

## The Architect in the Home: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Parenting Styles, Communication, and Social Competence in Malaysian Preschoolers

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### Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the parental practices that shape social competence in Malaysian preschool children. Amidst national concerns about social-emotional deficits among young learners, this study investigates parenting styles and communication patterns that influence children's social development. The research employed a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, which began with a quantitative survey of 885 parents from community-based KEMAS preschools, followed by in-depth qualitative interviews with a purposive sample of eight parents. Crucially, the analysis also found that the authoritarian parenting style had a statistically significant positive influence ( $p=0.009$ ), challenging Western-centric views on strict parenting. Conversely, the study found no significant difference in parental communication patterns or children's social competence based on parental education or household income, suggesting that parenting capability transcends socioeconomic status. The qualitative phase identified six key characteristics of social competence (cooperation, communication skills, empathy, discipline, autonomy, and socialization) and uncovered seven specific parental activities that foster these traits. By synthesizing these findings, this study concludes that adaptive, intentional, and emotionally supportive parenting practices are fundamental for promoting social competence in young children, offering a culturally nuanced model for the Malaysian context.

Keywords: *Parenting Styles, Social Competence, Early Childhood Education, Parent-Child Communication, Mixed-Method Research*

### 1. Introduction: The Social Competence Imperative in Early Childhood

#### 1.1. The Foundational Role of Parents as First Educators

Researchers universally recognize parents as a child's first and most influential educators, who serve as the primary architects of their character, emotional regulation, and social behaviour (Rohita & Krisnawati, 2021). Cultural wisdom deeply embeds this fundamental role, as captured by the Malay proverb, "*Bagaimana acuan begitulah kuihnya*," which translates to "As the mould, so the cake." This adage powerfully illustrates that children often mirror the values and behaviours of their parents (Eryani et al., 2023). Parents are fundamental in establishing a child's values and emotional maturity. Neglect significantly impacts a child's capacity to regulate emotions and adapt to their environment (Diananda, 2020). Early parent-child relationship establishes the foundation for a child's self-expression, confidence, and capacity to form meaningful connections with others throughout life.

#### 1.2. The Social Competence Gap in Malaysian Preschools: A National Concern

A significant number of preschool children in Malaysia exhibit difficulties in acquiring social competence. These challenges manifest in behaviours such as emotional outbursts, withdrawal from peer interactions, poor conflict-resolution skills, and an inability to cooperate in group settings (Mohamed et al., 2020). Such difficulties not only impede a child's ability to participate meaningfully in the classroom but can also lead to long-term social adjustment problems, including peer rejection (Mohamed et al., 2020). Ahmad and Lee (2018) warn that aggressive behaviour in childhood, if left unaddressed, can lead to significant maladaptive outcomes in adolescence, including delinquency, poor academic performance, and chronic absenteeism.

This issue represents a pressing national concern. The Malaysian Ministry of Education's National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK) emphasizes holistic development through interactive, play-based learning, in which social interaction serves as a key component (Yean & Ngadni, 2024). However, many children attending community-based preschools, such as those the Community Development Department (KEMAS) operates, continue to struggle with the foundational social-emotional skills necessary for school readiness. This gap between policy and reality suggests that a significant portion of children are entering formal education without the prerequisite competencies for success. This challenge extends beyond the classroom, touching upon broader national aspirations. The Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPM) 2013-2025 aims to cultivate students who can communicate effectively and engage confidently, while the overarching vision of Malaysia Madani seeks to build a harmonious and empathetic society (Ushama, 2024). Deficits in early social competence represent a foundational threat to achieving these macro-level goals.

Besides that, most Malaysian studies have mainly used quantitative designs, which do not capture the real experiences and voices of parents. This study fills that gap by using a mixed-methods approach to provide both statistical evidence and deeper understanding from parents' own perspectives. Many prior studies have relied on quantitative methods, failing to capture the rich, lived experiences of parents (Masiran, 2022). This lack of qualitative depth limits the practical applicability of research findings, as it fails to provide parents and educators with actionable, "how-to" knowledge. The current study addresses this very gap.

