Case Study on the Impact of Permissive Parenting on Early Childhood Social–Emotional Development

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ABSTRACT

Social–emotional development is a critical foundation for children's lifelong learning, well-being, and social adjustment. Parenting style plays a central role in shaping children's emotional regulation and social competence during early childhood. This study aims to explore the impact of permissive parenting on early childhood social–emotional development using a qualitative descriptive case study approach. The participant was a six-year-old male child enrolled in an early childhood education institution who demonstrated persistent challenges in emotional regulation. Data were collected through classroom observations, anecdotal records, semi-structured interviews with parents, and documentation. Data trustworthiness was ensured through technique triangulation and source triangulation. Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that while the child demonstrated basic social interaction skills and emerging empathy, significant difficulties were evident in emotional regulation, frustration tolerance, and independent problem-solving. These findings suggest that permissive parenting, characterized by high emotional responsiveness and low behavioral control, may limit opportunities for children to develop emotional self-regulation and social–emotional autonomy. This study highlights the importance of balanced parenting practices that integrate warmth with consistent boundaries to support optimal social–emotional development in early childhood.

Keywords: Permissive Parenting; Social–Emotional Development; Early Childhood; Qualitative Case Study

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood represents a critical developmental period during which foundational social–emotional competencies are established. Social–emotional development encompasses children's ability to recognize and regulate emotions, build positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, and adapt to social norms. These competencies are strongly associated with later academic achievement, psychological well-being, and long-term social adjustment (Denham et al., 2020; Eisenberg et al., 2020). Because early patterns of emotional regulation and social interaction often persist into later

developmental stages, understanding the factors that shape social–emotional development during early childhood remains a central concern in developmental psychology and early childhood education research (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2020).

One of the most influential environmental factors shaping children's social–emotional development is parenting style. Parenting style refers to consistent patterns of parental attitudes, behaviors, and emotional climate in child-rearing practices. Extensive research demonstrates that parenting styles significantly influence children's emotional regulation, self-control, and social competence (Lansford & Bornstein, 2020; Morris et al., 2019). Among the major parenting styles, permissive parenting is characterized by high emotional responsiveness combined with low levels of behavioral control and rule enforcement (Kim & Kochanska, 2021). While emotional warmth may foster children's sense of security, limited structure and inconsistent boundaries may restrict opportunities for children to develop frustration tolerance and adaptive self-regulation skills (Anthony & Ogg, 2020; Lunkenheimer et al., 2019).

Brief Literature Review

Social–emotional development in early childhood is closely linked to children's capacity for emotional regulation. Emotional regulation allows children to manage negative emotions, cope with challenges, and interact constructively with peers and adults (Thompson, 2019). Children who experience difficulties in emotional regulation during preschool years are more likely to encounter challenges in peer relationships, classroom adjustment, and learning engagement (Denham et al., 2020; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2020).

Classical models of parenting categorize parenting styles into authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful types, each associated with distinct developmental outcomes (Santrock, 2021). Parenting characterized by emotional warmth combined with consistent expectations tends to promote positive social–emotional outcomes, including stronger self-regulation and social competence (Lansford & Bornstein, 2020; Morris et al., 2019). Conversely, parenting practices that lack consistent behavioral guidance may increase vulnerability to emotional dysregulation and behavioral difficulties, particularly during early childhood when regulatory capacities are still developing (Dunsmore et al., 2019).

Research on permissive parenting suggests mixed developmental consequences. Although high emotional responsiveness may enhance children's expressive abilities and perceived security, the absence of consistent rules and limits may hinder the development of frustration tolerance, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies (Anthony & Ogg, 2020; Kim & Kochanska, 2021). Children raised in permissive environments may demonstrate warmth and sociability but experience difficulties adapting to structured social contexts such as early childhood classrooms (Lunkenheimer et al., 2019).

Despite the substantial body of research linking parenting styles to child development, much of the existing literature relies primarily on quantitative survey methods. While these approaches provide valuable statistical associations, they may

overlook contextual and process-oriented aspects of children's emotional experiences in daily life (Bornstein & Leventhal, 2019). Qualitative case studies remain relatively limited, particularly those integrating classroom observations with parental perspectives to explore how permissive parenting manifests in children's real-time social–emotional behaviors.

Research Question and Objective

Given these gaps, the present study seeks to explore how permissive parenting influences early childhood social–emotional development within a natural educational context. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research question:

How does permissive parenting impact the social–emotional development of a child in early childhood education settings?

