Parenting and Social Environment in Improving Early Childhood Social Skills: A Study of Informal Education

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Social skills in early childhood are a crucial foundation for children's future social development and adaptation. In the context of informal education, families and communities serve as primary learning ecosystems that shape children's interaction patterns. This article aims to examine how parenting and the social environment are discussed in the literature as factors influencing children's social skill development through a narrative literature review approach. This review synthesizes reputable national and international journal articles and academic books published between 2015 and 2024. The results of the synthesis indicate that responsive parenting and a supportive social environment contribute significantly to the development of empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation. However, these findings also demonstrate variations in outcomes influenced by differences in family context, school setting, and sociocultural conditions, confirming that there is no single approach (one size fits all). Theoretically, this article strengthens the relevance of the Integrated Developmental Ecological Model by repositioning parenting and the environment not as independent variables, but as dynamically interacting systems. The novelty of this article lies in its critical synthesis across ecological levels that emphasizes the importance of holistic synergy between strengthening domestic capacity and creating a conducive social environment for future early childhood education policies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The cultivation of social skills during early childhood has historically been a primary emphasis in developmental psychology and child education (Bierman et al., 2023; Hosokawa et al., 2024). Social skills are understood as a set of abilities that enable children to interact effectively with their social environment, including the ability to communicate, cooperate, manage emotions, and understand social norms (Santrock, 2020; Papalia et al., 2021). In an era of increasingly complex globalization, these abilities are no longer merely complementary but rather foundational to life success. Numerous longitudinal studies have shown that social skills in childhood are strong

predictors of social adjustment, academic success, and even psychological well-being in adulthood (Hall & DiPerna, 2017; Kochenderfer-Ladd et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2026).

However, the challenges in developing these skills are increasing with changes in social structures and patterns of human interaction. Amid the dominance of digital technology, which often physically isolates children, the role of informal education—which occurs naturally at home and in the community—is becoming crucial (Jones & Brady, 2022; Nudin et al., 2019). Informal education is seen here not as a substitute for school, but as a "primary learning space" where social values are first internalized and tested in real life (Jackson, 2023; Souto-Otero, 2021).

A substantial body of literature has identified parenting styles as a key determinant of children's social skill development (Mak et al., 2020). Responsive and supportive parenting is consistently associated with the emergence of prosocial behavior and better emotional regulation (Wang et al., 2025; Williams & Berthelsen, 2017). Parents act as primary socialization agents, providing a blueprint for children's perceptions of the outside world. However, these findings are not universally consistent. Bornstein et al. (2018) demonstrated that the strength of parenting styles' influence is highly dependent on the family's socioeconomic and cultural context, making generalizing findings across contexts problematic.

On the other hand, literature on the social environment—particularly peer groups and local communities—suggests that relational contexts can play an equally important role, even surpassing, in some situations, family influence. Wentzel and Muenks (2016) found that support from outside the home can moderate the impact of suboptimal parenting on children's social skills. However, criticism has emerged from Neal and Neal (2013), who argue that many studies still view the social environment as a static context. They argue that previous research fails to capture the dynamics of cross-system social relationships that children experience on a daily basis, particularly in informal educational settings that are unstructured but full of social stimulation.

Despite the rapid growth of literature on parenting and the social environment, most studies still examine these two factors separately or place them in a simple linear relationship (Chaplin et al., 2021; Lomanowska et al., 2017; Sanders & Turner, 2018). Claims that this approach lacks integration are not merely conceptual assumptions but rather a reflection of the methodological limitations of previous studies. Rarely does research explore the simultaneous interaction between environmental systems in shaping children's social skills.

This gap creates a significant gap in our understanding of the effectiveness of informal education. We know that parents are important, and we know that the environment is influential, but we do not yet fully understand how these two systems intersect, negotiate, or even conflict in shaping children's social behavior. Can democratic parenting at home remain effective if the surrounding social environment is toxic or individualistic? Or conversely, can a social environment rich in communal values compensate for authoritarian parenting?

Unlike previous research, which has largely focused on formal school settings, this study places informal education as the primary locus of analysis. Informal education offers flexibility and a depth of interaction absent in a formal curriculum (Peeters et al., 2014). In informal education, learning transpires through observation, active engagement in community activities, and daily discourse between parents and children regarding the surrounding social phenomena (Hsu et al., 2023; Mardliyah et al., 2025).

