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## PARENTING COMMUNICATION PRACTICES AS A FOUNDATION FOR PRESCHOOLERS' SOCIAL COMPETENCE: INSIGHTS FROM MALAYSIAN KEMAS PRESCHOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

Social competence in early childhood predicts long-term academic achievement, emotional well-being, and interpersonal success. This study examines how parental communication patterns shape the social competence of preschoolers in Malaysian KEMAS preschools. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2005) and Family Communication Patterns Theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), a qualitative phenomenological design was used to explore parents' lived experiences through semi-structured interviews with five parents selected via purposive sampling. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework identified four themes: (1) modelling positive communication, (2) promoting emotional understanding, (3) encouraging prosocial behaviour, and (4) guiding conflict resolution. These communication practices supported children's empathy, cooperation, emotional regulation, and problem-solving, reflecting the influence of the family microsystem within Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. The findings contribute culturally grounded, qualitative insights into parenting communication within the KEMAS community-based preschool context and align with the Malaysia Madani vision emphasising compassion, respect, and social well-being.

**Keywords:** Parental Communication Practices; Children's Social Competence; Early Childhood Education; Qualitative Phenomenological Research; Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory; Malaysia KEMAS

### INTRODUCTION

Social competence in early childhood is widely recognised as a critical foundation for long-term academic success, emotional well-being, and interpersonal relationships (Denham, 2023). It encompasses skills including emotional regulation, cooperation, empathy, and effective communication, all of which are essential for positive peer and adult interactions. The preschool years are particularly formative, as children begin engaging more actively in social environments beyond the family. In Malaysia, KEMAS preschools serve many low- and middle-income families, making them an important context for exploring how social competence develops in a community-based early childhood setting (Rahmatullah et al., 2021).

Research consistently points to parents as the primary architects of children's early social learning. Ibnu Khaldun's classical insight that humans are born with an intrinsic social disposition further supports this idea, positing that individuals are naturally inclined to live in communities and learn from those closest to them (Abdul Karim & Suhaini, 2020). Despite the acknowledged role of

communication in parenting, there is a shortage of qualitative research exploring how Malaysian parents use communication strategies to shape preschoolers' social competence, particularly within community-based preschools. This gap limits the development of context-sensitive approaches for strengthening parent-child interactions that support social-emotional growth.

This study fills that gap by adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach to provide culturally informed insights into parental communication practices. The focus resonates with the principles of Malaysia Madani, which envisions a progressive and inclusive society grounded in mutual respect, compassion, and civic harmony (Ushama, 2025). Social competence is a cornerstone of that national vision, fostering the emotional intelligence and interpersonal qualities essential for cohesive communities. By situating findings within the KEMAS preschool context, this study contributes to both theoretical understanding and Malaysia's broader societal goal of nurturing future citizens prepared for meaningful civic participation.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Preschool as a Platform for Social Competence**

Preschool education in Malaysia is administered by multiple sectors, including the Ministry of Education, government agencies, and non-governmental organisations. KEMAS preschools, under the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, serve as a major provider for low- and middle-income families (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2024). The preschool years represent a critical window during which children begin forming identities as both individuals and members of a social community, moving beyond immediate family to engage meaningfully with peers and teachers (Ghozali, 2020).

During this stage, children acquire fundamental elements of social competence, including forming friendships, cooperating, empathising, communicating effectively, and regulating emotions, all crucial for lifelong social success (Junge, Valkenburg, Deković, & Branje, 2020). The integration of social competence into Malaysia's National Preschool Curriculum Standards is deliberate, reflected in the domains of Communication, Personal Competence, and Spirituality and Values (Taha et al., 2020). These educational aims align with Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, which calls for quality early childhood education supporting all areas of child development (UNESCO, 2023).

