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Comparison of Parental Communication Patterns on Empathy in Children Aged 3-6

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Abstract

Empathy is a key component in the social-emotional development of early childhood, which is influenced by communication patterns within the family. This study aims to analyze the influence of parental communication patterns on the empathy of children aged 3–6 years. The study used a quantitative approach with a correlational method on 69 pairs of parents. The data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation test and multiple linear regression. The results show that conversation-oriented communication patterns have a positive and significant relationship with children's empathy, both in mothers and fathers, while conformity-oriented patterns have a significantly negative relationship. Mothers' conversation orientation contributes most strongly to increasing children's empathy, while fathers' conformity orientation has a greater negative impact. These findings confirm the different roles of maternal and paternal communication in shaping early childhood empathy. Theoretically, this study reinforces the model of family communication patterns in the context of empathy development. Practically, the results provide an empirical basis for parents and early childhood educators to implement more dialogic communication strategies to foster empathy from an early age.

Kata Kunci: *early childhood, children's empathy, parental role, communication patterns.*

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Introduction

Early childhood development is a crucial period that determines a person's social, emotional, and moral qualities in the future (Suryana et al., 2022). Children are born with diverse abilities and characteristics. A child's potential can be nurtured through the role of parents in providing education, guidance, and appropriate parenting (Maf'ula et al., 2024). However, some facts in the field show that some children display aggressive behavior that overwhelms their parents, such as throwing or kicking objects, refusing to listen to others, arguing, and displaying other angry behaviors (Fauziyah, 2022). These actions not only disturb the surrounding environment, but can also make peers or siblings feel afraid, sad, cry, or hurt by their actions (Asnia Zusiva & Muthohar Sofa, 2024).

Aggressive behavior and children's difficulty in understanding other people's feelings are often associated with low empathy skills. Children with immature emotional regulation tend to focus on themselves and lack consideration for other people's emotional states (Erlita & Abidin, 2021). The inability to recognize the impact of behavior on the social environment is an indicator of weak empathy, which in the long term has the potential to trigger antisocial behavior and social-emotional disorders (Nurfazrina et al., 2020; Wong, 2023). Individuals with low empathy generally

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show a lack of concern, difficulty in forming social relationships, and a tendency toward social anxiety (Eaton et al., 2024).

Empathy is an important psychosocial capacity that needs to be developed from an early age. Empathy enables children to understand other people's feelings, accept different points of view, and respond to social emotions adaptively (CH Nona Irma et al., 2022). Conceptually, empathy consists of two main components, namely cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand the emotional state of others rationally, while affective empathy relates to the ability to feel the emotions experienced by others (Risna Mardiah Mardiah & Isnaini Ma'rifah, 2025). These two components complement each other and form the basis for healthy social interactions in early childhood.

Empathy skills emerge spontaneously early in life, but require environmental stimulation to develop optimally (Gare et al., 2021). Between the ages of 3 and 6, empathy development is increasingly influenced by cognitive maturity, which allows children to understand that other people's emotions are triggered by certain conditions and may differ from their own feelings (Papalia et al., 2023). Various factors influence children's empathy development, including age, culture, individual characteristics, and parenting patterns. Among these factors, the family is the most influential context in shaping children's social-emotional development (Maimuna et al., 2025; Simon & Nader-Grosbois, 2021).

One important aspect of the family environment is communication patterns. Family Communication Patterns Theory explains that interactions within families are shaped by two main dimensions, namely conversation orientation and conformity orientation (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Conversation orientation emphasizes open communication, emotional expression, and discussion, which contribute to children's psychological well-being. Conversely, conformity orientation emphasizes uniformity of values, obedience, and the dominance of authority figures in family decision-making (Békefi et al., 2024). The combination of these two orientations forms a distinctive communication pattern that influences children's social and emotional development.

A number of studies show that family communication patterns play a significant role in the development of children's empathy. Conversation orientation is known to strengthen supportive parenting and is positively correlated with empathy, while a high conformity orientation tends to be associated with low empathy, especially in the context of authoritarian parenting (Abdullah et al., 2020). Another study in Indonesia shows that family communication patterns function as a mediator between socioeconomic factors and children's empathy (Amanda & Agoes Salim, 2019). In addition, warm and responsive father involvement has also been shown to contribute to the emotional and empathic development of young children (Kusaini et al., 2024).

