

# Between Affect and Interaction: A Thematic Literature Review on the Determinants of Children's Social-Emotional Development

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates factors influencing early childhood social-emotional development through a thematic literature review of 25 recent scholarly sources published between 2018 and 2025. A systematic search was conducted across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, Elsevier, MDPI, Sage Journals, and Taylor & Francis. The collected studies were analyzed using thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns and key determinants. The results reveal four principal categories affecting social-emotional development: (1) internal affective factors, (2) external social interaction factors, (3) contextual and environmental influences, and (4) the integration of affective and interactive dimensions. The findings indicate that children's social-emotional development is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also significantly by the quality of interactions with caregivers, peers, and the broader learning environment. In particular, supportive and responsive relationships emerge as critical components in fostering emotional regulation and social competence. The study concludes that a holistic approach, integrating both affective and social interactional aspects, is essential for optimizing early childhood development. These findings have important implications for educational practice and policy, highlighting the need for contextualized, evidence-based social-emotional learning models that are responsive to children's developmental needs.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional development in early childhood has a significant long-term impact on academic development, social relationships, and mental well-being. Research emphasizes the importance of social-emotional skills as a foundation for academic success (Kuswanti et al., 2024), while Fitriyah et al. (2024) show that early intervention focused on social-emotional skills can produce sustainable positive changes. In addition, research (Krisnaningsih et al., 2024) highlights the importance of a supportive family environment in strengthening children's social-emotional skills. Overall, appropriate

intervention and support from an early age is very important for a child's social-emotional development, which in turn contributes to the child's future academic readiness and social success.

The social-emotional development of early childhood has a crucial role in determining readiness to learn, the quality of social relationships, and long-term mental health. A study by (Krisnaningsih et al., 2024) shows that early childhood education support in developing social-emotional skills, including through the wise use of technology, can increase children's ability to adapt emotionally and socially in the learning environment. (Muali & Fatmawati, 2022) added that active parental involvement in the educational process contributes significantly to the formation of children's attitudes of empathy, cooperation and self-control, which are the foundations of healthy social relations. The interactions and socialization that occur within the family have a dominant influence on children's emotional development. Meanwhile, a meta-analysis by (Azwira et al., 2024) proves that social-emotional intervention programs not only have a positive impact on children's interpersonal skills, but also have an effect on increasing academic achievement and reducing the risk of emotional disorders in adolescence.

Children's social-emotional development is influenced by a combination of internal (affective) and external (social interaction) factors. (Mulyana et al., 2017) shows that children's ability to manage emotions such as controlling anger and expressing empathy comes from aspects of temperament and self-regulation that develop from an early age. On the other hand, the social environment such as upbringing and relationships with the adults around them also play a big role. (Burleson & Kunkel, 2002) found that children who received emotional support from their families showed better social skills. In addition, (Xiang et al., 2022) emphasized that positive interactions in the school environment, including relationships with teachers and peers, strengthen children's cooperation and empathy abilities. This confirms that social-emotional development is the result of dynamic interactions between a child's character and the quality of his or her social environment.

However, children's social-emotional development is not only influenced by internal characteristics such as temperament and emotional regulation, but also by external dynamics such as parenting patterns, interactions with teachers, peers, and environmental context (Denham, 2006). This complexity presents challenges in formulating appropriate intervention strategies and policies, because each factor interacts with the others dynamically. While various studies have examined these aspects separately, to date there are still limitations in synthesizing findings that are able to fully integrate the dimensions of affection (internal) and social interaction (external) (Denham & Brown, 2010). This lack of integration can hamper the comprehensive understanding needed by educators, parents and policy makers to support optimal child development.

In this context, literature synthesis is an important approach that can bridge various scientific findings that have so far been fragmented. Thematic review literature studies allow researchers to identify patterns, gaps, and connections between research results and present a more integrated conceptual framework (Kurniawan et al., 2023). This approach also provides theoretical and practical contributions through critical analysis of the available Evidence.

Reflecting on the various findings, it becomes clear that efforts to understand and develop children's social-emotional development cannot be done partially. The complex context of children's lives demands a comprehensive and adaptive approach, which not only considers the child's individual factors but also the social networks and environment in which the child grows. Thus, integrated literature can be a solid foundation for formulating holistic, humanistic, and evidence-based educational strategies. Early childhood education is not only about transferring knowledge, but also about forming whole humans who are able to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions, while building healthy social relationships.

This research aims to identify and classify the determinants of children's social-emotional development based on relevant national and international scientific literature. This study specifically groups the findings into four major themes, namely: affective factors (internal), social interaction factors

(external), contextual and environmental factors, and integration between affection and interaction. Through this approach, it is hoped that it can provide a more holistic understanding while developing conceptual and practical implications in the context of early childhood education. The structure of this research includes literature collection methods, thematic analysis, and synthesis results in four main themes, as well as discussion, conclusions, and follow-up recommendations.