### **Parenting Style and Social Competence**

Baumrind (1971) introduced the foundational parenting typologies of authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive styles, providing a structured framework for understanding how different parenting approaches shape children's social competence. Parenting style reflects the overall attitude, beliefs, and behaviours parents display in raising their children, and it operates as a key determinant in shaping children's social and emotional well-being (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

Authoritative parenting, characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and appropriate boundaries, is consistently associated with higher levels of prosocial behaviour, emotional competence, and overall social readiness (Luo, Xie, & Zhang, 2024). Authoritarian parenting, though often associated with limited peer interaction in Western contexts (Li, Li, & Zhu, 2024), carries different implications in Asian collectivist settings. In Malaysia, parental strictness is frequently embedded in care, moral guidance, and familial responsibility rather than dominance (Keshavarz &

Baharudin, 2009). The Confucian notion of training (*guan*) suggests that structured parental guidance, when paired with warmth, fosters discipline, respect, and social maturity (Chao, 1994).

A comparative study of parenting styles in Malaysia, China, and Taiwan confirmed that cultural context significantly mediates the effects of parenting on children's social and emotional development (Mu et al., 2024). Malaysian families, rooted in collectivist traditions, tend to favour structured guidance that balances discipline with emotional support, values reflected in both Malay Islamic *tarbiyyah* and Chinese Confucian filial piety. This cultural grounding shapes how parental authority is exercised and how communication functions within the family.

### **Parent-Child Communication Practices**

Communication patterns between parents and children form the essential foundation for developing preschoolers' social competence. These early interactions represent the primary context in which children learn to recognise, express, and manage emotions while engaging with others (Ladd, 2005). Through daily conversations, explanations, and emotional exchanges, parents model core communicative behaviours such as active listening, appropriate responding, negotiation, and empathy, which children gradually internalise as social scripts. These scripts later shape how children cooperate and resolve conflicts in peer and school settings.

Family Communication Patterns Theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002) identifies two key orientations which are, conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Conversation-oriented families embrace open, frequent communication, encouraging children to express thoughts, ask questions, and participate in decision-making. This approach is strongly associated with the development of empathy, self-expression, assertiveness, and the capacity to manage peer interactions constructively (Schrodt et al., 2008). Conformity-oriented families prioritise obedience and group cohesion, instilling discipline and respect for authority but potentially limiting opportunities for emotional expression and independent social decision-making.

Breiner et al. (2016) underscore that consistent and supportive communication provides a secure emotional foundation, allowing children to feel valued and understood, which fosters self-confidence and trust in relationships. Daily interactions such as storytelling, reflective questioning, and guided play teach children active listening, turn-taking, cooperation, and respect for differing perspectives (Dere Çiftçi, Ceylan, & Gök Çolak, 2021). In Malaysian preschools such as KEMAS, where multicultural values and social harmony are emphasised, these parental communication practices complement classroom strategies, creating continuity between home and school socialisation (Rahmatullah et al., 2021).

Recent research further confirms that verbal richness, emotional availability, and responsive dialogue are essential mechanisms for developing social competence in young children (Hart & Risley, 1995). Non-verbal communication, including gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and eye contact, also plays a pivotal role.

### **Theoretical Framework: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**

This study situates parental communication within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which examines how multiple environmental layers shape children's social development. At the microsystem level, the family represents the child's most immediate environment. Parents who use responsive communication, express empathy, and guide children calmly during moments of frustration model essential social skills such as patience, cooperation, and respect (Vasiou et al.,

2023). Consistent supportive dialogue at this level strengthens children's emotional regulation and social confidence, both core elements of social competence (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016).

At the mesosystem level, the connection between home and school is reinforced when parents and KEMAS educators communicate constructively and share aligned expectations. Children experience coherence in behavioural norms across contexts, strengthening their capacity for empathy and cooperative participation. At the macrosystem level, Malaysian cultural and religious values shape the tone and purpose of parental communication. Rooted in collectivist traditions valuing harmony and interdependence (Sorkhabi, 2005), Malaysian parents emphasise relational sensitivity and moral responsibility in communication with their children. The ideals of Malaysia Madani further reinforce these practices by promoting compassion, civic responsibility, and mutual respect as family and societal virtues (Ushama, 2025).

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

What parental communication patterns support the development of social competence among preschoolers in Malaysian KEMAS preschools?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how parents communicate with their preschool-aged children and how those interactions shape children's social competence. The phenomenological approach was chosen to capture the depth of parents' lived experiences and the meaning they assign to everyday interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative inquiry allows for the rich, detailed understanding of personal experiences that quantitative methods cannot fully capture. This study is interpretive in nature, seeking to understand how communication practices are subjectively experienced and enacted within the home environment.

