative parenting mechanisms between families and schools. Through parent classes, parent-child activities, and parenting guidance, emotional education can be jointly reinforced by both home and school.

Special attention should be given to families from vulnerable groups. Providing support in parent–child conflict mediation and guidance on positive parenting can reduce the negative impact of family risk factors on children’s emotional development.

5.3. Future Research Directions

Future studies should increasingly adopt longitudinal designs to dynamically observe the influence of parent–child relationships on preschool children’s emotional expression and regulation abilities, clarifying developmental patterns and causal relationships. Research should integrate multiple sources of information, including parent and teacher evaluations, children’s self-reports, and on-site observations, to enhance data accuracy and comprehensiveness. In addition, attention to cultural differences in parent–child relationships and children’s emotional development can help identify both general principles and specific variations. Detailed analysis of emotional language use and differences in parenting practices during parent–child interactions may reveal the micro-level mechanisms of children’s emotional socialization. Finally, the development of localized assessment tools, combining perspectives from psychology and sociology, is needed to promote methodological diversity and improve the applicability of theoretical frameworks.

If any, should be placed before the references section without numbering.

6. Conclusions

This study focuses on the influence of parent–child relationships on preschool children’s emotional expression and regulation, systematically reviewing recent empirical findings from China and other countries to clarify the role of parent–child interactions in children’s emotional socialization. The preschool period is a critical stage for emotional development and social adaptation. As the earliest and most central socialization environment, parent–child relationships shape children’s

emotional experiences and expression patterns while profoundly affecting their emotional regulation abilities.

The findings indicate that close, stable, and responsive parent–child relationships provide a safe environment for emotional communication, enhancing children’s initiative, diversity, and appropriateness in emotional expression. Through improving self-control and peer interaction quality, such relationships indirectly support the development of emotional regulation. In contrast, interactions characterized by low responsiveness or frequent conflict tend to limit emotional recognition, suppress expression, and hinder regulation. Parents’ emotional socialization practices, the use of emotional language in daily interactions, family structure, and the quality of cooperative parenting all play important roles in the development and stability of children’s emotional abilities.

Based on these findings, four key suggestions are identified: (1) creating an open and inclusive emotional atmosphere at home; (2) balancing emotional support and behavioral guidance within authoritative parenting; (3) enhancing home–school collaboration in preschool institutions to improve emotional education quality; and (4) paying attention to vulnerable families by providing conflict mediation and guidance on positive parenting.

The significance of this study lies in integrating the structural and functional dimensions of parent–child relationships from the dual perspective of emotional expression and regulation, constructing a systematic framework of influence. This provides a theoretical reference for understanding the mechanisms of preschool children’s emotional development and offers guidance for family education practices and early childhood policy development.

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