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Interpreting the Role of Parenting in Maintaining Early Childhood Mental Health: A Qualitative Study of Parents' Perceptions in Preschool Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood mental health plays a crucial role in shaping children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. Parenting is considered a key factor in creating a supportive environment that fosters children's psychological well-being. This study aims to interpret the role of parenting in maintaining early childhood mental health based on parents' perceptions in preschool contexts. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was employed to explore parents' lived experiences and meanings related to caregiving practices. The participants consisted of 10 kindergarten teachers in Brebes Regency, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that parents perceive parenting as the primary foundation for children's mental health, emphasizing the importance of emotional support, warm communication, and consistent caregiving. Parents also experience challenges in balancing emotional protection and children's social interaction needs, which require adaptive parenting strategies. Furthermore, collaboration between parents and teachers is identified as a critical factor in supporting children's emotional development, as it strengthens continuity between home and school environments. Early childhood education is perceived not only as a learning space but also as a supportive and healing environment that contributes to children's emotional stability. This study highlights the importance of integrating parenting practices and educational support systems to promote children's mental health. The findings provide theoretical contributions by emphasizing parents' subjective experiences and offer practical implications for developing context-sensitive parenting programs and policies in early childhood education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood mental health is a fundamental aspect of human development that significantly influences children's social, emotional, and personality outcomes later in life. During early childhood, often referred to as the "golden age," children experience rapid growth in cognitive, emotional, and social domains. At this stage, children begin to develop emotional regulation, a sense of security, and the ability to form relationships with others. Therefore, maintaining mental health in early childhood has become an increasingly important issue in both educational and parenting research. Previous studies highlight that children's mental health is strongly shaped by their immediate environment, particularly the family as the primary context of care and development (Meilanie, 2020; Ulfasari & Fauziah, 2021) . In this regard, parents play a central role in providing a nurturing, safe, and responsive environment that supports children's psychological well-being.

Parenting is no longer viewed merely as a process of fulfilling children's physical needs but has evolved into a multidimensional practice that encompasses emotional, social, and psychological dimensions. Responsive, warm, and consistent parenting practices have been widely recognized as key contributors to children's emotional stability and self-regulation abilities (Oktavianingsih & Fitroh, 2022; Sit & Rakhmawati, 2022) . According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), child development is influenced by multiple environmental systems, with the family representing the most immediate and influential microsystem. Similarly, Baumrind (1991) emphasized that authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and structure, promotes higher levels of social competence and emotional maturity in children. These theoretical perspectives reinforce the idea that parenting plays a crucial role in shaping early childhood mental health.

Despite its recognized importance, the relationship between parenting and early childhood mental health remains a subject of ongoing academic debate. Some researchers position parenting as the primary determinant of children's psychological well-being, while others argue that it should be understood within a broader socio-cultural and economic context (Kusumawardani & Dimyati, 2021) . This debate suggests that no single perspective can fully explain the complexity of children's mental health development. Furthermore, there is often a gap between ideal parenting practices described in the literature and the realities of parenting in everyday life. Many parenting programs tend to be normative and less sensitive to diverse family backgrounds, limiting their effectiveness in real-world contexts.

Globally, concerns about early childhood mental health have intensified in recent years, particularly in response to crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, and rapid social changes. Children are considered a vulnerable group due to their limited capacity to understand and cope with stress and emotional challenges. Research by Masten and Narayan (2012) indicates that children exposed to psychosocial stress without adequate support are at higher risk of experiencing long-term developmental difficulties. In such contexts, the family serves as a critical protective system that can foster resilience in children. Supportive and empathetic parenting can buffer the negative effects of stress and promote adaptive coping mechanisms in young children.

In Indonesia, challenges related to early childhood mental health have become increasingly complex due to socio-economic changes, evolving family dynamics, and the growing influence of digital technology. Increased exposure to digital media, shifts in parenting styles, and economic pressures have all contributed to changes in children's emotional well-being. Studies have shown that preschool-aged children are beginning to exhibit symptoms such as anxiety, behavioral problems, and difficulties in social adaptation (Purnomosari et al., 2022) . Unfortunately, these issues are often underestimated and considered part of normal development, resulting in limited attention and intervention. In reality, untreated mental health issues in early childhood can have long-term consequences for children's academic readiness, social competence, and emotional development.