### **Participants and Sampling**

Five parents of children enrolled in KEMAS preschools were selected through purposive sampling. Selection criteria included active involvement in the child's daily upbringing and a willingness to reflect on and discuss parenting communication practices. Qualitative phenomenological studies prioritise depth of insight over breadth of representation, with samples of three to ten participants considered appropriate within this tradition (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Regarding data saturation, the research process involved iterative review of transcripts after each interview. By the fourth and fifth interviews, no new meaningful patterns emerged beyond those already identified, indicating that the data had reached a point of conceptual sufficiency consistent with established phenomenological practice.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a conversational format to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on key topics such as behaviour modelling, emotional coaching, boundary setting, and parent-child communication routines. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and conducted in a setting chosen by participants to ensure comfort and openness. This method was particularly suited for accessing rich, contextually grounded narratives about parenting within the Malaysian cultural setting (Yin, 2003).

## **Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation with data, initial coding, theme development, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming them, and constructing a thematic map. Analytical rigour was maintained through reflective journaling, peer debriefing, and iterative coding to validate emerging themes and ensure the credibility of findings.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time.

## **FINDINGS**

Thematic analysis identified four major themes reflecting how Malaysian parents communicate with their preschool children to support social competence: (1) modelling positive communication, (2) promoting emotional understanding, (3) encouraging prosocial behaviour, and (4) guiding conflict resolution. These themes collectively illustrate how communication within the family microsystem contributes to children's development of cooperation, empathy, and self-regulation, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework.

### **Theme 1: Modelling Positive Communication**

Parents modelled respectful language and empathetic dialogue, positioning themselves as communication role models for their children. Participant 4 stated, *"I always try to speak to her in a calm and gentle way. I believe that when we talk nicely at home, it teaches her to be respectful and patient with others too."* Active listening also emerged as a critical sub-theme. Participant 5 shared, *"When my daughter wants to share something, I stop what I'm doing and look at her face. Eye contact is very important. It shows her that I'm really listening, and it makes her feel valued."*

This pattern aligns with Bronfenbrenner's notion that responsive communication within the microsystem enhances children's sense of belonging and self-worth. Within the Malaysian context, this practice carries a culturally specific texture, as parents draw on values of *adab* (respectful conduct) and *sabar* (patience) deeply embedded in Malaysian family life. Through consistent modelling, children internalise respectful interaction patterns that later extend into peer communication at preschool.

### **Theme 2: Promoting Emotional Understanding**

Parents actively helped their children recognise and express emotions constructively. Emotional coaching was reflected in Participant 1's account: *"If my child looks upset, I ask them to tell me what they feel so we can solve it together."* Participant 5 elaborated on the importance of a calm and loving approach: *"When my daughter makes a mistake, I usually take some time to calm myself first... We believe in correcting her with love, not fear, so she grows to be thoughtful and confident."*

Encouraging empathy was another recurring pattern. Participant 1 noted, *"I explain to my child how others might feel when they are sad or happy."* Teachers' feedback confirmed this development, as Participant 4 shared that her daughter held another child's hand and softly

encouraged them during group activities. These findings illustrate how home communication serves as a training ground for emotional literacy, fostering the empathy and social sensitivity that are central to social competence. Facci, Baroncelli, and Ciucci (2024) confirm that parental emotional competence and emotion socialisation behaviours directly model children's social-emotional functioning, particularly during the preschool years.

### **Theme 3: Encouraging Prosocial Behaviour**

Parents consistently emphasised moral guidance, social rules, and kindness in daily interactions. Participant 1 explained, *"I tell my child that following rules helps them make and keep friends."* Participant 2 described a deliberate and ongoing approach: *"I always make it a point to speak politely, to teach her to respect others, and to be willing to listen to what people have to say."* Participant 5 added, *"At home, we always talk to her nicely, even when correcting her... we show her how to treat people with respect, like saying thank you, waiting for her turn, and using kind words."*

These narratives reflect parental intentionality in transmitting values of respect and cooperation aligned with Malaysia Madani's emphasis on civility and compassion. What distinguishes these practices is their grounding in collective family obligations and the moral expectation that children contribute to harmonious group life. Parental discourse in this context functions as a moral compass, shaping children's prosocial orientations across both home and preschool environments, consistent with findings by Luo et al. (2024) that authoritative parenting significantly fosters prosocial behaviour in children.