#### 1.3. Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate how parenting styles and communication patterns influence the development of social competence among preschool children in Malaysia. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this research aims to bridge the existing gaps in the literature by combining broad statistical patterns with deep, narrative insights. The following research questions guide the study:

1. What is the relationship between different parenting styles (authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive) and children's social competence?
2. Is there a relationship between parents' communication patterns and their children's social competence?
3. Do communication patterns differ significantly based on parents' education levels and income groups?
4. How do parental activities shape the social competence of preschool-aged children?

### 2. Theoretical Foundations of Parental Influence on Social Development

An integrated theoretical framework grounds this study, explaining both the emotional foundation and the instructional mechanisms through which parents influence their children's social development.

#### 2.1. The Parent-Child Bond as a Secure Base: An Attachment Theory Perspective

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory posits that a secure emotional bond between a child and a primary caregiver is essential for healthy psychological development. When parents are responsive, consistent, and emotionally available, they create a "secure base" for the child. This secure attachment fosters a sense of trust and safety, which empowers the child to explore the social world with confidence. From this secure base, children can better develop crucial prosocial behaviours, including empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation (Shoshani, 2024). A securely attached child learns to form trusting relationships, manage social stress, and engage confidently with peers, laying the

groundwork for lifelong social competence. This theory provides the emotional foundation and explains why a child feels safe to learn and practice social skills.

## 2.2. Learning as a Social Process

While Attachment Theory explains the emotional context, Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides the instructional mechanism to explain *how* social learning occurs. Cognitive development is an inherently social process and shaped by interactions with "More Knowledgeable Others" (MKOs) that are typical parents in early childhood (Topçiu & Myftiu, 2015). This study centers on two of Vygotsky's concepts: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. The ZPD defines the conceptual space between what a child can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Scaffolding refers to the temporary support the MKO provides to help the child master new skills within their ZPD.

The 3T Scaffolding Model offers a practical application of this theory: **Talk, Teach, and Train**. This model operationalizes scaffolding by showing how parents use dialogue (**Talk**), direct instruction and modeling (**Teach**), and guided practice (**Train**) to systematically build their child's social skills (Landry et al., 2006). As the qualitative findings will demonstrate, the parents in this study intuitively employed these scaffolding techniques, providing a real-world validation of this theoretical framework.

## 2.3. An Integrated Ecological and Communicative Framework

To provide a multi-layered context, this study also draws upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Fitzpatrick and Ritchie's Communication Patterns Theory. Bronfenbrenner's model in 1979 situates the parent-child relationship (microsystem) within a broader network of influences, including the interactions between home and school (mesosystem) and societal changes over time (chronosystem) (Sadownik, 2023). Fitzpatrick and Ritchie's theory (1994) further explains how family communication patterns ranging from high-conversation to high-conformity orientations mediate these environmental influences and shape a child's social learning. Together, these theories create a holistic framework for understanding that parental influence is a dynamic process embedded within wider social and cultural contexts.

## 3. Quantitative Analysis: Mapping the Landscape of Parenting and Social Competence

### 3.1. Methodology Overview

The initial research phase used a quantitative study to find correlations between parenting variables and children's social competence. Researchers surveyed 885 KEMAS preschool parents across three Selangor districts using stratified random sampling for community diversity. The survey instrument was adapted from the Parent Engagement Module 2: Using Positive Discipline to Support Your Child Development (Shehu, 2019) and modified for Malaysia. A three-expert panel validated the content with an 80% understanding score for clarity. A pilot study (N=30) then confirmed reliability and produced a Cronbach's Alpha of .817 for its 20 items (Sekaran and Bugie, 2010).

#### 3.1.1 Hypothesis Development

The hypothesis as stated below:

H1: There is no correlation between authoritarian parenting style and children's social competence.

H2: There is no correlation between authoritative parenting style and children's social competence.

H3: There is no correlation between permissive parenting style and children's social competence.

H4: Parenting styles have no significant impact on children's social competence.

H5: There is no correlation between parents' communication pattern practices and children's social competence.

H6: There is no significant difference in parents' communication pattern practices according to their level of education.

H7: There is no significant difference in parents' communication pattern practices according to their income group.

In this study, the researcher follows the proposal by Allua and Thompson (2009) that it is essential for the researcher to perform a test to determine whether they can reject the null hypothesis. Because this investigation is based on a null hypothesis.

