

Parents' Perceptions of Socio-Emotional Development of Children Aged 3 to 5 Years in Bangladesh

By

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A thesis submitted to Brac Institute of Educational Development in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Early Childhood Development

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Abstract

This qualitative study examines parents' perceptions and practices related to the socio-emotional development of children aged 3 to 5 years in urban Bangladesh. Drawing on six in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions with mothers and fathers in Dhaka, the findings reveal that while parents acknowledge the importance of socio-emotional growth, their approaches are shaped by gender roles, cultural expectations, and environmental constraints. Mothers tend to nurture emotional development through storytelling, conversation, and moral guidance, whereas fathers emphasize structured discipline, calm modeling, or delayed intervention. Extended family members also contribute to children's emotional learning, though intergenerational differences often lead to inconsistencies. Parents report facing challenges such as limited time, insufficient knowledge, and the disruptive effects of high screen exposure on emotional engagement. The study underscores the need for culturally responsive, father-inclusive, and family-oriented programs, the integration of socio-emotional learning into early childhood education, and practical guidance on managing digital exposure. Overall, the findings provide valuable insights for promoting emotional literacy, self-regulation, and social competence among young children in urban Bangladeshi contexts.

Keywords: Socio-emotional development, parental perceptions, early childhood, caregiving practices, father involvement, screen time, cultural context.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to **Dr. Moriom Inna Mam**, whom I consider as my mentor whose exceptional guidance and support have been invaluable throughout this journey. Her mentorship not only shaped my professional growth but also helped me maintain a balance between work and studies. With her encouragement, I have been able to successfully complete my Master's degree.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Form
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
ECD	Early Childhood Development
IDI	In-Depth Interview
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
BRAC IED	BRAC Institute of Educational Development
LMIC	Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Glossary

Term	Definition
Socio-Emotional Development (SED)	Integration of emotional awareness and social competence, shaping children's identity, self-regulation, and peer interactions.
Emotional Literacy	Ability to identify, understand, express, and manage emotions effectively.
Emotional Dysregulation	Difficulty in controlling or responding to emotional experiences appropriately.
Paternal Involvement	Fathers' active participation in caregiving and socio-emotional guidance.
Intergenerational Caregiving	Child-rearing contributions from multiple generations, particularly grandparents, within a household.
Emotion Coaching	Parental strategy involves labeling, validating, and guiding children's emotional experiences.
Cultural Norms	Shared beliefs, values, and practices that influence parenting and emotional expression.
Gendered Expectations	Socially prescribed roles that shape how boys and girls express emotions and behave.
Screen Exposure / Digital Devices	Use of technology that may impact face-to-face social and emotional interactions.
Peer Interaction	Engagement with other children that supports social learning, cooperation, and empathy.
Play-Based Learning	Experiential learning through structured or unstructured play that enhances socio-emotional skills.
Parenting Practices	Specific strategies parents use to support or guide children's socio-emotional development.
Parent-Child Bonding	Emotional connection and trust fostering security and social-emotional growth.
Emotional Validation	Acknowledging and accepting children's feelings as understandable and important.
Behavioral Guidance	Strategies to manage or shape children's actions while balancing emotional needs.

Chapter I: Introduction & Background

1.1 Introduction

Socio-emotional development in early childhood is foundational for overall well-being and lifelong success. Emotional development refers to the ability of a child to recognize, express, and regulate their feelings in healthy ways (Denham, 2006; Saarni, 1999). This includes not only understanding one's own emotions but also interpreting others' emotional cues and responding appropriately. Social development, in contrast, involves the acquisition of interpersonal skills such as cooperation, conflict resolution, empathy, and the capacity to form and maintain meaningful relationships (Rubin et al., 2006; Thompson, 2022). When considered together, socio-emotional development encompasses the integration of emotional awareness with socially competent behavior, shaping a child's identity, self-regulation, and peer interaction (Denham & Brown, 2010; Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Morris, 2002; Jones, Zaslow, Darling-Churchill, & Halle, 2016).