### **Theme 4: Guiding Conflict Resolution**

Parents used communication as a tool to guide children in managing disagreements calmly and assertively. Participant 1 stated, *"I teach my child to use words instead of hitting when they feel angry."* Participant 5 observed, *"From what I observe, she prefers to solve problems in a calm way. If she doesn't know what to do, she'll turn to someone older or a teacher."* Participant 1 also described teaching patience and respectful assertiveness: *"When my child wants a toy another child is using, I tell them to wait or ask nicely."*

This guided communication not only regulates immediate behaviour but also cultivates children's long-term capacity for cooperative problem-solving. Navarro et al. (2024) report that children with guided conflict resolution experience better social adjustment and develop essential interpersonal skills including cooperation, sharing, and empathy. The Malaysian parents in this study consistently framed conflict resolution through the lens of maintaining relational harmony, a value deeply embedded in Malaysia's collectivist cultural fabric.

### **Summary of Thematic Interpretation**

Across all four themes, Malaysian parents adopted culturally grounded communication strategies that nurtured prosocial behaviour, empathy, and emotional regulation. Their practices were embedded in moral and relational values aligned with the Malaysia Madani vision of mutual respect and compassion. These parent-child interactions within the home microsystem had a ripple effect, influencing children's competence in the preschool mesosystem. Effective communication therefore serves as both a developmental catalyst and a bridge linking home values with school-based social experiences.

## DISCUSSION

This study explored parental communication practices that support preschoolers' social competence through four interconnected themes. The discussion below connects these themes to the research objective, theoretical framework, and existing literature, while grounding them in the Malaysian cultural context. As an exploratory study with a purposive sample of five participants, the findings offer in-depth, context-specific insights from this KEMAS community rather than generalisable causal claims.

### a) Modelling Positive Communication

Parents consistently emphasised respectful language and active listening. One parent noted, *"I use polite words with my child, so they learn to speak respectfully to others"* (P1), while another described balancing firm guidance with empathy: *"I try to guide him strongly while yet showing empathy, so he knows he is loved while also learning what is right and wrong"* (P3).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory positions the family as a crucial microsystem influencing children's social development. The findings demonstrate that positive communication at home shapes children's behaviour and interactions within preschool settings. Mokhtar and Mohamed (2024) found that authoritative parents who combine warmth with clear boundaries facilitate communication that is both emotionally supportive and developmentally appropriate. Consistent with Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002) conversation orientation, parents who model open, respectful dialogue equip children with the social scripts necessary for effective peer interaction. International research similarly highlights that active listening and empathetic guidance strengthen children's social-emotional skills (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2005).

For parents, these findings emphasise the practical value of respectful communication in daily interactions. Parent workshops focused on communication strategies can offer concrete guidance for fostering empathy and cooperation at home. Educators can reinforce these practices through classroom routines that model respectful language and encourage children to share their home experiences. For policymakers, these insights can inform national early childhood policies and parenting modules aligned with Malaysia Madani values.

### b) Promoting Emotional Understanding

Parents described helping children identify and express emotions while developing empathy toward peers. Participant 1 shared, *"If my child looks upset, I ask them to tell me what they feel so we can solve it together,"* and also explained, *"I explain to my child how others might feel when they are sad or happy."* Teachers' observations confirmed that children who received emotional guidance from home displayed confidence and consideration during group activities.

Bronfenbrenner's framework highlights that children's emotional learning within the family microsystem influences their social interactions in broader settings. Hosokawa et al. (2024) affirm that parental scaffolding of emotional understanding contributes to self-regulation and empathy in young children. Facci et al. (2024) further establish that parents' own emotional competence models the process of children's emotional socialisation, with direct effects on social-emotional functioning during the preschool years. These findings underscore that consistent emotional guidance and open communication are key to developing children's social competence over time.

Parents can nurture these skills through daily conversations that build emotional awareness and by modelling empathy and respect. Educators can strengthen this foundation with structured social competence activities such as role-play and emotion-recognition exercises. Parents experiencing sustained stress are more likely to reduce emotionally rich dialogue, which restricts opportunities for emotion coaching and collaborative problem-solving. This reinforces the importance of institutional and community support systems for parents in the KEMAS context.