#### 3.2. The Impact of Parenting Styles on Children's Social Skills: A Correlational Analysis

The quantitative data revealed distinct patterns regarding the influence of different parenting styles. The regression analysis confirmed that the authoritative parenting style (Beta = 0.114,  $p = 0.001$ ) significantly enhances children's social competence. This aligns with established literature suggesting that the combination of warmth, responsiveness, and clear boundaries fosters positive social outcomes and emotional regulation (Steinberg et al., 2006). However, the findings regarding the authoritarian style offered a culturally distinct insight. Contrary to the initial hypothesis that it might be detrimental or non-significant, the analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.183$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and a significant predictive impact (Beta = 0.090,  $p = 0.009$ ) on social competence. This result contradicts the common Western narrative that authoritarianism is inherently negative. In the Malaysian context, this significance suggests that elements of high control and strict discipline, when viewed through the lens of *guan* (training) or concern, contribute effectively to a child's ability to navigate social hierarchies and adhere to social norms. Finally, permissive parenting demonstrated the strongest positive beta value (Beta = 0.187,  $p = 0.000$ ). While this style is often associated with a lack of discipline, in this context, it appears that the high responsiveness and warmth inherent in permissive parenting may encourage social confidence and expressiveness in young children, though the long-term implications for self-regulation remain a subject for discussion.

#### 3.3. The Role of Socioeconomic Status: Deconstructing the Influence of Parental Education and Income

One of the most compelling findings from the quantitative analysis was the independence of social competence from socioeconomic variables. A One-Way ANOVA conducted to determine the effect of parental education levels on communication patterns yielded an F-value of 1.489 with a significance of  $p = 0.216$ , indicating no significant difference. Similarly, the analysis of household income groups (Table 2) produced an F-value of 1.326 and a significance value of  $p = 0.265$ . These results confirm that a family's financial standing does not dictate the quality of parent-child communication or the resulting social competence of the child. This suggests that effective parenting strategies are accessible to families across all socioeconomic strata within the KEMAS community.

**Table 1: One-Way ANOVA of parent's communication pattern according to academic level**

Views	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	56.928	3	18.976	1.489	.216
Within Groups	11227.020	881	12.743		
Total	11283.948	884			

Table 1 displays an F-value of 1.489 with a significance value of  $p = .216$ . This p-value exceeds the standard alpha level of 0.05. The analysis confirms that there is no significant difference exists in communication patterns based on parental education. Academic qualifications do not automatically translate to superior communication skills in a child-rearing context. Analysis of household income revealed a similar pattern as parents in the lower-middle bracket (RM1,001 to RM3,000) recorded the highest mean score for communication practices (Mean = 1.67, SD = 0.471) followed by those earning below RM1,000. The highest income group (RM5,000 and above) recorded the lowest mean score

(Mean = 1.50) and this challenges the assumption that higher financial resources inevitably lead to better parental engagement. A second One-Way ANOVA tested the statistical significance of these differences.

**Table 2: One Way ANOVA of parent’s communication patterns according to their group of income in the appearance of their children’s social competence**

Views	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	50.728	3	16.909	1.326	.265
Within Groups	11233.220	881	12.751		
Total	11283.948	884			

Table 2 displays an F-value of 1.326 and have significance value of  $p = .265$  to confirm that the household income does not significantly influence communication patterns. Consistency across education and income variables suggests cultural values within the KEMAS ecosystem play a dominant role in shaping parenting behaviours rather than socioeconomic status. Parenting competence appears as a universal skill set accessible to families regardless of financial or academic standing.

**3.3.1 Summary of Hypothesis Test Result**

The hypothesis test summary as shown below;

Hypothesis	Description	Statistical Outcome	Result
H1	There is no correlation between authoritarian parenting style and children’s social competence.	Significant ( $p < 0.05$ )	Null Rejected
H2	There is no correlation between authoritative parenting style and children’s social competence.	Significant ( $p < 0.05$ )	Null Rejected
H3	There is no correlation between permissive parenting style and children’s social competence.	Significant ( $p < 0.05$ )	Null Rejected
H4	Parenting styles have no significant impact on children’s social competence.	Significant ( $p < 0.05$ )	Null Rejected
H5	There is no correlation between parents’ communication pattern practices and children’s social competence.	Significant ( $p < 0.05$ )	Null Rejected
H6	There is no significant difference in parents’ communication pattern practices according to their level of education.	Not Significant ( $p = .216$ )	Null Accepted
H7	There is no significant difference in parents’ communication pattern practices according to their income group.	Not Significant ( $p = .265$ )	Null Accepted

**4. Qualitative Insights: The Lived Experience of Nurturing Social Competence**

**4.1. Methodology Overview**

The second study phase employed a phenomenological approach to examine parenting experiences. Researchers is selected a purposive sample of eight parents that comprising four mothers and four fathers from the KEMAS community based on active participation. These parents engaged in semi-structured interviews that designed to gather narratives regarding parenting practices and child social behaviours. Data saturation occurred after the eighth interview indicating no new information emerged. The researchers employed member checking and peer debriefing to validate the identified themes.