Within this context, parents play a pivotal role as primary caregivers who shape children's emotional experiences and responses. Parenting practices that are consistent, affectionate, and non-violent can create a secure environment that supports children's mental health. Daily interactions such as playing, storytelling, and open communication enable children to express their emotions and develop a sense of trust and belonging. Positive parent-child interactions have been shown to contribute significantly to children's psychological well-being and emotional resilience (Purnomosari et al., 2022) . Thus, strengthening parenting practices that are sensitive to children's emotional needs is essential in promoting early childhood mental health.

In addition to the role of parents, early childhood education (ECE) institutions also contribute significantly to children's mental and emotional development. ECE settings provide opportunities for children to interact with peers, develop social skills, and learn emotional regulation in structured environments. Collaboration between parents and teachers is therefore essential in ensuring consistency between home and school environments. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of qualitative approaches in capturing individuals' lived experiences, which is particularly relevant in understanding how parents perceive and practice parenting in relation to children's mental health. Through such approaches, researchers can gain deeper insights into the subjective meanings and experiences that shape parenting practices.

However, studies that specifically explore parents' perceptions of their role in maintaining early childhood mental health remain limited, particularly in the Indonesian context. Most existing research tends to focus on measuring children's mental health outcomes or evaluating intervention programs, rather than understanding parents' lived experiences and perspectives. Yet, parents' perceptions play a crucial role in shaping their parenting decisions and behaviors. Understanding how parents interpret their role in supporting their children's mental health is therefore essential for developing more effective and contextually relevant parenting interventions.

Based on this background, this study aims to interpret the role of parenting in maintaining early childhood mental health from the perspective of parents in preschool settings. This research seeks to provide both theoretical and practical contributions by enriching the existing literature on parenting and early childhood mental health, as well as offering insights for the development of responsive and context-sensitive parenting programs. Furthermore, the findings are expected to

inform policy-making in early childhood education by emphasizing the importance of integrating mental health considerations into educational practices.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on parents' subjective experiences and perceptions as central to understanding parenting practices. Unlike previous studies that predominantly emphasize quantitative measurements or intervention outcomes, this research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the meanings, concerns, and strategies constructed by parents in their daily caregiving practices. Additionally, this study contributes empirical evidence from the Indonesian context, which is characterized by diverse cultural values and dynamic social conditions. By bridging the gap between theoretical concepts and real-life parenting practices, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the role of parenting in supporting early childhood mental health.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early Childhood Mental Health: Concepts and Significance

Early childhood mental health refers to a child's capacity to experience, regulate, and express emotions, as well as to form secure relationships and explore the environment effectively. This concept is fundamental because mental health during early childhood serves as the basis for later development in cognitive, emotional, and social domains. According to Meilanie (2020), early stimulation and environmental support play a crucial role in shaping children's developmental outcomes, including their emotional well-being . Children who grow up in supportive environments tend to develop better emotional control, resilience, and social competence. Conversely, children exposed to unstable or neglectful environments are at higher risk of experiencing emotional and behavioral problems.

The importance of early childhood mental health has been increasingly recognized in global and national contexts. Ulfasari and Fauziah (2021) emphasize that parental involvement in children's daily learning and emotional experiences significantly influences their psychological development . During early childhood, children rely heavily on external support to understand and manage their emotions. Therefore, mental health should not be viewed as a separate domain but as an integral part of holistic child development. Furthermore, Masten and Narayan (2012) highlight that early interventions and supportive caregiving environments can strengthen children's resilience, particularly in contexts of adversity such as disasters or social disruptions. These findings underscore the urgency of addressing mental health issues early in life to prevent long-term developmental challenges.

Parenting Styles and Their Impact on Children's Mental Health

Parenting style is one of the most influential factors in shaping children's mental health. Baumrind (1991) categorizes parenting styles into authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive, with authoritative parenting being associated with the most positive developmental outcomes. This parenting style is characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and clear expectations, which help children develop emotional stability and self-regulation. In line with this, Oktavianingsih and Fitroh (2022)

argue that parenting practices that emphasize empathy, communication, and consistency contribute significantly to children's emotional well-being .