The objective of this study is to examine the manifestations of permissive parenting in daily family practices and to analyze how these practices relate to children's emotional regulation, social interaction, and behavioral adjustment in the classroom environment.

Research Contribution

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing an in-depth qualitative examination of permissive parenting within a real-life early childhood education setting. By integrating classroom observations, parental interviews, and contextual analysis, this research offers nuanced insights into the processes through which permissive parenting influences children's social–emotional functioning. Unlike large-scale quantitative studies, this case study approach highlights the lived experiences and daily interactions that shape emotional development.

The findings are expected to inform both parenting practices and early childhood educational strategies by emphasizing the importance of balanced emotional responsiveness and structured guidance in supporting optimal social–emotional development during the formative years (Bornstein & Leventhal, 2019; Morris et al., 2019).

METHOD
Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore the impact of permissive parenting on early childhood social–emotional development within a natural educational context. A qualitative approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of the child's lived experiences and observable behaviors. The case study method is appropriate for investigating complex developmental phenomena in which contextual factors play a central role in shaping outcomes (Yin, 2023). Through this design, the study aimed to examine how permissive parenting practices are manifested in a child's daily emotional and social functioning within the classroom environment.

Subjects, Population, and Sample

The participant in this study was a six-year-old male child enrolled in Group B4 at an early childhood education institution. The child had attended the institution for approximately two years, beginning in Kindergarten A at the age of five and continuing to Kindergarten B.

The participant was selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria relevant to the research focus, namely observable difficulties in emotional regulation, peer interaction, and classroom adjustment. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that the selected case provided rich and relevant information regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The child's identity and institutional affiliation were anonymized to maintain confidentiality and ethical compliance.

Regarding family background, both parents were employed and frequently worked until evening hours. Consequently, the child spent a significant portion of daily time under the supervision of a domestic caregiver. Parental supervision related to behavioral guidance and emotional regulation was reported to be inconsistent. This family context provided relevant background information for understanding the manifestation of permissive parenting practices in the child's social–emotional behavior.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted on October 20, 2025, using multiple qualitative techniques to obtain comprehensive information. First, classroom observations were carried out during regular learning activities to document the child's emotional responses, peer interactions, compliance with classroom rules, and behavioral adjustments. Observations were conducted in a natural setting without intervention.

Second, anecdotal records were used to capture significant emotional or behavioral incidents occurring during classroom activities. These records provided detailed descriptions of specific situations reflecting the child's emotional regulation and social responses.

Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the child's parents to obtain contextual information regarding parenting practices, daily routines at home, behavioral expectations, and emotional guidance strategies. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for in-depth responses.

Finally, documentation review was conducted, including examination of classroom routines and learning activity records, to provide additional contextual support for observational findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction stage, raw data from observations, interviews, anecdotal records, and documentation were organized, selected, and coded

according to themes related to social–emotional development and parenting practices. Irrelevant information was excluded to maintain focus on the research objectives.

During the data display stage, categorized data were presented in narrative and tabular formats to facilitate pattern identification and comparison across data sources. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying findings through continuous comparison among data sources. This iterative analytical process ensured that interpretations were grounded in empirical evidence and supported by multiple forms of data.