## 2. METHODS

This research uses a thematic literature review approach with the aim of identifying and analyzing in depth the factors that influence children's social-emotional development. Literature reviews were chosen because they allow authors to summarize, classify, and synthesize various relevant research findings in this field, while building a comprehensive understanding based on existing scientific evidence (Snyder, 2019)

### 2.1 Searching Strategy

The literature was collected through a systematic search of six academic databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, Elsevier (ScienceDirect), MDPI, Sage Journals, and Taylor & Francis. The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2018 and 2025 and used keywords related to early childhood and social-emotional development. The initial search identified 112 articles. After removing duplicate records (27 articles), 85 articles were screened based on their titles and abstracts. From this stage, 48 articles were excluded because they were not directly relevant to early childhood social-emotional development. A full-text review of the remaining 37 articles led to the exclusion of 12 studies due to limited methodological clarity or weak relevance to the focus of this review. In total, 25 articles were retained for final analysis. The selected articles must be related to keywords and articles that are irrelevant or do not meet the criteria can be excluded from the analysis (Kurnia et al., 2025)

### 2.2 Inclusion Criteria

After collecting scientific journals, the next step is to carry out filtering based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. This filtering ensures that only articles that have significant contributions and clear methodology will be analyzed further (Kurnia et al., 2025). Articles that are not relevant, do not have full access, and do not fit the key themes are eliminated in this process.

The coding strategy of each selected article was analyzed using a descriptive thematic approach. The author identified and marked important elements such as research objectives, methodology, and main findings of each study. This process uses the *technique open coding*, where the initial code is developed from the article content without

### 2.3 Data Analysis and Coding Process

Next, the codes are reduced and categorized in *axial coding* into four major themes based on the interconnectedness of their meanings:

1. Affective (internal) factors include temperament, self-regulation, and basic emotional development.
2. Social interaction factors (external) include the child's relationship with parents, teachers, and peers.
3. Contextual and environmental factors, such as cultural influences, technology, and educational conditions.
4. Integration of affect and interaction studies that combine internal and external dimensions interdependently.

To maintain the reliability of the analysis, the coding process was carried out alternately by two independent reviewers. Comparison of the initial coding results was carried out in a discussion session

to reach an agreement. The level of agreement between reviewers reached 88%, indicating a high level of consistency in the interpretation of the themes.

The analysis was conducted using a descriptive thematic approach, where each article was analyzed based on the research objectives, theoretical framework, methods, and main results. The data were then grouped into major themes that reflect the determinants of children's social-emotional development, namely: Affective factors (internal), Social interaction factors (external), Contextual and environmental factors, and Integration of affection and interaction.

The analysis was carried out using a descriptive thematic approach, where each article is analyzed based on research objectives, theoretical framework, methods, and main results. The data is then grouped into major themes that reflect the determining factors of children's social-emotional development, namely: Affective factors (internal), Social interaction factors (external), Contextual and environmental factors, and Integration of affection and interaction

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of a synthesis of scientific research analyzed, found that the social-emotional development of early childhood is determined by various factors which can be grouped into four main themes, namely affective factors (internal), social interaction factors (external), contextual and environmental factors, as well as integration between affection and interaction. Each of these groups of factors has an interrelated contribution in shaping children's capacity to understand, express and manage emotions, and build healthy social relationships. The following table presents the research findings along with the practical implications that can be drawn from each factor studied as follows.

**Table 1.** The four main themes, determining factors, main findings, and practical implications

Theme	Core Focus	Synthesized Evidence	Educational Implications
Affective Factors (Internal)	Emotional regulation, empathy, attachment	Secure emotional bonds and self-regulation consistently support adaptive social behavior and emotional stability	Strengthening emotion-focused parenting and early emotional scaffolding
Social Interaction Factors (External)	Parent-child, teacher-child, peer relationships	Warm and responsive interactions enhance empathy, cooperation, and social confidence	Teacher professional development and positive parenting practices
Contextual & Environmental Factors	Learning climate, culture, digital exposure	Supportive, culturally responsive environments foster emotional security and social engagement	Inclusive classroom design and guided digital use
Integration of Affection & Interaction	Holistic SEL, play-based experiences	Integrated emotional and social experiences produce stronger and more sustainable outcomes	Contextualized SEL through play and meaningful interaction

The social-emotional development of early childhood is an important foundation for the formation of a psychosocially healthy person in the future. Children's ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions, as well as establish healthy social relationships, develops through a complex process of interaction between internal and external factors. The results of current research show that individual affective factors, social interactions, contextual environments, and the synergy between the three play a central role in determining the direction and quality of children's social-emotional development.