Responsive parenting, which involves understanding and responding appropriately to children's emotional needs, has been widely recognized as a protective factor for mental health. Sit and Rakhmawati (2022) highlight that integrating emotional and social learning within early childhood education can enhance children's ability to manage emotions and build positive relationships . Parenting practices that involve positive interactions, such as storytelling, play, and open communication, create opportunities for children to express their feelings and develop a sense of security. These practices also strengthen the emotional bond between parents and children, which is essential for healthy psychological development.

However, parenting is not a uniform practice and is influenced by various contextual factors, including culture, socio-economic status, and family dynamics. Kusumawardani and Dimyati (2021) note that parenting practices during the COVID-19 pandemic have shifted significantly, with increased reliance on digital learning and changes in parent-child interactions . These changes highlight the need for flexible and context-sensitive parenting approaches that can adapt to evolving challenges while maintaining children's mental well-being.

The Ecological and Contextual Perspective of Child Development

Understanding early childhood mental health requires a broader perspective that considers the interaction between multiple environmental systems. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how different layers of the environment influence child development. The microsystem, which includes family and school, has the most direct impact on children's experiences. The mesosystem reflects the interaction between these environments, such as the relationship between parents and teachers. Meanwhile, the exosystem and macrosystem encompass broader social, cultural, and policy contexts.

This ecological perspective highlights that parenting cannot be isolated from its broader context. Family conditions, community support, and educational systems all play a role in shaping children's mental health. Purnomosari et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of family involvement in supporting children's psychological well-being, particularly in challenging situations such as post-disaster recovery . Similarly, Sit and Rakhmawati (2022) argue that early childhood education should adopt an interdisciplinary approach that integrates mental health considerations into learning processes .

In addition, trauma-informed education has gained attention as an approach that recognizes the impact of adverse experiences on children's development. Kusumawardani and Dimyati (2021) suggest that educators and parents need to be aware of children's emotional conditions and provide supportive environments that promote healing and resilience . This perspective reinforces the idea that maintaining children's mental health requires collaboration between families, schools, and communities.

Parent–School Collaboration in Supporting Children's Mental Health

The collaboration between parents and early childhood education institutions is a critical factor in supporting children's mental and emotional development. Effective communication between parents and teachers helps create a consistent environment that reinforces children's sense of security and emotional stability. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), understanding participants' experiences through qualitative inquiry can reveal how collaboration is perceived and practiced in real-life contexts .

Parents who actively engage with teachers are more likely to understand their children's developmental needs and provide appropriate support at home. Purnomosari et al. (2022) highlight that family involvement enhances children's psychological well-being by creating continuity between home and school environments . Moreover, early childhood education settings provide opportunities for children to develop social skills, interact with peers, and learn emotional regulation in structured contexts.

In the Indonesian context, however, parent–school collaboration is often influenced by cultural values, communication barriers, and limited access to resources. Ulfasari and Fauziah (2021) note that parental involvement varies depending on parents' educational background and professional commitments . Therefore, strengthening partnerships between parents and teachers requires strategies that are inclusive, culturally sensitive, and adaptable to diverse family contexts.

Research Gap and Theoretical Contribution

Despite the growing body of literature on parenting and early childhood mental health, several gaps remain. Most studies have focused on quantitative measurements of children's mental health or the effectiveness of specific interventions, while limited attention has been given to parents' subjective experiences and perceptions. This gap is significant because parents are the primary decision-makers in children's daily care and play a crucial role in shaping their emotional environments.

Furthermore, existing research often emphasizes universal parenting models without adequately considering cultural and contextual variations. This limitation highlights the need for qualitative studies that explore how parents interpret and practice parenting in their specific contexts. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that qualitative research is particularly suitable for capturing the complexity of human experiences and meanings .

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on parents' perceptions of their role in maintaining early childhood mental health within the Indonesian preschool context. By adopting a qualitative approach, this research provides a deeper understanding of how parenting practices are shaped by cultural values, daily experiences, and interactions with educational institutions. The findings are expected to contribute to both theory and practice by offering insights into the development of contextually relevant parenting programs that support children's psychological well-being.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore parents' perceptions regarding the role of parenting in maintaining early childhood mental health. The phenomenological approach was selected because it allows researchers to understand participants' lived experiences and the meanings they construct in their daily lives. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology focuses on exploring how individuals interpret their experiences within specific contexts . This design is particularly relevant for examining parenting practices, as these are deeply influenced by personal beliefs, emotions, and social interactions. The study aimed to capture how parents perceive emotional support, security, and caregiving practices in relation to children's mental health. By using this approach, the research provides a rich and in-depth understanding of parenting as a lived experience.