Building on this foundation, the years from age 3 to 5 represent a particularly sensitive period for developing these skills. During this time, children begin to exhibit more advanced emotional expressions, such as pride, guilt, shame, and empathy (Brownell & Kopp, 2007), while also learning to regulate impulses, delay gratification, and engage in cooperative play (Denham et al., 2019; Spinrad et al., 2023). Such abilities are critical for success in both formal schooling and broader life experiences (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Center on the Developing Child, 2020).

At the heart of this developmental journey, parents play a pivotal role. The ways they model emotions, provide emotional validation, respond to misbehavior, or encourage social learning directly shape the child's emerging socio-emotional competencies (Gottman et al., 1997; Eisenberg et al., 2015). Importantly, parental perception—the way parents interpret their children's behavior, emotional expressions, and developmental needs—strongly influences the strategies they use to support their children's socio-emotional growth. These perceptions are shaped not only by formal knowledge of child development but also by education, income, cultural values, exposure to early childhood development (ECD) resources, and intergenerational parenting practices (Raval & Martini, 2011; Bornstein, 2022).

In the context of urban Bangladesh, these dynamics become especially complex. Rapid urbanization, increased access to digital technology, changing family structures, and highly competitive academic environments have transformed traditional parenting practices (Kabir & Sultana, 2023; Haque & Imtiaz, 2021). Parents often face the dual challenge of fostering socio-emotional development while preparing children for academic expectations and navigating a screen-saturated environment. A 2024 UNICEF Bangladesh report highlights that over 60% of preschool-aged children in Dhaka are exposed to digital devices daily, often replacing critical face-to-face social interaction and play, which are essential for emotional literacy and cooperative behavior.

Moreover, cultural and religious norms further influence parenting practices in urban contexts. Emotional expression, particularly in boys, may be discouraged, reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting opportunities for open emotional communication (Rashid & Hossain, 2016; BRAC IED, 2023). Extended family members, including grandparents, often play an active role in shaping children's emotional and social behavior, which can be both supportive and, at times, inconsistent with parental expectations (Hossain & Mannan, 2023).

Within these shifting family dynamics, fathers and mothers experience their roles differently. Fathers, historically less involved in hands-on caregiving, are increasingly participating in emotional and educational activities in urban households, yet their approaches often reflect tension between nurturing intentions and culturally prescribed disciplinary roles (Choudhury & Islam, 2023). Mothers, conversely, remain central to daily emotional interactions, frequently using storytelling, conversation, and guidance rooted in cultural or religious teachings (Shanmukh et al., 2023; Zaman et al., 2023).

These complexities have been further heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Disrupted routines, reduced peer interactions, heightened parental stress, and increased reliance on digital devices have all contributed to emotional and behavioral difficulties in young children (Uddin et al., 2021; Karim & Begum, 2024). Despite growing advocacy for emotional learning through global frameworks such as the CASEL model (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020) and the Nurturing Care Framework (WHO, UNICEF & World Bank,

2018), practical knowledge about how parents in Bangladesh, particularly in urban areas, perceive and respond to their children's socio-emotional development remains limited.

Consequently, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring parents' perceptions of socio-emotional development of children aged 3 to 5 years in urban Bangladesh. By focusing on their understanding, daily practices, emotional interpretations, and challenges, the research aims to capture a holistic picture of caregiving. Moreover, by including both mothers and fathers, it highlights gendered differences, the influence of extended family, and the impact of urban environmental factors such as screen exposure and limited play spaces. The findings are expected to inform culturally relevant, context-sensitive interventions that enhance emotional literacy, social competence, and overall well-being for preschool-aged children in Bangladesh.

While socio-emotional development is recognized globally as essential for healthy childhood, the understanding and prioritization of this domain within Bangladeshi households remain inconsistent and underexplored. Parents often focus on academic milestones, hygiene, or behavior management while underestimating the importance of emotional guidance and social skill-building (Denham et al., 2012; Spinrad et al., 2023). This misalignment can lead to missed developmental opportunities, especially during the critical 3–5-year age window when socio-emotional capacities begin to solidify.