### 3.1 Affective Factors (Internal)

Affective factors relate to a child's internal ability to regulate emotions and respond adaptively to social experiences. Research (Hu, 2024) and (Santanyi & Suryanti, 2024) shows that children who have good self-regulation skills tend to show positive social behavior such as empathy, sharing ability, and cooperation. This ability is strongly influenced by emotional closeness to parents, especially secure bonds formed at an early age. (Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2022) added that children who tend to withdraw socially or have difficult temperaments are often treated with more stressful parenting patterns, which can actually worsen their difficulties in adapting socially.

Affection-based interventions such as children's yoga programs, mindfulness, and edutainment approaches have also been shown to be effective in strengthening children's emotional regulation. (Bazzano et al., 2023) show that participation in a regular yoga program can increase self-control and reduce anxiety symptoms. Meanwhile, (Khadijah et al., 2021) emphasized the importance of a fun learning approach to stimulate children's affective aspects optimally, especially in the learning context in elementary schools and kindergartens. Thus, an approach that pays attention to the unique emotions and character of children is the key to building a strong social-emotional foundation.

### 3.2 Social Interaction Factors (External)

Apart from internal factors, the dynamics of social interactions between children and their environment are also the main determinants of social-emotional development. In the family environment, parenting that is responsive, full of warmth, and dialogue plays a very important role in shaping children's social skills (Suprijanto et al., 2022). (Bagus Rezki, 2021) found that families were able to build Open communication with children will grow children's self-confidence and ability to solve social conflicts in a healthy manner.

Furthermore, the role of teachers as main actors in the early childhood education environment cannot be ignored. (Damayanti & Syafril, 2024) emphasize that teachers not only act as academic facilitators, but also as emotional and social models. Through learning strategies that prioritize social interaction, such as group discussions, collaborative games, and collaborative reflection, teachers are able to create a learning environment that supports the development of children's empathy, resilience, and social awareness.

On the other hand, the role of peers is also significant, especially in shaping children's abilities to understand other people's perspectives, solve social problems, and build attachments outside the family sphere. However, challenges arise when children live in a family context with a permissive parenting style, or when they are cared for by institutions (such as daycare) that do not provide adequate emotional support. (Izzati et al., 2024) remind that children in such conditions often show aggressive or withdrawn behavior as a response to a lack of meaningful interaction.

### 3.3 Contextual and Environmental Factors

Contextual factors such as the quality of the physical environment, cultural values, and exposure to digital media are important dimensions in shaping children's social-emotional experiences. (Kirk & Jay, 2018) and T (Tamblyn et al., 2023) emphasize that a child-friendly learning environment – with adequate lighting, a clear activity structure, and a safe atmosphere – can increase emotional stability and strengthen children's sense of security in social exploration.

However, new challenges arise along with the widespread use of digital technology from an early age. Research (Aurora et al., 2024) reveals that using devices without assistance can reduce the frequency of face-to-face interactions, reduce children's ability to read emotional expressions, and reduce empathy. Therefore, regulation of the use of digital media in children's lives is needed as well as the integration of educational media that supports positive social-emotional development.

On the other hand, cultural and community environments have great potential in supporting this development. Community-based programs such as "Star of the Week", play-based social emotional

classes, and evidence-based SEL approaches have been shown to improve children's social skills, reduce aggressive behavior, and strengthen interpersonal relationships (San et al., 2021); (Aksoy & Gresham, 2024). This emphasizes the importance of collaboration between educational institutions, families, and communities in providing a conducive social and emotional growth space.

### ***3.4 Integration of Affection and Interaction***

The final synthesis emphasizes the importance of integration between individual affective aspects and contextual social interaction experiences. Research by Bell et al. (2024) and Sidqia et al. (2024) shows that concrete experiences such as role-playing, emotional discussions, and the use of emotional language in learning can help children understand and express their emotions in a healthy way. Through this strategy, children not only learn to recognize their own emotions, but also develop the ability to understand and respond to the emotions of others.

Additionally, reflective play experiences such as Biodanza and cooperative play provide space for children to build trust, empathy, and the ability to solve social problems collaboratively (Zilka, 2023). Learning models that integrate local values, participatory activities, and social-emotional practices have been shown to strengthen the connection between emotions and social interactions. (Rachman et al., 2023) and Chen et al. (2024) concluded that the success of a social-emotional intervention program is largely determined by the ability of the educational environment and family to respond flexibly to the individual characteristics of children. In other words, the formation of social-emotional competence cannot be done separately, but must be a dynamic process that involves the entire ecosystem of child development.

### ***3.5 Discussion***

The findings of this thematic literature review demonstrate that early childhood social-emotional development is a multidimensional construct shaped by the dynamic interaction of internal, relational, and contextual factors. The synthesis of 25 selected studies reveals four interrelated domains— affective (internal), social interaction (external), contextual-environmental, and integrative processes—which collectively influence children's ability to regulate emotions, develop empathy, and establish meaningful social relationships. These findings reinforce the perspective that social-emotional competence is not acquired in isolation but emerges through continuous interactions between the child and their environment.