**4.2. Parental Perceptions of a Socially Competent Child: Key Characteristics**

Thematic analysis of parent interviews have identified six core characteristics that defining a socially competent child. Researchers manually coded transcripts to identify emerging patterns related to parenting behaviours and child social skills. These themes derived from parental experiences offer a practical definition of social competence suited to the cultural context:

1. Cooperation: The ability to work and play well with others. As one parent (R1) observed, "They took turns playing on the slide happily."
2. Communication Skills: The capacity to initiate and sustain positive verbal interactions. One parent (R2) proudly noted, "I saw my son strike up a conversation with another child."
3. Empathy: The ability to understand and share the feelings of another. A parent (R6) described a moment of empathy, stating, "...Ajak understood the importance of easing the worker's burden."
4. Discipline: The internalization of responsibility and self-control. A parent (R8) illustrated this, saying, "She knows it's her responsibility to get ready, and she does it willingly."
5. Autonomy: The willingness to take initiative and act independently in a helpful manner. For instance, one parent (R7) shared, "Without being told, she took the initiative to help serve fruits..."
6. Socialization: The understanding and practice of culturally appropriate social graces. A parent (R7) gave the example, "Lin greeted her grandmother respectfully with a handshake..."

**4.3. The Parental Toolkit: A Thematic Analysis of Activities that Foster Social Skills**

The interviews also uncovered seven key themes related to the specific, everyday activities parents use to cultivate these characteristics in their children. These activities form a practical "toolkit" for fostering social competence :

1. Instituting Discipline: This involves setting clear, consistent rules and explaining the rationale behind them. As parent R1 stated, "We have clear rules about behaviour and always explain why they are important."
2. Fostering Communication: This includes practices like active listening, encouraging children to express themselves, and providing positive verbal reinforcement. For example, parent R2 shared, "We provide verbal praise to our children when they adhere to this guideline."

3. Promoting Social Engagement: Parents create opportunities for their children to interact with peers in various settings. Parent R5 explained, "We prioritize regular trips to the playground every weekend, where he can meet other children."
4. Articulating Emotions: This involves modelling emotional awareness and encouraging children to name their feelings and recognize emotions in others. As parent R7 described, "We encourage all our children... to express their emotions and to recognize how others feel..."
5. Instilling Cultural/Religious Values: Parents consciously teach values that promote prosocial behaviour, such as respect, harmony, and consideration for others. Parent R4 emphasized this, saying, "It's important for me that he grows up knowing how to live in harmony..."
6. Offering Support: This encompasses providing encouragement, showing gratitude, and being an emotionally available resource for the child.
7. Cultivating Self-Esteem: Parents actively work to build their child's confidence, which in turn empowers them to engage socially.

These findings demonstrate that effective parenting is not an abstract style but a collection of intentional, daily practices. The synergy between these activities creates an environment where social skills can flourish.

## 5. Discussion: Synthesizing Quantitative Patterns and Qualitative Narratives

### 5.1. The Primacy of the Authoritative Approach: A Universal Finding in a Malaysian Context

This study's mixed-methods design provides a powerful synthesis of findings. The quantitative data strongly affirm the primacy of the authoritative parenting style, a conclusion that aligns with the global body of developmental research (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010). However, this study goes a step further by using qualitative narratives to illustrate what this "authoritative" style looks like in the daily lives of Malaysian families. It represents not merely a theoretical construct but a practical blend of firm, consistent boundaries and high levels of emotional warmth and open communication. The parental activities of "Instituting Discipline" prove effective precisely because parents pair them with "Fostering Communication" and "Articulating Emotions." A parent who sets clear rules but also explains the reasons for them and validates their child's feelings is practicing authoritative parenting in its most effective form. This integration of quantitative patterns and qualitative descriptions provides a holistic and actionable understanding of the most beneficial parenting approach.