Furthermore, parental perceptions play a determining role in how a child's behavior is interpreted and addressed. However, many Bangladeshi caregivers, particularly in urban settings, report uncertainty when it comes to identifying emotional distress, supporting emotional expression, or encouraging social adaptability (BRAC IED, 2023; Kabir & Sultana, 2023). For instance, emotional outbursts may be interpreted as misbehavior, or shyness may be mistaken for weakness, leading to punitive or dismissive responses rather than empathy or guidance.

In addition to these perception gaps, the rapid expansion of screen media has further complicated parent–child interactions. Digital devices are increasingly used to calm or occupy children, limiting direct emotional engagement and parent-led social learning (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016; Hadi et al., 2022). Parents themselves often express concern over excessive screen use but lack alternative strategies to engage children constructively (Siddiqua & Mahmud,

2021). Moreover, children who spend long hours on screens may show signs of emotional dysregulation, delayed language development, and limited peer interaction (UNICEF, 2020).

Alongside these issues, the limited involvement of fathers in emotion-focused parenting conversations presents another challenge. Though present in caregiving roles, many fathers in Bangladesh still struggle with social expectations that equate masculinity with emotional restraint. As a result, they may downplay or avoid emotional conversations with their children, weakening opportunities for positive modeling and support (Choudhury & Islam, 2023).

Taken together, these factors highlight a significant gap in knowledge and practice. There remains a lack of context-specific research addressing how Bangladeshi parents, both mothers and fathers, interpret and respond to their children's emotional and social needs. Without such understanding, policy efforts and ECD programs risk being misaligned with real household dynamics.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how parents of children aged 3 to 5 years in urban Bangladesh perceive their children's socio-emotional development. It focuses on the ways parents interpret children's emotions and behaviors, the strategies they use to support emotional growth, and the challenges they encounter within family and societal contexts. By capturing these perspectives and practices, the study seeks to generate evidence that can inform culturally sensitive, family-oriented interventions to strengthen parent-child emotional connections and promote socio-emotional competence in early childhood. In doing so, it also examines whether parenting follows any fixed, culturally relevant guidelines or is largely shaped by contextual practices and everyday experiences.

1.4 Significance and Justification of the Study

This study is significant because it provides evidence to inform culturally sensitive, family-centered strategies for supporting socio-emotional development in early childhood. Findings can guide the design of parent education programs, awareness campaigns, and national initiatives in early childhood care and education (ECCE) that prioritize emotional learning

alongside cognitive development. By highlighting both maternal and paternal contributions, the study promotes inclusive approaches to caregiving and offers practical insights for strengthening parent-child emotional connections. Additionally, documenting challenges such as digital exposure, time constraints, and evolving family roles can help policymakers and practitioners develop interventions that are responsive to contemporary urban family life in Bangladesh.

The study is justified by the limited research on socio-emotional development in the Bangladeshi context, where early childhood policies and programs primarily emphasize academic skills (OECD, 2021; BRAC IED, 2023). While mothers' caregiving roles are relatively well-documented, fathers' involvement in emotional development remains underexplored despite its importance for children's socio-emotional competence (Choudhury & Islam, 2023). Furthermore, urban families face new challenges, including professional pressures and increased digital distractions, which affect parent-child interactions and caregiving practices (UNICEF Bangladesh, 2024). By addressing these gaps, the study provides evidence to inform interventions, policies, and programs tailored to the realities of Bangladeshi families.

1.5. Research Questions

1. What is parents' understanding of socio-emotional development in children aged 3 to 5?
2. What ways do parents support their children's socio-emotional development during early childhood?
3. What difficulties do parents face in helping their children develop socio-emotional skills?

1.6. Operational Definitions

This section presents the operational definitions of the key concepts used in the study, outlining how terms such as socio-emotional development, emotional regulation, and caregiving practices are specifically defined and applied within the research framework.

- **Socio-Emotional Development** – In this research, socio-emotional development refers to how children aged 3–5 years recognize, express, and regulate emotions; build relationships with peers and adults; show empathy; and exercise self-control in everyday family and preschool environments (Denham et al., 2012; BRAC IED, 2023).