Affective factors, particularly emotional regulation, temperament, and attachment, constitute the foundational layer of social-emotional development. Children who demonstrate strong self-regulation and secure attachment tend to exhibit more adaptive social behaviors, including empathy, cooperation, and prosocial engagement (Hu, 2024; Santyani & Suryanti, 2024). This aligns with the broader theoretical framework that emphasizes emotional security as a prerequisite for social exploration and learning (Denham, 2006). Furthermore, interventions such as mindfulness and play-based emotional learning have been shown to strengthen these internal capacities, promoting resilience and reducing anxiety (Bazzano et al., 2023). However, children with more challenging temperamental traits may require more responsive and adaptive caregiving approaches, as negative parenting responses can exacerbate socio-emotional difficulties (Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2022).

In addition to internal factors, social interaction plays a critical role in shaping children's emotional and social competencies. The quality of relationships with parents, teachers, and peers significantly influences children's ability to interpret social cues, manage conflicts, and develop social awareness. Warm, responsive parenting has been consistently associated with higher levels of emotional intelligence and social competence (Suprijanto et al., 2022), while open communication within families fosters confidence and problem-solving skills (Bagus Rezki, 2021). In educational settings, teachers function not only as facilitators of learning but also as emotional role models whose behaviors directly affect children's emotional security and classroom engagement (Damayanti & Syafril, 2024). Peer

interactions further contribute to the development of perspective-taking and cooperation, although insufficient emotional support in caregiving environments may lead to maladaptive behaviors such as aggression or withdrawal (Izzati et al., 2024).

Contextual and environmental factors provide an additional layer of influence, highlighting the importance of learning environments, cultural values, and digital exposure in shaping children's social-emotional experiences. Supportive and well-structured educational environments enhance children's sense of safety and engagement, thereby facilitating emotional stability and social participation (Tamblyn et al., 2023; Kirk & Jay, 2018). At the same time, increasing exposure to digital technology presents both opportunities and challenges. While digital tools can support learning, excessive or unguided use may reduce face-to-face interactions and hinder the development of empathy and emotional recognition (Aurora et al., 2024). Moreover, cultural contexts significantly influence how emotions are expressed and regulated. In collectivist societies, for instance, emotional expression is often shaped by values of social harmony and communal responsibility, an aspect that remains underrepresented in existing research.

The integrative dimension of this review underscores that optimal social-emotional development occurs when affective and interactional factors are addressed holistically. Evidence suggests that learning experiences incorporating emotional awareness, language development, and social interaction—such as role-playing and cooperative play—enhance both emotional understanding and interpersonal skills (Bell et al., 2024; Zilka, 2023). Holistic approaches that integrate family, school, and community contexts have been shown to produce more sustainable developmental outcomes (Rachman et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024). This supports the argument that social-emotional learning (SEL) programs should not be implemented as isolated interventions but rather embedded within children's everyday experiences.

Despite these contributions, several limitations are evident within the reviewed literature. A significant proportion of studies are conducted in Western contexts and rely predominantly on cross-sectional designs, limiting the generalizability and the ability to capture developmental changes over time. Additionally, there is a lack of representation of children with diverse needs and backgrounds, which restricts the inclusiveness of current theoretical and practical models. These limitations suggest the need for caution in applying generalized frameworks across different cultural and educational contexts.

Overall, this discussion highlights that early childhood social-emotional development is best understood as a relational and context-dependent process. Effective support requires not only structured interventions but also emotionally responsive relationships and environments that recognize children as active participants in their own development. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and culturally responsive studies to better capture the complexity and diversity of children's social-emotional growth.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This thematic literature review concludes that children's social-emotional development grows from the close connection between emotions, relationships, and the environments in which children live and learn. Emotional regulation, empathy, and secure attachment provide an important internal foundation, but these abilities develop meaningfully only when children experience warm, consistent, and supportive interactions with parents, teachers, and peers. The findings suggest that approaches to social-emotional development should not treat emotional skills and social interactions as separate domains. Instead, children benefit most from holistic practices that integrate emotional understanding, relational experiences, and culturally responsive environments. Frameworks such as CASEL remain useful, but they need to be adapted to reflect local values, family structures, and educational realities.

This review is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and the dominance of studies conducted in Western contexts. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of children's social-emotional experiences across cultures and developmental conditions. Future research should therefore focus on longitudinal, inclusive, and context-sensitive studies, particularly in underrepresented regions. In practice, supporting children's social-emotional development means creating spaces where children feel emotionally safe, socially valued, and genuinely understood. Such environments allow children not only to learn about emotions, but also to grow as empathetic, resilient, and socially connected individuals.

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