Although the literature has recognized the importance of family communication, most studies still view parents as a single entity or focus only on one parent figure. Studies that specifically compare the contributions of maternal and paternal communication patterns to the development of empathy in early childhood, particularly in the Indonesian cultural context, are still limited. This gap highlights the need for more in-depth research to understand the differences in communication roles based on parental gender in facilitating children's empathy development.

Based on the above description, this study aims to analyze the relationship between mothers' and fathers' communication patterns and empathy in children aged 3–6 years, as well as to compare their respective contributions in shaping empathy during early development. This study departs from the hypothesis that parental communication patterns are positively related to children's empathy and that there are differences in the influence of maternal and paternal communication patterns. The novelty of this study lies in its comparative approach to the roles of parents based on gender in the Indonesian cultural context, which is expected to enrich the development of family communication theory and provide practical implications for parents and early childhood educators.

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Methodology

This study uses a quantitative approach with a correlational design that aims to identify and understand the relationship between family communication patterns and empathy in early childhood. A correlational design was chosen because it allows for testing the relationship between variables as they occur naturally without manipulating the conditions of the respondents. To obtain a more comprehensive picture of the relationship, this study applied multiple linear regression analysis by focusing on two main dimensions of family communication patterns, namely conversation orientation and conformity orientation. This analysis was used to identify the strength of the relationship, the direction of influence, and the relative contribution of each dimension of communication patterns to the variation in children's empathy. All data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software in accordance with quantitative research principles.

Research data was collected from 69 pairs of mothers and fathers residing in the Bekasi area, Indonesia. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling techniques with inclusion criteria of biological parents who had children aged 3–6 years, lived with their children, and were willing to complete the research instrument. This technique was used to ensure that respondents had characteristics relevant to the research objectives, as recommended in child development-based family research (Suriani et al., 2023). Data collection was conducted using a printed questionnaire in Indonesian, which was distributed with the assistance of one of the kindergartens in the study area. The questionnaire was filled out by parents at home and returned within a week to give respondents the opportunity to carefully understand each item.

Children's empathy was measured using The Basic Empathy Scale–Parent Report (BES-PR) developed by (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014). This instrument originally consisted of 20 items, but after validity testing using item-total correlations, two items that did not meet the validity criteria were removed, leaving 18 items used in the analysis. Family communication patterns were measured using The Revised Family Communication Pattern Instrument–Parent's Version (RFCP-PV) developed by (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), which consists of two main dimensions, namely conversation orientation and conformity orientation.

Both research instruments underwent adaptation into Indonesian through forward translation by bilingual translators, followed by expert review to ensure conceptual equivalence and cultural appropriateness. The adapted instruments were then tested on a limited basis to ensure item readability. Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and showed adequate internal consistency, so the instruments were deemed suitable for use in the context of this study.

Before inferential analysis was conducted, data normality was tested using the Shapiro–Wilk test to ensure that parametric statistical assumptions were met. Once the data was declared normally distributed, Pearson's correlation analysis was used to identify the strength and direction of the relationship between maternal and paternal communication patterns and children's empathy. Furthermore, multiple linear regression analysis was applied to evaluate the contribution of conversation orientation and conformity orientation to early childhood empathy. The results of this analysis were used to answer the research questions and test the research hypotheses empirically.

This study was conducted in accordance with research ethics principles, particularly because it involved young children as indirect subjects. Written informed consent was obtained from parents prior to data collection. The confidentiality of respondents' identities was maintained, and all data was used solely for academic purposes. This study did not pose any psychological or social risks to the participating children and families.

Results and Discussion

Results

This section presents the main findings of the study related to the relationship between mother and father communication patterns and empathy in children aged 3-6 years. The study began with statistical assumption testing to ensure data validity before correlation and regression analysis was performed. The results of normality testing for all variables can be seen in the following table:

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Tabel 1. Results of Normality Test of Research Variables (N=69)

Variable	Statisti	Sig.(
Child Empathy Score	0.986	0.119
Mother Conversation Orientation Score	0.985	0.088
Father Conversation Orientation Score	0.987	0.152
Mother Conformity Orientation Score	0.982	0.051
Father Conformity Orientation Score	0.983	0.067

Based on Table 1, the test results show that all variables have a significance value (p) > 0.05, ranging from 0.051 to 0.152. Thus, the data is declared to be normally distributed and meets the assumption of normality. Next, a linearity test was conducted to ensure that the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is linear.