The qualitative nature of this study enabled the researcher to collect detailed and contextual data that reflect real-life parenting situations. Unlike quantitative research, this approach does not aim for generalization but rather for a deeper understanding of specific phenomena. The study was conducted in a natural setting without any manipulation of variables. The researcher acted as the primary instrument in both data collection and analysis processes. This allowed direct interaction with participants and facilitated deeper insights into their experiences. Consequently, the findings are grounded in authentic and meaningful narratives provided by the participants.

Research Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 10 kindergarten (TK) teachers from Brebes Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria required participants to be actively teaching in early childhood education settings. Additionally, participants needed to have experience interacting with both children and parents in their daily professional activities. This ensured that they could provide comprehensive insights into parenting practices and children's mental health. The selection of participants aimed to obtain rich and relevant information aligned with the research focus.

Teachers were chosen as key informants because they play a significant role in observing children's behavior and communicating with parents. Their position allows them to understand both the school and family perspectives regarding children's development. Participants were drawn from different schools to ensure diversity in socio-cultural backgrounds. This diversity helped enrich the data and provided multiple viewpoints. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation. Data collection was stopped when no new significant information emerged from additional interviews.

Research Setting and Duration

This research was conducted in several early childhood education institutions located in Brebes Regency, Central Java. The location was selected because it represents a diverse socio-cultural context relevant to the study. The study was carried out over a period of three months, from January to March 2026. This timeframe allowed sufficient opportunity for data collection and initial analysis. Conducting the study in real educational settings ensured that participants could share their experiences naturally. The natural setting contributed to the authenticity and credibility of the data collected.

The research setting also enabled the researcher to understand how parenting-related issues are discussed within educational environments. Participants were interviewed in familiar settings, which helped them feel comfortable and open during the data collection process. This comfort facilitated richer and more detailed responses. The interaction between teachers and parents within the school context provided valuable insights into collaborative practices. Observing this context indirectly strengthened the depth of the study. Therefore, the setting played an important role in supporting the overall research process.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using structured in-depth interviews as the primary method. Interviews were chosen because they allow participants to express their perceptions and experiences in detail. An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and relevant literature on parenting and early childhood mental health. The questions focused on parenting practices, emotional support, and collaboration between parents and teachers. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted face-to-face to ensure effective communication and interaction.

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to maintain data accuracy. The researcher also took field notes to capture non-verbal expressions and contextual information. These notes helped complement the recorded data and provided additional insights. Documentation was used as a secondary data source to support the findings. This included school-related records and communication between teachers and parents. The combination of multiple data sources enhanced the credibility of the study through triangulation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns and meanings within the data. The first step involved transcribing all interview recordings verbatim to ensure accuracy. The researcher then read the transcripts repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Coding was performed by identifying significant statements and labeling meaningful units. These codes were then grouped into categories based on similarities. From these categories, broader themes were developed to represent key findings.

The analysis was conducted inductively, meaning that themes emerged directly from the data rather than being predetermined. This approach allowed the findings to remain closely aligned with participants' experiences. The researcher continuously compared data with emerging themes to ensure consistency. Reflexivity was applied to minimize potential bias during interpretation. The results were presented in a descriptive narrative supported by direct quotations. This process ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were applied. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants and data triangulation. Multiple data sources were used to validate the findings. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear and systematic research process. Detailed documentation was kept to allow transparency in how the study was conducted. This makes it possible for other researchers to understand and evaluate the research process.

Confirmability was addressed by ensuring that findings were based on data rather than researcher bias. Direct quotations from participants were included to support interpretations. Reflexive practices were also applied to maintain objectivity. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context. This allows readers to assess whether the findings can be applied to other settings. Overall, these strategies strengthened the rigor of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study before data collection began. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure voluntary participation. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and anonymous. All data were stored securely and used only for research purposes. This ensured the protection of participants' privacy.

