



## Parents' Habits in Instilling Empathy Behaviors in Children Aged 4-6 Years

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### ABSTRACT

This research discusses the importance of the role of parents in instilling values of empathy and helping behavior in children from an early age through habits formed in the family environment. The aim of this research is to understand how parental involvement affects the development of children's empathy in daily life. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach with a case study method, employing data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, and documentation. The results show that the research subjects, Ananda M and X, have a high level of empathy, especially in helping behavior. This is influenced by the habits and role models consistently provided by parents at home. The discussion of the results indicates that a warm, emotionally supportive family environment that provides real examples of empathetic behavior plays a crucial role in shaping a child's caring and loving character.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the very important social skills that should be instilled from an early age is empathy. This skill helps children identify and understand the feelings of others and serves as a foundation for their social and emotional growth. Hurlock (in Sholeha & Widiyastuti, 2021) emphasizes that those who have empathy are able to understand the perspectives, ideas, feelings, and emotions of others in order to feel what they are going through. Because empathetic children will naturally want to help others out of genuine concern, empathy is also crucial in promoting prosocial behavior such as helping one another.

According to Decety & Jackson (in Salsabila, Astuti, Hafidah, Nurjanah, & Jumiatmoko, 2021), empathy is an important skill that allows a person to understand and respond to the feelings of others and to meet their needs by offering comfort, support, or forgiveness. Empathy comes from the Greek word 'empathia,' which means to feel what others are experiencing, according to Goleman (in Nugraha, Apriliya, & Veronicha, 2017). Empathy enables a person to accept the feelings of others and understand their problems and emotions from their perspective. According to Asih (in Hutasuhut & Yaswinda, 2020),

empathy also encourages motivation and helpful character, which is very important since humans are essentially social creatures who rely on each other.

The early development of empathy is very important to influence children's prosocial behavior, which includes their ability to consider the perspectives of others. When someone helps others, they also feel the emotions of that person. Helping one another is a concrete manifestation of empathy that benefits not only others and the environment but also oneself by fostering happiness for all. According to Hoffman (in Syafitri, 2020), empathy offers cognitive and affective benefits. While affective empathy allows children to deeply feel the emotions of others, cognitive empathy aids in processing knowledge about those emotions.

A child's ability to form healthy relationships and control their emotions and behaviors is directly related to their social and emotional skills, which include empathy (Watt & Frydenberg, 2024). According to Hutasuhut and Yaswinda (2020), children who exhibit a high level of empathy are more skilled at building friendships, understanding their peers, creating emotional intimacy, building trust, and making others feel comfortable in their presence.

However, without a learning process, empathy does not emerge spontaneously. Guidance for children is needed through role models, direct experiences, and habituation. Rahmawati (2020) emphasizes that various techniques, including habituation, motivational stories, group play, and direct experiences, can enhance empathy. According to Denham (in Nugraha et al., 2017), age and maturity level, gender, and parental role models are three key elements that influence empathy in early childhood. Because they have similar experiences, children find it easier to relate to same-gender peers. On the other hand, parents who act with empathy provide a clear example for their children. Children are more likely to help others when they feel emotionally safe (Akollo, Wattilete, & Lesbatta, 2020).

On the other hand, children's social development is negatively influenced by a lack of empathy. According to von Polier et al. (2020), a lack of empathy is demonstrated by an indifferent attitude towards others, characterized by a lack of guilt, concern, or desire to help. People who lack empathy are usually selfish, indifferent to the circumstances of others, and unable to listen to or understand others' problems (Ulfa, Husniah, & Sofyan, 2022). According to Jane (in Santosa & Nurcahyani, 2019), children who lack empathy are more likely to grow up to be bullies because they cannot understand the emotional burden their actions cause to the victims.

Data from the Indonesian Education Monitoring Network (Kornas JPPI) shows an increase in cases of violence in schools from 194 cases in 2022 to 285 cases in 2023, and by October 2024, there have been 293 cases recorded, with 31% of them being bullying cases (Suryowati, 2024). This condition underscores the importance of the role of parents in instilling the value of empathy from an early age, particularly through the habituation of helping behavior in daily life.