Data Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, this study applied both technique triangulation and source triangulation. Technique triangulation involved integrating data from classroom observations, anecdotal records, interviews, and documentation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data derived from observed child behavior, parental interview responses, and classroom contextual information. Cross-validation across techniques and sources strengthened the consistency and reliability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles in research involving young children. Informed consent was obtained from the child's parents prior to data collection. The participant's identity and institutional affiliation were anonymized to protect confidentiality. Observations were conducted non-invasively during regular classroom activities without disrupting the child's learning process. The study posed no physical or psychological risk to the participant. All data were used exclusively for research purposes and stored securely to maintain confidentiality.
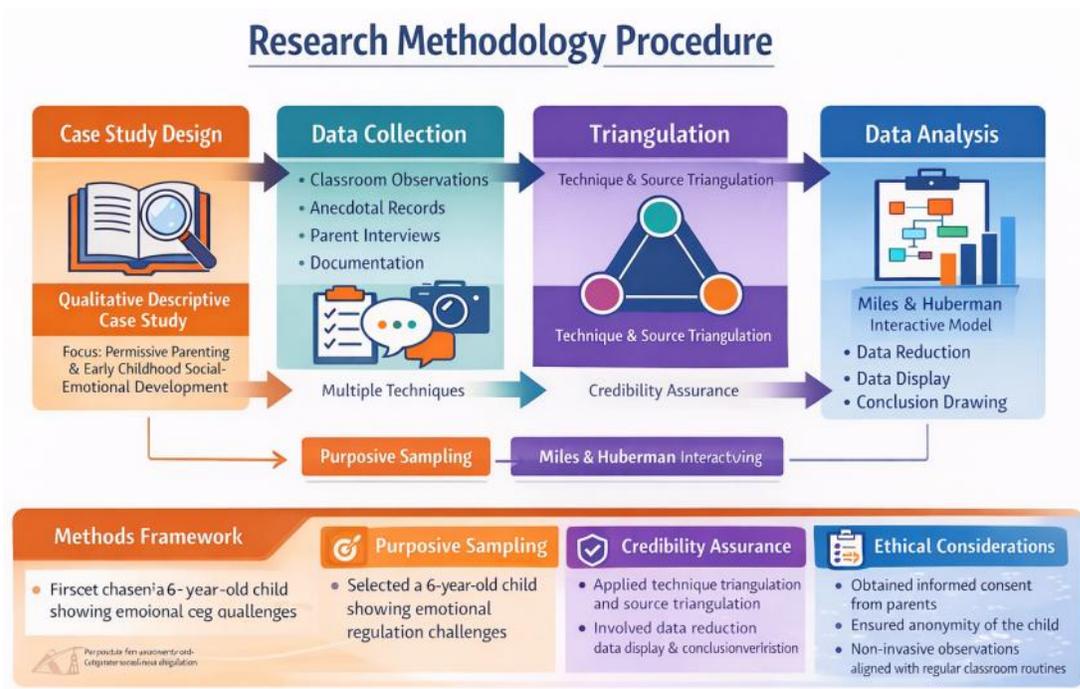
Figur 1. Research Methodology Procedure

FINDING AND DISCUSSION
Main Results

The findings are presented in descriptive form based on data collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and anecdotal records. The results focus on manifestations of social–emotional development and parenting practices in relation to the research objective.

Observational Findings

Classroom observations indicated that the child was able to initiate and participate in peer interactions during structured group activities and free play sessions. The child engaged in cooperative play and responded to peers during shared tasks. Instances of helping behavior and verbal responses to peers' emotional expressions were observed.

However, repeated difficulties were documented in emotional regulation. The child frequently displayed intense emotional reactions in response to frustration, waiting for turns, losing a preferred role in play, or experiencing routine transitions. Emotional reactions included crying, withdrawal from group activities, refusal to continue tasks, and expressions of anger. In multiple instances, teacher intervention was required to assist the child in calming down and resuming participation.

During transitions between activities, the child showed observable discomfort and hesitation, occasionally stopping participation until guided by the teacher. Compliance with classroom rules was inconsistent when emotional distress was present.

Interview Findings

Semi-structured interviews with parents revealed that behavioral expectations at home were minimal and not consistently enforced. Parents reported that they often fulfilled the child's requests to prevent emotional outbursts.

Parents stated that when the child resisted instructions or expressed strong emotions, they tended to adjust rules or provide alternatives rather than maintain consistent consequences. Structured routines and behavioral limits were reported as flexible and situational. Parents also reported limited implementation of consistent disciplinary strategies.

Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal documentation recorded several significant emotional incidents during classroom activities. In one recorded incident, the child withdrew from a group activity when a preferred game was postponed due to schedule changes. The child sat apart from peers and did not re-engage until approached by the teacher.

In another incident, the child cried intensely when a peer used a desired toy. The child did not verbally negotiate or request turn-taking independently. Teacher mediation was required to resolve the situation.

Additional anecdotal notes indicated similar patterns of heightened emotional responses during situations involving delayed gratification or unmet expectations.