The researcher also ensured that participants experienced no harm or discomfort during the study. Interviews were conducted in a respectful and supportive manner. Participants were given the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical principles such as honesty, transparency, and respect were upheld throughout the research. These considerations ensured the integrity of the research process. Consequently, the study maintained high ethical standards in line with academic research guidelines.

4. FINDINGS

Theme 1: Parenting as the Foundation of Early Childhood Mental Health

The findings indicate that parents perceive parenting as the primary foundation for maintaining children's mental and emotional health. Parents believe that the home environment plays a crucial role in shaping children's emotional stability and sense of security. Children who receive limited emotional attention are often described as more irritable, withdrawn, and sensitive in daily

interactions. Parents emphasize that parenting is not only about meeting physical needs but also about providing emotional support and affection. Warm communication and consistent caregiving are considered essential elements in supporting children's well-being. These perceptions highlight that parenting practices significantly influence children's early mental health development.

Parents also describe daily interactions such as playing, storytelling, and casual conversations as important opportunities for children to express their emotions. These activities create a safe environment where children feel comfortable sharing feelings such as fear, anxiety, or sadness. One parent stated, *"If a child is not talked to enough at home, they become quick-tempered and have difficulty calming down. I try to talk to my child every day so they feel heard. When I listen to them, they become calmer and more open."* Another parent added, *"When we play together, my child starts telling stories about their feelings. It makes me understand what they are going through. I can see that it helps their emotions become more stable."* These statements illustrate that emotional interaction within the family is perceived as a key factor in maintaining children's mental health.

Furthermore, parents associate successful parenting with visible emotional changes in children. They observe that children who feel secure at home tend to be more cheerful, confident, and expressive. A parent explained, *"If a child feels safe at home, they are more relaxed and not easily upset. I notice my child becomes more confident when I spend more time with them. It shows that emotional support is very important."* Parents believe that consistency in caregiving routines helps children develop trust and emotional stability. The family is therefore viewed as the first and most important psychological safe space for children. These findings reinforce the idea that parenting is central to the development of early childhood mental health.

Theme 2: Parents' Efforts to Maintain Emotional Balance and Social Interaction

The findings reveal that parents experience emotional tension in balancing children's mental health with their need for social interaction. Parents often feel worried about allowing children to engage in activities outside the home. At the same time, they recognize that social interaction is essential for children's emotional and social development. This creates a dilemma between protecting children and encouraging their independence. Parents attempt to manage this tension by gradually introducing social experiences. These efforts reflect an adaptive approach to parenting in maintaining children's emotional balance.

Some parents initially restricted their children's social interactions due to concerns about safety and emotional readiness. However, prolonged isolation led to noticeable behavioral changes in children, such as boredom, withdrawal, and decreased enthusiasm. One parent stated, *"When my child stayed at home for too long, they became quiet and less active. I realized that they needed friends to interact with. It made me rethink how I was parenting."* Another parent shared, *"At first, I was afraid to let my child go outside, but I saw that they were becoming sad. I started allowing them to play with other children slowly. Now they look happier and more confident."* These experiences highlight how parents adjust their parenting strategies based on children's emotional responses.

Parents also emphasize the importance of guiding children during social interactions. They accompany their children, communicate about feelings, and ensure that children feel safe in new environments. A parent explained, *"I always ask my child how they feel after playing with friends. If they feel*

uncomfortable, we talk about it together. This helps them feel supported." Parents view socialization as a necessary component of emotional development. However, they continue to balance this with protective measures to ensure children's well-being. These findings suggest that parenting involves continuous adaptation to meet both emotional and social needs.

Theme 3: The Role of Parent–Teacher Collaboration

The findings show that collaboration between parents and teachers plays a significant role in supporting children's mental health. Parents express trust in teachers who actively communicate about children's development. This communication helps parents better understand their children's emotional needs. Parents feel more confident in their parenting practices when they receive regular updates from teachers. This relationship creates a sense of shared responsibility in supporting children's well-being. As a result, teachers are perceived as important partners in parenting.

Parents highlight that open and consistent communication strengthens their trust in teachers and educational institutions. One parent stated, *"The teacher always tells me how my child is doing at school. It makes me feel calm because I know my child is being cared for. I feel like I am not alone in supporting my child."* Another parent explained, *"When teachers give advice, it really helps me at home. I can follow what they suggest and see improvements in my child. It makes parenting easier for me."* These statements demonstrate that collaboration enhances parents' confidence and effectiveness in supporting their children.