Observations of Ananda M and X show that their empathetic behavior, particularly in helping attitudes, is shaped through consistent habituation by their parents. Parents not only provide examples but also educate about the importance of helping others. This fact indicates that active parental involvement in the habituation process has a significant impact on the development of empathy in children.

Based on the background, the problem formulation in this research is: (1) what is the role of parents in developing children's empathy through fostering a helping behavior?, (2) what are the forms of practice that parents undertake to cultivate empathy in children?, and (3) what factors support and hinder the process of fostering empathy by parents? The aim of this research is to understand the role of parents in developing children's empathy through fostering a helping attitude, to describe the forms of practice carried out by parents, and to identify supporting and hindering factors in the process.

## **METHODS**

This research uses a case study design with a qualitative approach, aiming to deeply understand the social phenomenon of parental habituation in instilling empathy behavior in early childhood. The population in this study consists of preschool children who tend to show empathetic behavior, while the sample is taken purposively, that is, two children aged 4-6 years who are known to have a high level of empathy, especially in helping others. Data collection techniques were conducted through three main methods: direct observation of children's behavior, interviews with parents to explore the habits and parenting patterns applied, and documentation in the form of written documents, images, and electronic files that support the research. The data collection process lasted for two weeks and involved two intense meetings. For the data analysis, the interactive analysis model by Miles and Huberman was used, which consists of three stages: data reduction (filtering and organizing relevant data), data presentation (arranging the data in a clear narrative form), and conclusion drawing (summarizing meaningful patterns or findings). In addition, to maintain the validity of the data, the researcher used triangulation techniques, both from the source of the data and the method of data collection (Rahmawati, 2020).

## **RESULTS**

This research aims to understand the role of parents in instilling empathetic behavior in the form of helping attitudes in preschool children through habituation in the home environment. Data was obtained through direct observation, in-depth interviews with parents, and documentation in the form of images and notes on children's activities.

Based on the observation results, it was found that Ananda M showed empathetic behavior while playing with peers; when a friend fell off a bicycle, Ananda M spontaneously helped without being asked. This finding is reinforced by the results of an interview with Ananda M's parents, who stated that they have accustomed their child to engage in various activities that encourage helping behaviors, such as cleaning up their own eating area, assisting with household chores, and getting used to using polite words like 'please', 'sorry', and 'thank you'. Parents also apply a democratic parenting style and serve as direct role models in everyday life. They provide repeated guidance and appreciation for every positive behavior displayed by the child M. Meanwhile, observations of the child X show that he/she takes the initiative to help his/her crying sibling when there are no adults at home by seeking help from outside. Through interviews, it is known that the parents of child X foster empathetic behavior through a combination of direct modeling and education through educational shows such as the cartoon 'Bing'. The parenting style employed is situational,

sometimes democratic and sometimes authoritarian, depending on the circumstances. In addition to setting an example, parent X also engages the child in discussions about his/her feelings to better understand the emotions of others. Appreciation is also given when children show helping behavior, such as verbal praise or a thumbs up gesture. From the documentation results, in the form of daily activity notes and images, additional evidence is obtained that the habits consistently practiced by parents have tangibly and repeatedly shaped the child's empathetic character in various situations.

Thus, descriptive hypothesis testing shows that the research hypothesis is proven, namely that the conditioning carried out by parents consistently can foster empathy behavior in early childhood. Both research subjects, M and X, exhibited empathy behavior in the form of tangible actions to help others, both in play environments and family settings. Although there are differences in conditioning strategies such as the use of educational media or direct approaches, both demonstrate that parental involvement is a key factor in instilling an empathetic attitude in children from an early age.