- **Emotional Regulation** – Emotional regulation is described as a child’s capacity to appropriately manage emotional experiences, which includes calming down when distressed, expressing emotions in verbal or non-verbal ways, and adjusting behaviors according to social expectations (Thompson, 2022; Spinrad et al., 2023).
- **Parents’ Perception** – Parents’ perception refers to the beliefs, interpretations, and viewpoints parents hold about their children’s social and emotional behaviors, and how these understandings shape parenting choices and caregiving practices (Rashid & Hossain, 2016; Haque & Imtiaz, 2021).
- **Caregiving Practices** – Caregiving practices are defined as the concrete strategies and actions parents or primary caregivers use to foster socio-emotional growth in children. These include nurturing interactions, storytelling, play activities, guidance on values, and discipline methods (Siddiqua & Janus, 2017; BRAC IED, 2023).
- **Digital Dependency** – Digital dependency is understood as a child’s habitual reliance on electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, or television, often with parental mediation which limits opportunities for direct social interactions or emotionally supportive engagement (Kabir & Sultana, 2023; Hadi et al., 2023).
- **Emotional Expression** – Emotional expression refers to the verbal and non-verbal ways through which children communicate feelings such as joy, sadness, anger, or fear, as observed and interpreted by parents (Denham et al., 2012; Thompson, 2022).
- **Empathy** – Empathy is operationalized as a child’s ability to notice, comprehend, and respond sensitively to the emotions of others, reflected in gestures, verbal acknowledgment, or supportive actions during social interactions (Spinrad et al., 2023; Rashid & Hossain, 2016).
- **Collectivist Culture** – Collectivist culture is defined as a cultural orientation that prioritizes family and community interests over individual preferences, emphasizing respect for elders, conformity, and group harmony. This framework strongly influences parental approaches to socio-emotional development (Hofstede, 2001; Choudhury & Islam, 2023; UNICEF Bangladesh, 2023).

Chapter II: Literature Review

2. Literature Review

Socio-emotional development (SED) in early childhood is foundational for lifelong psychological well-being, academic performance, and social functioning (Denham et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2021). Between ages 3 and 5, children acquire critical abilities such as emotional recognition, empathy, impulse control, and social interaction. These are not innate but shaped by consistent interactions with parents and primary caregivers (Kim & Kim, 2023; Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016). Globally, socio-emotional learning (SEL) has gained traction, with organizations like CASEL (2020) and OECD (2021) promoting SEL integration into early childhood systems. However, in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) such as Bangladesh, parental awareness and culturally grounded practices to foster socio-emotional growth remain underdeveloped (BRAC IED, 2023).

This chapter synthesizes global and Bangladeshi literature on how parents, both mothers and fathers perceive and support socio-emotional development in children aged 3 to 5. It explores the challenges families face, caregiving practices, the influence of culture and religion, and intergenerational caregiving dynamics, aligning findings with data collected from urban Dhaka.

Understanding Socio-Emotional Development: Parental Knowledge and Misconceptions

Parental understanding of socio-emotional development (SED) serves as a critical foundation for young children's capacity to recognize, regulate, and express emotions. Indeed, emotionally attuned parents globally foster SED by labeling emotions, validating children's feelings, and providing active guidance in emotional regulation (Gottman et al., 1997; Center on the Developing Child, 2020). From a theoretical perspective, Vygotsky's sociocultural approach emphasizes that children internalize emotional scripts through interactions with caregivers, whereas Erikson's psychosocial theory underscores that during the preschool years (initiative vs. guilt), children require consistent emotional validation to develop confidence and social competence (Fleer, 2021; Erikson, 1963/1993).

However, recent evidence from Bangladesh highlights notable gaps in parental understanding. For instance, a nationwide survey conducted by BRAC IED (2022) found that only one in four parents could accurately describe the basic emotional needs of preschool-aged children. Similarly, the findings of this study indicated that many parents, particularly fathers, often misinterpreted emotional signals, for example, perceiving withdrawal as disobedience or aggression as rudeness. These misconceptions suggest a limited awareness of children's emotional cues and their developmental significance.