### **c) Encouraging Prosocial Behaviour**

Parents reported teaching the importance of social rules and reinforcing kindness. Participant 1 stated, *"I tell my child that following rules helps them make and keep friends,"* while Participant 2 described a consistent daily approach that gradually built her daughter's self-confidence through respectful interaction and guidance.

This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's microsystem concept, as parental modelling of prosocial norms shapes children's social behaviour at school. Luo et al. (2024) confirm that authoritative parenting significantly fosters prosocial behaviour in children, while research by Eisenberg et al. (2005) establishes that early parental guidance in social norms improves children's peer relationships and conflict resolution skills. What emerged distinctly from this Malaysian sample was the moral framing of prosocial guidance, where parents linked kindness and respect to religious and cultural obligations, making these values personally meaningful rather than merely rule-based.

Educators can build on this foundation by integrating teamwork and empathy-focused activities in the classroom, ensuring consistency between home and school environments. Policymakers can support this by creating family-school partnership programmes aligned with Malaysia Madani's values of harmony, compassion, and mutual respect.

### **d) Guiding Conflict Resolution**

Parents taught children alternatives to aggression and encouraged negotiation. Participant 1 shared, *"I teach my child to use words instead of hitting when they feel angry,"* while Participant 2 added, *"Sometimes I remind her that it is also acceptable to speak up gently when someone is being unfair."* These strategies translate learned communicative behaviours into real-life interpersonal interactions.

Navarro et al. (2024) report that children with guided conflict resolution experience better social adjustment, forming meaningful friendships and developing essential interpersonal skills including cooperation, sharing, and empathy. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model explains this trajectory, as family microsystem guidance directly influences children's responses in peer interactions at the mesosystem level. Parents can model peaceful problem-solving by guiding children to express emotions and resolve disagreements respectfully, while educators can strengthen these skills through guided discussions and role-play in classrooms.

## **Summary**

Malaysian parents play an active and intentional role in fostering their children's social competence through daily interactions and shared activities. Parents engage in modelling positive communication, guiding emotional understanding, and encouraging cooperative play, collectively strengthening children's social adaptability. These home-based practices are reinforced when educators provide parallel opportunities through guided discussions, role-play, and reflective

feedback. Policymakers can support this synergy by formulating early childhood initiatives that strengthen home-school collaboration and promote parent education programmes focused on emotional coaching and social learning.

This interplay across family, school, and policy contexts reflects Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, emphasising the dynamic interconnection between microsystem and mesosystem influences. The study's findings are best understood as descriptive insights generated from a specific community sample. They are not intended to establish generalisable causal claims about the comparative strength of different parenting dimensions, but rather to offer meaningful qualitative data that can inform future larger-scale investigations, including longitudinal and mixed-methods studies across Malaysia's diverse ethnic communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how parental communication practices shape social competence among preschoolers in Malaysian KEMAS preschools. The four themes identified, modelling positive communication, promoting emotional understanding, encouraging prosocial behaviour, and guiding conflict resolution, revealed that parents use communication as a purposeful and culturally grounded developmental tool. These practices operate at the home microsystem level and carry direct influence into the preschool mesosystem, where children's social learning is further supported by educators.

A key observation from this study is that the communication practices described by parents were not generic. They were embedded in Malaysia's collectivist values, religious moral frameworks, and the cultural expectation of harmonious communal living. Parents framed their guidance through the lens of *adab*, respect, and communal responsibility, giving a distinctly Malaysian texture to practices that might otherwise appear universal. This cultural grounding distinguishes the findings from the broader global literature on positive parenting.

Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this research, the findings represent descriptive insights from a specific community sample. Future research should examine how these communication patterns function across Malaysia's three main ethnic groups, exploring how Malay, Chinese, and Indian parents approach communication about sharing, emotional expression, and conflict resolution. A longitudinal design would strengthen causal inferences about how parenting practices shape social competence over time. Such research can guide early childhood programmes and parent-training interventions, ensuring that children's social competence development remains culturally relevant and aligned with the principles of Malaysia Madani.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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