In addition, parents appreciate teachers who show empathy and patience in handling children. They believe that such qualities contribute to children's emotional comfort at school. A parent shared, *"The teacher is very patient and understands my child's feelings. My child feels comfortable at school, and that makes me feel relieved. It shows that the teacher really cares."* This trust strengthens the connection between home and school environments. Parents perceive education as a collaborative process rather than an isolated effort. These findings emphasize the importance of strong parent–teacher partnerships in maintaining early childhood mental health.

Theme 4: Education as a Supportive and Healing Environment

Parents perceive early childhood education as a supportive space that contributes to children's emotional well-being. Schools are seen not only as places for learning but also as environments that support emotional recovery and development. Parents observe that school activities help children regain confidence and social skills. These activities include playing, interacting with peers, and engaging in structured routines. Schools provide a sense of normalcy that is important for children's mental stability. As a result, education is viewed as an essential component of children's overall well-being.

Parents also recognize that school experiences positively influence their own parenting practices. Through interaction with teachers and school programs, parents learn new ways to support their children emotionally. One parent stated, *"Through school, I learned how to understand my child's feelings better. The teacher guided me on how to talk to my child. It really helped improve our relationship at home."* Another parent added, *"School activities make my child more cheerful and active. I can see that they enjoy being there. It gives me confidence as a parent."* These experiences demonstrate that education contributes to both child development and parental learning.

Furthermore, parents view the process of emotional development as gradual and continuous. They understand that improvements in children's behavior occur over time through consistent support. A parent explained, *"My child started smiling more and interacting with others slowly. It did not happen instantly, but I can see progress. It makes me feel hopeful."* Schools are perceived as environments that support this gradual process. Education is therefore seen as both a learning and healing space. These findings highlight the important role of early childhood education in supporting children's mental health.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that parenting plays a fundamental role as the primary foundation for early childhood mental health. Parents perceive that emotional support, warmth, and consistent interaction significantly influence children's emotional stability and sense of security. This aligns with attachment theory, which emphasizes that secure emotional bonds between parents and children are essential for psychological well-being. Baumrind (1991) also highlights that authoritative parenting fosters emotional regulation and social competence in children . The current findings extend this perspective by showing that parents consciously recognize their role in creating a safe emotional environment. Unlike previous studies that focus on parenting styles quantitatively, this study reveals how parents interpret their role through lived experiences.

The results also support Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which states that child development is influenced by interactions within multiple environmental systems. The family, as the primary microsystem, has the most direct impact on children's emotional experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) . This study demonstrates that parents actively construct a supportive environment through daily interactions such as communication and shared activities. These findings are consistent with Meilanie (2020), who emphasizes the importance of early stimulation in shaping children's development . However, this research adds depth by highlighting parents' awareness of emotional needs rather than only cognitive stimulation. It also shows that emotional security is perceived as a prerequisite for optimal learning and development.

Furthermore, the study highlights the complexity of parenting in balancing children's emotional protection and social interaction needs. Parents experience a dilemma between safeguarding their children and allowing them to explore social environments. This finding is consistent with Purnomosari et al. (2022), who note that family involvement is crucial in supporting children's psychological well-being, particularly during transitional situations . Similarly, Masten and Narayan (2012) emphasize that supportive environments help children build resilience when facing stress. The present study contributes new insights by showing how parents adapt their strategies based on children's behavioral changes. This adaptive parenting reflects a dynamic process rather than a fixed set of practices.

In addition, the findings confirm that social interaction is an essential component of children's emotional development. Children who are isolated for extended periods tend to exhibit withdrawal and reduced enthusiasm, which aligns with previous research on social-emotional development. Sit and Rakhmawati (2022) argue that integrating social and emotional learning in early childhood education enhances children's ability to regulate emotions . The current study supports this argument

by demonstrating that parents recognize the importance of peer interaction. However, it also reveals that parents remain cautious and continuously evaluate risks. This highlights the need for parenting approaches that balance protection with opportunities for social growth.