Tabel 2. Results of Linearity Test of Inter-Variable Relationships

Variable Relationships	Deviation from Linearity (Sig.)
Child Empathy – Mother's Conversation	0.318
Child Empathy – Father's Conversation	0.456
Child Empathy – Mother's Conformity	0.539
Child Empathy – Father's Conformity	0.614

The test results based on Table 2 show that the deviation from linearity value for all variable pairs is greater than 0.05, with values ranging from 0.318 to 0.614. This indicates that all relationships between variables are linear. All data met the assumptions of normality and linearity, so Pearson's correlation analysis was then performed to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the independent variables (conversation orientation and conformity of mothers and fathers) and the dependent variable (child empathy).

This study then investigated family communication patterns based on parental gender and their effect on children's empathy development, with the following statistical results:

Tabel 3. Results of Pearson's Correlation Test Based on Parental Gender

Variable	Mother (N=69)	p (Mother)	Father (N=69)	p (Father)
Child Empathy – Conversation Orientation	0.421	< 0.001	0.347	0.003
Child Empathy – Conformity Orientation	-0.332	0.005	-0.359	0.002

The results of the Pearson correlation test shown in Table 3 indicate that there is a positive and significant relationship between the conversation-oriented communication patterns of parents and their children's empathy, both for mothers and fathers. The correlation between children's empathy and conversation orientation in mothers shows a value of $r = 0.421$ with $p < 0.001$, while the correlation value for fathers is $r = 0.347$ with $p = 0.003$. Although both are significant, the relationship is statistically stronger in mothers than in fathers. In terms of conformity orientation, there was a difference in the strength of the relationship between mothers and fathers. The results of Pearson's correlation test on fathers showed a stronger negative relationship ($r = -0.359$; $p = 0.002$) than mothers ($r = -0.332$; $p = 0.005$).

After conducting a correlation test, this study also conducted a multiple linear regression test aimed at determining the contribution of each dimension of communication patterns in mothers and fathers. The results provide an in-depth picture of the magnitude of changes in family communication patterns to predict changes in children's empathy. The regression test results are presented in the following table:

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Tabel 4. Multiple Linear Regression Test Results

Gender Parents	Predictor Variable	B (Unstd.)	β (Std)	t	Sig
Mother	Conversation Orientation	0.500	0.407	3.877	< 0.001
	Conformity Orientation	-0.336	-0.312	-2.977	0.004
Father	Conversation Orientation	0.370	0.301	2.735	0.008
	Conformity Orientation	-0.461	-0.315	-2.863	0.006

Multiple linear regression analysis in Table 4 shows that the pattern of maternal communication with conversation orientation has a significant positive effect on children's empathy (B = 0.500, p < 0.001), while conformity orientation has a significant negative effect (B = -0.336, p = 0.004). This indicates that the higher the tendency of mothers to use conversation orientation, the higher the children's empathy, whereas mothers' emphasis on conformity orientation tends to decrease children's empathy.

Similar statistical results were found in fathers' communication patterns. Conversation orientation had a significant positive effect on children's empathy (B = 0.370, p = 0.008), while conformity orientation had a significant negative effect (B = -0.461, p = 0.006), meaning that fathers' use of conformity orientation had a stronger effect on reducing children's empathy.

The overall regression analysis shows that there is a significant difference in the influence of conversation orientation and conformity orientation based on parental gender. In conversation orientation, mothers have a stronger influence than fathers, with a coefficient of 0.500 (p < 0.001) for mothers and 0.370 (p = 0.008) for fathers. These results indicate that intensive open communication from mothers is more effective in increasing children's empathy than the same role played by fathers. Conversely, fathers' conformity orientation has a greater negative influence on children's empathy, with a coefficient of -0.461 (p = 0.006) compared to mothers with a coefficient of -0.336 (p = 0.004). These findings confirm that a father's emphasis on obedience and rules tends to have a greater negative impact on children's empathy skills than a similar emphasis from mothers.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that parental communication patterns play a significant role in the development of empathy in young children, with different contributions from mothers and fathers. These findings expand on previous research that places the family as the primary context for children's social-emotional development. They show that the influence of family communication is not homogeneous, but is influenced by the roles and communication characteristics of each parent.