(a) Ananda X



(b) Ananda M

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that parents play a significant role in instilling empathetic behavior in young children, especially in the context of helping one another. Both subjects of the study, Ananda M and Ananda X, demonstrated empathetic behavior in their daily lives, such as helping a friend who fell or assisting a younger sibling who was crying when no adults were at home. This empathetic behavior stems from consistent habits practiced by parents through household activities and warm emotional communication. These habits indicate that parents actively take on the role of role models, in line with the opinion of Ramdan and Fauziah (2019) that parents are the primary example in the formation of children's character.

One form of habituation that is practiced is the use of four polite words: 'excuse me,' 'please,' 'thank you,' and 'pardon' which, according to Sulist (2017), are very effective in enhancing social interaction and children's empathy. Furthermore, this study reinforces the findings of Nurhayati et al. (2024) that emphasize the importance of early habituation in shaping social and emotional character, as well as the findings of Fitriyana, Zwagery, and Safitri (2020) that empathy can be instilled through direct experiences and prosocial behavior in daily activities.

The learning process carried out by parents is not limited to direct instructions, but also utilizes digital media as an aid. Viewing such as the educational cartoon "Bing" is used by Ananda X's parents to instill values of empathy, which supports the research findings of Maranatha and Putri (2021) on the effectiveness of visual media in building emotional understanding in children. This is also supported by Syahrul and Nurhafizah (2021), who state that digital media plays an important role in character development in children in the modern era.

However, this research also found that external influences such as peers and uncontrolled digital content pose their own challenges in the process of fostering empathy. This is consistent with the findings of Lusiyana, Sadif, and Susanti (2021), and Pello and Zega (2024), which state that children's behavior is greatly influenced by their social environment. Nevertheless, parents should remain consistent in providing understanding and positive reinforcement so that children can distinguish good values, as demonstrated through giving appreciation in the form of praise or a thumbs-up gesture. This concept aligns with Webster's (1996) definition of appreciation, which includes recognition, support, and encouragement of good behavior.

The parenting styles applied also vary. Ananda M's parents tend to use a democratic parenting style that allows for dialogue and understanding, while Ananda X's parents occasionally employ an authoritarian style, such as giving commands in a loud tone when the child is reluctant to help. Despite the differences, both still show similar outcomes, namely the development of empathy in the children. This proves that the habituation of empathy can succeed through adaptive parenting styles, as explained by Hurlock in Marintan and Priyanti (2022), that authoritarian parenting can instill discipline, although the child's motivation is often based on obedience.

An interesting finding from this research is the combination of habituation approaches, emotional discussions, and digital education as strategies to build empathy. The formation of empathy is not only achieved through advice or examples but also through small discussions about children's feelings and the use of positive digital media. This approach has not been explicitly discussed in previous research, which tends to focus on formal methods or a single type of parenting pattern.

This research makes an important contribution in the field of early childhood education and family education. The results show that fostering empathy can begin from small and repeated habits at home, without the need for complex methods. A flexible, humanistic, and responsive approach to child development has proven effective in instilling social values such as helping one another. These findings are expected to serve as a practical reference for parents, teachers, and child education observers.

However, this study has limitations. The number of subjects being only two children makes the results not widely generalizable. Additionally, the relatively short data collection period prevents the researcher from observing the long-term development of the habituation process. Further research with a larger number of subjects and a longer observation period is necessary to strengthen these findings and explore other factors that may influence the process of instilling empathy in early childhood.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research findings indicate that parental involvement is crucial in the formation of empathy behavior, particularly the attitude of helping others in early childhood. Parents act as role models as well as educators through direct habituation and media, such as cartoons, which are consistently applied despite negative influences from the outside environment. The differences in educational methods between the parents of Ananda M and X show variations in approach, yet both strengthen empathetic behavior with positive appreciation. The parenting patterns applied also influence children's responses to empathy learning. These findings underscore the importance of synergy between the roles of parents and the environment in instilling values of empathy, which contribute to the development of social relationships and children's emotional growth. Thus, consistent and adaptive empathy habituation strategies in response to external challenges become the key to successfully instilling a helping attitude from an early age.

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