Data Visualization

Table 1 Summary of Observational Findings in Classroom Context

Aspect Observed	Documented Behavior	Adult Intervention Required
Peer interaction	Initiated play and participated in group activities	No (in stable conditions)
Empathy	Responded to peers during cooperative tasks	No
Emotional regulation	Crying, withdrawal, anger during frustration	Yes (frequent)
Transition adjustment	Hesitation and task discontinuation	Yes (occasional)
Rule compliance	Inconsistent during emotional distress	Yes (situational)

Table 2 Summary of Interview Findings on Parenting Practices

Parenting Dimension	Parent Report
Rule enforcement	Minimal and flexible
Response to emotional outbursts	Compliance to avoid conflict
Behavioral consequences	Inconsistent implementation
Daily structure	Situational and adaptable

Table 3 Selected Anecdotal Emotional Incidents

Situation	Child Response	Resolution
Preferred activity delayed	Withdrawal from group	Teacher approached and guided return
Peer used desired toy	Intense crying	Teacher-mediated negotiation
Waiting for turn	Verbal protest and refusal	Teacher reassurance provided

DISCUSSION
Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that permissive parenting may contribute to an imbalanced pattern of social–emotional development in early childhood. The observed child demonstrated the ability to initiate peer interactions, participate in cooperative activities, and show emerging empathy. These behaviors suggest that emotional warmth and responsiveness in the home environment may support basic social engagement and relational comfort.

However, consistent difficulties were observed in emotional regulation, particularly in situations involving frustration, delayed gratification, or changes in routine. The child frequently displayed intense emotional reactions and required adult intervention to restore stability. These findings suggest that while emotional security may be supported, the development of autonomous emotional regulation skills may be limited in contexts where behavioral expectations and boundaries are inconsistent.

From a developmental perspective, emotional regulation skills are strengthened through repeated exposure to structured guidance, predictable routines, and consistent consequences. When children encounter manageable challenges within clear limits, they gradually internalize strategies for coping with frustration and adapting to social expectations. The absence of consistent structure may reduce opportunities for children to practice self-regulatory skills independently.

Relationship to Literature

The results of this study are consistent with previous research indicating that permissive parenting is associated with difficulties in self-control and emotional regulation (Kim & Kochanska, 2021; Morris et al., 2019). Although permissive parenting emphasizes warmth and acceptance, limited behavioral control may reduce children's opportunities to develop frustration tolerance and adaptive coping strategies.

Lansford and Bornstein (2020) emphasize that balanced parenting practices combining emotional responsiveness with clear expectations are associated with stronger social–emotional outcomes. The present findings align with this perspective, as the child demonstrated adequate social engagement but struggled with emotional regulation in structured classroom contexts.

Furthermore, research suggests that early childhood is a critical period for the development of self-regulatory skills, which are shaped through guided participation and consistent adult feedback (Morris et al., 2019). The emotional incidents documented in this study reflect challenges in applying self-regulation independently when external demands differ from the flexible home environment.

Overall, the findings support existing theoretical frameworks that emphasize the importance of structured emotional socialization practices in fostering adaptive social–emotional development.

Limitations of the Study

This study employed a qualitative case study design focusing on a single participant. As a result, the findings are contextual and cannot be generalized to broader populations. The limited duration of data collection restricts the ability to examine long-term developmental patterns or changes over time.

Additionally, although triangulation was applied through observations, interviews, and anecdotal records, the findings remain partially dependent on reported information from parents and classroom observations within a specific setting. Variations in teacher responses, classroom dynamics, and situational factors may have influenced the child's emotional expressions.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the findings have important practical implications for both parents and educators. Parents may benefit from implementing consistent boundaries and structured expectations alongside emotional warmth. Providing predictable routines and clear consequences may support the development of frustration tolerance and independent emotional regulation skills.

For early childhood educators, collaboration with families is essential to create continuity between home and school expectations. Classroom strategies that gradually scaffold self-regulation, such as guided problem-solving and structured turn-taking activities, may further strengthen social–emotional competencies.

Future research is recommended to involve larger samples and longitudinal designs to examine developmental trajectories over time. Mixed-method approaches may also provide broader insights into how permissive parenting interacts with other contextual factors influencing early childhood social–emotional development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that permissive parenting plays a significant role in shaping early childhood social–emotional development, particularly in the domains of emotional regulation, frustration tolerance, and autonomy. The findings indicate that while children raised in permissive environments may demonstrate adequate social interaction skills and emotional expressiveness, they may encounter challenges in managing negative emotions,

adapting to structured expectations, and resolving conflicts independently within classroom contexts.

The results highlight the importance of balanced parenting practices that combine emotional warmth with consistent boundaries and behavioral guidance. Such integration appears essential in fostering self-regulatory competence, adaptive coping strategies, and independent problem-solving abilities during early childhood.

Despite contributing in-depth contextual insights, this study is limited by its single-case design and short observation period, which restrict the generalizability of findings. Future research is recommended to include multiple cases, longitudinal approaches, and comparative designs to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how permissive parenting influences social–emotional development across diverse contexts.

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