This article adopts the Integrated Developmental Ecological Model as an analytical framework. This model emphasizes the dynamic relationship between child developmental systems (Burakgazi, 2025; Gal, 2017). Although this model has been widely used, its specific application to synthesize the relationship between parenting and the social environment in the context of early childhood social skills through the lens of informal education is still rare. Most developmental ecology studies tend to be descriptive, without critically assessing how variations in the micro (family) and meso (neighborhood) environments reinforce or undermine each other (Ungar et al., 2013).

This article argues that early childhood social skills are not the product of a single variable but rather the result of the resonance between parenting and the quality of the social environment. We position informal education not as mere background but as an active process in which parents interpret the social environment for their children, and the social environment provides a platform for children to practice what their parents teach. Conceptually, this article addresses the key questions: (1) How does the current literature explain the interaction between parenting and the social environment in shaping the social skills of early childhood children in informal education? (2) Under what conditions does the influence of each environmental system become more dominant or mutually reinforcing?

Using a critical synthesis approach, this article does not aim to replace existing developmental ecology studies but rather to provide a new contribution in the form of a more integrative framework. We highlight that in informal education, the role of parents transforms into "social curators" who select and give meaning to interactions between children and their environments.

Education practitioners and policymakers urgently need to recognize the value of informal education, which drives the importance of this study. To date, interventions to improve children's social skills have often focused solely on teacher training in schools or separate parenting courses for parents (Neitola, 2018; Slotkin et al., 2023). This lack of understanding of the synergy between the home and the social environment has rendered many intervention programs ineffective because they fail to address the roots of the child's ecosystem as a whole. This article aims to raise awareness that enhancing children's social skills requires more than just improving one aspect of their environment. Harmonization between parenting styles at home and the creation of an inclusive and supportive social environment in the community is necessary (Tripon, 2024; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2022). This initiative is an effort to restore the community's function as a "village" that raises a child, as the old adage "It takes a village to raise a child" suggests.

To achieve the desired depth of analysis, this article explores various dimensions of parenting, from emotional warmth to behavioral control, and links them to dimensions of the social environment such as neighborhood social cohesion and the availability of child-friendly public spaces. Using an expanded ecological framework, we will map how these interactions operate at various levels, from microsystem interactions to broader ecosystem influences. So, this article aims to offer a strong theoretical basis for future studies and act as a helpful resource for parents and teachers in enhancing the social development of young children by improving informal education that works well with the environment.

2. METHOD

This article applies a narrative literature review approach to synthesize and critically analyze various scientific findings regarding the role of parenting and the social environment in the development of early childhood social skills. This design was chosen based on its effectiveness in building in-depth theoretical arguments and facilitating comprehensive conceptual analysis within the Integrated Developmental Ecological Model framework. Through this method, diverse literature is integrated to identify patterns, research gaps, and complex inter-variable relationships within the informal education ecosystem. The visualization of the stages and design framework of the narrative literature review used in this study is detailed in Figure 1 below.
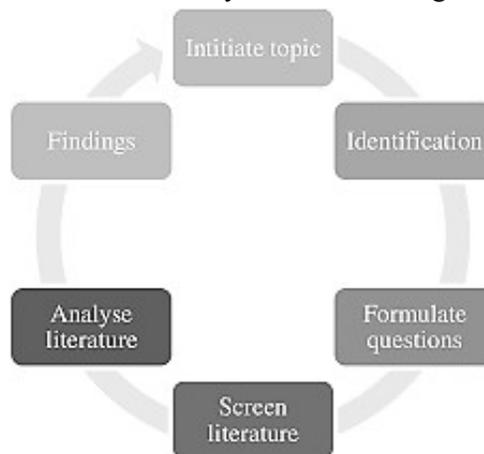

Figure 1. Narrative Literature Review Design

Literature Search and Selection Procedure

The literature identification process was conducted through a systematic search of various reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. The search used a combination of keywords in Indonesian and English, such as parenting style, social environment, early childhood, and children's social skills, integrated with Boolean operators (AND/OR) to optimize the relevance of the results. The literature included in this analysis included indexed national and international journal articles, as well as authoritative academic books published within the last ten years (2015–2024) to ensure data relevance.

The inclusion criteria were strictly based on peer-reviewed publications that discuss parenting styles, social environment, and early childhood social skills, both empirically and theoretically. From an initial total of over 120 identified publications, a screening process was conducted based on topic relevance and appropriateness of the study focus, resulting in 38 primary sources selected for further analysis.

Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted by grouping findings based on key themes and ecological levels, including the micro, meso, and macro levels—in accordance with the theoretical framework used. Next, the literature was synthesized thematically, highlighting comparisons in the form of similarities, differences, and limitations of previous studies. This systematic procedure aims to generate an integrative understanding of the dynamics of parenting patterns and the influence of the social environment in shaping the development of early childhood social skills within the informal education ecosystem.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study examines in depth the mechanisms of early childhood social skill formation—which encompasses the dimensions of empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation—as a multisectoral process. Rather than viewing child development as the result of a single variable, this study emphasizes that social competence is constructed through a dynamic synergy between parenting styles and the quality of the social environment. The interaction between these two factors creates a crucial informal learning ecosystem, where values instilled in the domestic environment resonate with external stimuli to strengthen children's social adaptive capacity holistically.

Theoretical Foundation: Integrated Ecological Model

This study adopts the Developmental Ecological Model as the primary analytical instrument to comprehensively examine the complexities of child development. From this perspective, children's social growth is not understood as an isolated process, but rather as a manifestation of dynamic interactions within various interconnected environmental layers. Operationally, the analysis focuses on the microsystem level, the smallest technical environment directly impacting children's daily lives. At this level, parenting styles are positioned as the dominant variable, where reciprocal interactions between parents and children form a crucial foundation for the internalization of social values and the formation of adaptive behavior from an early age.

Furthermore, this study explores the mesosystem dimension to identify the degree of synchronization between domestic values and prevailing norms in neighborhoods and educational institutions. This inter-contextual alignment is a key determinant of the consistency of social stimulation received by children, which is then expanded through a macrosystem lens to understand the broader influences of culture, ideology, and social

policy. Through the integration of these three ecological layers, this study aims to map how this systemic synergy contributes holistically to strengthening the social competence of early childhood, while also identifying macro factors that strengthen or limit the effectiveness of interactions in informal educational spaces.

Synthesis of Key Findings

Building upon a comprehensive literature review of publications from 2015 to 2024, this study identified three main pillars that determine the success of early childhood social development. These three pillars reflect the complex interactions between internal family factors and external dynamics within the informal education ecosystem. To provide a more systematic overview of the interrelationships between these variables, the results of the data analysis are presented in depth in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Synthesis of Key Findings

Main Pillars	Key Components	Impact on Social Development
Family Environment	Parenting styles, attachment, and parental mental health.	It provides a foundation for children to learn empathy, communication, and emotional regulation before interacting with the outside world.
Social and School Interactions	Peer relationships, the role of teachers, and play-based learning methods.	It fosters cooperation skills, conflict resolution, and adaptation to broader social norms.
Individual and Cognitive Factors	Language skills, self-regulation, and exposure to technology.	It determines a child's effectiveness in expressing desires and understanding the emotions of others (social intelligence).

Interaction Dynamics: Not Just a Unidirectional Influence

The findings of this study place particular emphasis on the urgency of systemic interactions within the child development ecosystem, confirming that social competence is not formed in isolation. Data analysis indicates the existence of reciprocal mitigation mechanisms; high-quality parenting can be degraded in effectiveness within a toxic social environment, and conversely, a supportive community environment can compensate for limitations in domestic functioning. This dynamic demonstrates that children's social skills do not develop linearly, but rather through a complex process of adaptation to socioeconomic pressures and the massive technological transformations that have occurred over the past decade.

Furthermore, the reviewed literature confirms the role of Responsive Parenting as a key buffer in facing external challenges. Amidst fluctuating and less conducive social environments, parents' capacity to provide sensitive and supportive responses is key to maintaining emotional stability and prosocial growth in children. Variations in child development outcomes depend heavily on the extent to which the family system is able to renegotiate its role in response to macrosystem influences. Therefore, the synergy between parenting strategies and environmental resilience is a crucial determinant in optimizing social skill attainment in informal education.

Discussion

Mechanistic Integration between Parenting and the Social Environment

Recent literature indicates that the influence of parenting styles on children's social skills does not operate in a linear or isolated manner but is instead mediated and moderated by the quality of the social environment in which children interact. Responsive and supportive parenting serves as an affective foundation that shapes children's readiness to engage in broader social interactions, particularly within the school environment and peer groups (Denham et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2024; Lin & Faldowski, 2023). Within the framework of the Integrated Developmental Ecological Model, this mechanism is understood as an emotional mediation process, where emotion regulation developed within the family enables children to more effectively utilize social learning opportunities outside the home.