Conversational orientation has been shown to be positively associated with children's empathy, indicating that open communication plays an important role in helping children understand their own emotions and those of others. These findings are consistent with previous studies that suggest open family dialogue facilitates the development of empathy through the process of emotional socialization. However, this study makes an additional contribution by showing that the influence of conversation orientation is greater for mothers than for fathers. This marks a theoretical advance by emphasizing that conversation orientation not only functions as a general characteristic of the family system, but also works through specific interpersonal relationships.

In the context of Indonesian culture, mothers generally have a higher intensity of interaction with their children in daily caregiving activities. These repeated and emotional interactions enable mothers to play a major role in their children's emotional learning process. Thus, mothers' conversational orientation not only provides a space for communication, but also forms emotional bonds that form the basis for the affective and cognitive empathy development of early childhood. These findings enrich the literature, which previously emphasized the collective role of family communication without considering the differentiation of parental gender roles.

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Conversely, conformity orientation shows a negative relationship with children's empathy, with a stronger influence found in fathers' communication patterns. These results are in line with previous studies that link conformity orientation with limited emotional expression and low perspective-taking abilities in children. However, this study provides conceptual refinement by showing that these negative effects are more pronounced when conformity orientation is applied by fathers. In Indonesian family structures, which tend to be hierarchical, fathers are often positioned as figures of authority and decision-makers. When this role is dominated by demands for obedience without balanced dialogue, children are at risk of experiencing obstacles in the process of internalizing empathy.

The difference in contributions between mothers and fathers shows that both perform complementary psychosocial functions in family dynamics. Mothers play a more dominant role in building emotional closeness through dialogic communication, while fathers more often play a role in establishing structure and discipline. However, the findings of this study confirm that structure without balanced open communication can hinder the development of empathy in children. Thus, children's empathy develops optimally when emotional support and rule enforcement are in balanced proportion.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the Family Communication Patterns Theory by providing empirical evidence in the context of early childhood and collectivist cultures. In line with the findings of (Amanda & Agoes Salim, 2019), conversation orientation can be understood as a protective factor for the development of empathy, while conformity orientation has the potential to be a risk factor when applied dominantly. The main contribution of this study lies in its emphasis that the effects of both orientations are influenced by the role of parents, thereby expanding the understanding of a theory that has previously been tested more in Western cultural contexts.

Overall, this study confirms that conversation orientation serves as the main mechanism in supporting the development of empathy in early childhood, while conformity orientation requires careful application so as not to hinder children's social-emotional development. These findings contribute conceptually and empirically to the study of family communication and have practical implications for the development of parenting programs that emphasize a balance between dialogic communication and rule enforcement in the context of Indonesian family culture.

Conclusion

This study concludes that family communication patterns play a significant role in supporting the development of empathy in early childhood, with different contributions from mothers and fathers. Conversation orientation has been proven to function as a protective factor in the development of children's empathy, while conformity orientation has the potential to become a risk factor if applied dominantly without balanced dialogic communication. These findings indicate that children's empathy is not only influenced by the type of communication pattern but also by the role of parents as the main actors in family interactions.

The main contribution of this study lies in strengthening and developing the Family Communication Patterns Theory in the context of early childhood and Indonesian family culture. This study provides empirical evidence that the mother's conversation orientation has a stronger positive influence on children's empathy, while the father's conformity orientation shows a greater negative influence. This difference confirms that the communication of mothers and fathers has non-identical psychosocial functions, so that understanding family communication needs to consider the dimension of parental gender roles.

In practical terms, the results of this study emphasize the importance of balanced family communication between emotional support and enforcement of rules. Parents are expected to expand the space for dialogue with their children so that the process of internalizing empathy can develop optimally. For educators and early childhood education practitioners, these findings can form the basis for the development of parenting programs that emphasize open communication and sensitivity to children's emotional needs.

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