### 5.2. Beyond Demographics: Interpreting the Non-Significant Impact of Education and Income

The non-significant quantitative findings regarding parental education and income present a puzzle that the qualitative data helps to solve. The qualitative theme of "Instilling Cultural/Religious Values" emerged as a potent and consistent practice across the interviewed parents. This study proposes that these shared values which emphasize community, respect, empathy, and social harmony act as a powerful, unifying framework for parenting within this community. This "cultural capital" may override the influence of economic or educational capital, providing all parents, regardless of their socioeconomic status, with a common toolkit for fostering prosocial behaviour (Elsayed, 2024). The desire for a child to "grow up knowing how to live in harmony" (R4) represents a value that transcends income brackets and educational levels, potentially explaining the consistency in parenting outcomes the quantitative data observed.

### 5.3. Toward a Holistic Model of Intentional Parenting for Social Competence

The combined findings of this study point toward an integrated model of intentional parenting. Effective parenting does not involve rigidly adhering to a single style but is an adaptive process of scaffolding a child's development. By mapping the seven parental activities onto the 3T Scaffolding Model, a clear and practical framework emerges. Parents use open dialogue (Talk), direct instruction and modeling of values (Teach), and guided social experiences like playground visits (Train) to help their children develop the six key characteristics of social competence. This model demonstrates that the parents in this study were intuitively acting as effective developmental "coaches," providing a powerful, evidence-based roadmap for other parents and educators.

The following table provides a direct synthesis of the study's quantitative and qualitative findings, illustrating how broad parenting styles manifest through specific parental activities and result in observable characteristics of social competence in children

**Table 1: A Mixed-Methods Synthesis of Parenting Practices and Social Competence Outcomes**

Parenting Dimension (from Quantitative Analysis)	Key Statistical Finding	Related Parental Activities (from Qualitative Themes)	Illustrative Parental Quote	Observed Child Characteristic (from Qualitative Themes)
Authoritative Style	Markedly enhances social competence.	Instituting Discipline, Fostering Communication, Articulating Emotions, Offering Support, Cultivating Self-Esteem.	"We have clear rules about behaviour and always explain why they are important." (R1)	Discipline, Communication Skills, Empathy, Autonomy.
Authoritarian Style	Marginally non-significant positive correlation (p=.055).	Instituting Discipline, Instilling Cultural/Religious Values.	"We have clear rules about behaviour..." (R1)	Discipline, Socialization.

## 6. Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The findings of this research have significant implications for parents, educators, and policymakers in Malaysia. They provide a clear, culturally relevant, and evidence-based framework for enhancing the social competence of preschool children.

### For Parents

The central message empowers parents. Income or education do not determine effective parenting; rather, intentional, learnable skills do. By focusing on the seven identified activities, balancing clear discipline with open communication, creating social opportunities, modeling emotional intelligence, and instilling positive values, parents can become the primary architects of their children's social success.

### For Educators (KEMAS)

These findings provide a robust foundation for developing parent education and engagement programs. Educators can design workshops and resources around the 3T Scaffolding Model and the seven parental activities. Such programs would prove highly effective because the study grounds them in the lived experiences and shared values of the KEMAS community itself, rather than importing them from a different cultural context. KEMAS has already demonstrated a strategic approach to empowering parents through its Parenting and Education Workshops and the Children's Potential Day curriculum, which these specific findings can further enhance (Saari et al., 2022).

### For Policymakers

The non-significant impact of socioeconomic status represents a critical finding that should guide policy. It suggests that universal parenting support programs focused on skill-building are likely to be more effective and equitable than programs targeted only at specific income or education groups. Investing in parental literacy and providing accessible resources that promote authoritative parenting practices can yield

significant returns in the form of a more socially and emotionally prepared generation. This aligns with national goals to improve the quality of early childhood education and ensure all children are ready for primary school (Mamat et al., 2023).

In conclusion, this study contributes a nuanced and holistic understanding of how Malaysian families nurture social competence. It moves beyond broad correlations to uncover the specific, daily interactions that form the bedrock of a child's social world. By demonstrating the power of intentional, adaptive, and warm parenting, this research reaffirms that the home is the first and most important classroom for social learning, and parents are its most indispensable teachers.

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