Another important finding is the significant role of parent–teacher collaboration in maintaining children's mental health. Parents in this study perceive teachers as partners who provide guidance, emotional support, and information about children's development. This aligns with family–school partnership theories, which emphasize the importance of collaboration in supporting children's learning and well-being. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that understanding participants' experiences can reveal how such partnerships function in practice . The findings extend previous research by showing that trust and communication are key elements in building effective collaboration. Parents feel more confident and supported when teachers actively engage with them.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of teachers' empathy and patience in shaping parents' perceptions of education. Parents value teachers who are responsive to children's emotional needs and create a supportive learning environment. This finding is consistent with trauma-informed education approaches, which emphasize the need for sensitivity to children's emotional conditions (Kusumawardani & Dimyati, 2021) . The study contributes additional insights by showing that teachers' interpersonal qualities directly influence parental trust. This trust strengthens the connection between home and school environments. Consequently, education becomes a collaborative effort that supports children's mental health holistically.

The findings also demonstrate that early childhood education is perceived as a supportive and healing environment for children. Parents view schools not only as places for academic learning but also as spaces where children can recover emotionally and develop social skills. This aligns with interdisciplinary approaches to early childhood education that integrate mental health and learning processes (Sit & Rakhmawati, 2022) . Additionally, Oktavianingsih and Fitroh (2022) highlight the role of innovative learning approaches in promoting children's social awareness . The current study extends these findings by emphasizing the therapeutic role of education from the parents' perspective. It shows that structured routines and social interactions at school contribute to children's emotional stability.

Furthermore, the study reveals that parenting and education are interconnected processes that support children's development. Parents learn from teachers and apply new strategies at home, creating continuity between different environments. This finding is supported by Ulfasari and Fauziah (2021), who emphasize the importance of parental involvement in children's education . The present study adds that such involvement is not only academic but also emotional. Parents become more aware of their role in supporting children's mental health through collaboration with teachers. This highlights the importance of integrated approaches that combine parenting and education.

From a broader perspective, the findings support the idea that early childhood mental health should be addressed through a systemic approach. Children's development is influenced by interactions between family, school, and social environments. This is consistent with international research emphasizing the importance of ecosystem-based approaches in early childhood education. Masten and Narayan (2012) highlight that resilience is built through supportive systems surrounding the child. The current study provides empirical evidence from the Indonesian context that supports

this perspective. It demonstrates that collaboration between parents and teachers creates a stable support system for children.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the literature by using a phenomenological approach to explore parents' subjective experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that qualitative research is essential for capturing the depth and complexity of human experiences . Unlike previous studies that rely on quantitative measures, this research provides a nuanced understanding of parenting practices. It reveals the emotional, cognitive, and contextual factors that influence parents' decisions. This approach allows for a more holistic understanding of early childhood mental health. Therefore, the study offers both theoretical and methodological contributions.

Overall, this study expands existing knowledge on parenting and early childhood mental health by emphasizing the role of parents as active agents in children's emotional development. The findings highlight that parenting is not only about caregiving but also about creating a secure and supportive emotional environment. They also demonstrate the importance of collaboration between parents and teachers in supporting children's well-being. These insights contribute to the development of more responsive and contextually relevant parenting programs. Additionally, the study provides a foundation for future research on integrating mental health into early childhood education. Thus, it offers valuable implications for both theory and practice.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that parenting plays a central and irreplaceable role in maintaining the mental health of early childhood, particularly in fostering emotional stability, a sense of security, and children's ability to express feelings appropriately. The findings demonstrate that parents perceive warm communication, consistent caregiving, and emotional responsiveness as key elements in supporting children's psychological well-being. In addition, the study highlights that parenting is not a static practice but a dynamic process in which parents continuously adapt to children's emotional and social needs. The collaboration between parents and teachers also emerges as a critical factor, as it strengthens the continuity of support between home and school environments and enhances children's overall development. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the enrichment of early childhood education and parenting literature by emphasizing parents' subjective experiences as a crucial dimension that has been underexplored in previous research. Practically, the findings provide important insights for educators and practitioners in designing parenting programs that are more contextual, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the real needs of families. In terms of policy implications, this study suggests the need for integrating parenting education and early childhood mental health support into national early childhood education frameworks, including the development of family–school partnership programs, teacher training on socio-emotional learning, and accessible parenting guidance services. Overall, this research underscores the importance of a holistic and collaborative approach that positions parents, teachers, and educational institutions as interconnected systems in supporting the mental health and well-being of young children.

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