Conversely, the social environment also plays a significant role in strengthening or weakening the influence of parenting styles. Wentzel and Muenks (2016) demonstrated that a supportive classroom climate can compensate for the limitations of home care, particularly for children from families with limited socioeconomic resources. These findings confirm the existence of cross-systemic compensatory mechanisms, often overlooked in studies that position the family as the sole determinant of children's social development.

In addition to mediating mechanisms, value consistency between the family and school environments emerges as a key factor in the maturity of children's social skills. Bronfenbrenner and Morris emphasized that misalignment of values and practices across microsystems has the potential to trigger developmental mismatch (Sekarsari & Fauziah, 2025). In this context, several studies have found that children raised with democratic parenting styles but placed in highly authoritarian school environments tend to exhibit ambiguous social behavior and significant adaptation difficulties (Neal & Neal, 2013).

However, the debate surrounding the importance of value consistency remains dynamic. Several cross-cultural studies have shown that exposure to diverse social norms can increase children's social flexibility, particularly in multicultural societies (Bornstein et al., 2018). These differences in findings emphasize that the relationship between parenting patterns and the social environment is highly context-dependent and cannot be understood solely through a universalistic approach but must consider the uniqueness of the social ecosystem in which the child grows.

Contradictory Findings and Limitations of Ecological Theory

Although developmental ecological theory offers a comprehensive framework, critics point out that this approach tends to be descriptive and lacks detailed explanations of causal mechanisms (Neal & Neal, 2013). Some longitudinal studies even report that the influence of the peer environment on children's social skills can outweigh the dominance of parenting styles at certain developmental stages, particularly in late childhood (Farida et al., 2019; Jeelani et al., 2025; Wang & Guo, 2024). This finding

fundamentally challenges the traditional assumption that the family system is the sole and most dominant determinant of each stage of a child's development.

Furthermore, recent literature shows inconsistent results regarding the role of digital technology in children's social ecosystems. Livingstone et al. (2025) reported a negative impact of digital exposure on the quality of in-person social interactions, while Zu et al. (2025) found that parental-mediated technology use can enrich children's social experiences. This discrepancy strongly suggests that ecological theory needs to be continually updated to accommodate increasingly complex and digitalized contemporary social dynamics.

Overall, this synthesis confirms that the development of early childhood social skills is the result of a dynamic interaction between parenting styles, the social environment, and the surrounding cultural context. The use of an integrative approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the variations and contradictions in findings in the literature, while avoiding overly normative generalizations.

The novelty of this article lies in the application of the Integrated Developmental Ecological Model as the primary analytical framework for examining children's social competence. Unlike previous research that tends to separate the roles of parenting styles and the social environment, this article positions the two as interacting and inseparable systems. By contextualizing developmental ecology theory within modern social dynamics, this study provides a new perspective for developing early childhood education policies and practices based on strategic collaboration between families, schools, and communities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the development of early childhood social skills in the informal education ecosystem is not a single, linear process, but rather the result of complex and dynamic interactions between various environmental systems. The findings emphasize that responsive parenting—characterized by warmth and sensitivity—and a supportive social environment are key predictors of children's success in mastering empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation. Theoretically, the study's findings reinforce the relevance of the Ecological Model of Development, in which informal education, encompassing the family and community, serves as the most influential microsystem, yet remains under the influence of the broader socio-cultural context.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that children's social skills are not uniform; there is significant variation influenced by differences in family context, school settings, and surrounding sociocultural conditions. This demonstrates that there is no single, universally applicable approach to child social development interventions. The key achievement of this article is its success in repositioning the role of parenting and environmental quality not as stand-alone variables, but as actively interacting systems. Thus, strengthening children's social skills must be done through holistic synergy involving collaboration between strengthening domestic capacity and creating a conducive social environment.

As a recommendation, Early Childhood Education (ECUD) institutions should not only focus on interactions at school but also actively involve families in social skills development programs. Early childhood education policies should consider the sociocultural background of families to ensure more targeted and inclusive interventions. Future researchers are expected to conduct longitudinal studies to see how these ecological system interactions change as children age, especially in the transition from informal to formal education.

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