In contrast, mothers in this study generally demonstrated higher levels of emotional attentiveness, recognizing sadness or frustration in their children. Nonetheless, they frequently lacked the technical vocabulary or structured strategies to support regulation, instead relying on comfort or distraction. Fathers, by comparison, tended to prioritize behavioral correction over emotional exploration, a pattern consistent with prior research indicating that paternal involvement in Bangladesh remains largely discipline-oriented (Rashid & Hossain, 2016). While well-intentioned, such approaches may inadvertently hinder children's development of emotional literacy, including their ability to identify, name, and articulate feelings (Spinrad et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023).

Moreover, recent international studies reinforce that children whose parents lack emotional vocabulary or rely heavily on discipline are at greater risk of delayed socio-emotional skills, including empathy, self-regulation, and peer cooperation (Rahman et al., 2024; Smart & Sinclair, 2022). Therefore, within the Bangladeshi context, these findings underscore the urgency of strengthening parental knowledge through culturally sensitive early childhood interventions that empower parents not only to manage behavior but also to nurture emotional understanding.

Factors Shaping Parents' Perceptions of Socio-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

Parents' perceptions of their children's socio-emotional development are influenced by a multitude of factors, including cultural norms, gendered expectations, family structures, and wider societal beliefs. In South Asian societies, entrenched patriarchal values often shape how emotions are expressed and valued, affecting caregiving practices. Research indicates that boys

are frequently encouraged to suppress emotions such as sadness or fear, while girls are guided toward empathy, gentleness, and compliance, reflecting culturally prescribed gender roles (Kabir & Sultana, 2023; Haque & Imtiaz, 2021). These gendered expectations can significantly shape how parents interpret children's behaviors and the strategies they employ to manage or nurture emotional growth.

From a theoretical perspective, early childhood development frameworks offer insight into these practices. Erikson's psychosocial theory posits that preschool-aged children (initiative vs. guilt, ages 3–5) develop confidence in expressing emotions when caregivers validate their feelings; conversely, repeated discouragement along gendered lines can lead to guilt and restrict socio-emotional growth (Erikson, 1963/1993). Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that children internalize societal norms and values through parental guidance, meaning that differential responses to emotions based on gender directly influence children's self-concept and social identity (Fleer, 2021). In addition, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory situates these caregiving patterns within the broader macrosystem of cultural norms and societal expectations, demonstrating how family-level parenting practices are deeply embedded in socio-cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Empirical studies further highlight the long-term consequences of culturally influenced emotional socialization. Longitudinal evidence indicates that boys who are discouraged from expressing vulnerability are at increased risk of developing internalizing disorders, including anxiety and depression, later in life (Smart & Sinclair, 2022). In contrast, girls who are socialized to over-regulate emotions may experience greater self-silencing and lower self-esteem (Chen et al., 2023). In the Bangladeshi context, reports suggest that restrictive parenting practices can inhibit emotional expression in boys, while girls are often encouraged toward compliant behaviors in peer and family interactions (UNICEF, 2023).

Recent research also emphasizes the transformative potential of father-inclusive interventions in reshaping gendered emotional expectations. Actively involving fathers in early childhood education has been shown to promote constructive emotional expression in boys and to provide girls with greater opportunities to develop assertive social behaviors (Sharma & Joshi, 2024; BRAC Institute of Educational Development, 2023). Consequently, culturally sensitive parenting

programs that address gendered expectations can support holistic socio-emotional development, equipping both boys and girls with the skills necessary to navigate emotional expression and social competence effectively.

Paternal Involvement in Socio-Emotional Development: Emerging Roles and Persistent Gaps

Globally, the significance of fathers' roles in young children's socio-emotional development (SED) is increasingly acknowledged, although actual participation varies across cultural contexts. Traditionally, caregiving responsibilities have been largely associated with mothers, while fathers have predominantly been cast as providers or disciplinarians (Rashid & Hossain, 2016). Nevertheless, contemporary early childhood development (ECD) research emphasizes that active paternal engagement contributes substantially to children's emotional literacy, empathy, and resilience (Wilson et al., 2023).

Theoretically, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model situates fathers within the microsystem, highlighting that their involvement directly influences children's social and emotional outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Similarly, attachment theory underscores that secure attachments with both parents—not solely mothers—enhance children's self-regulation and socio-emotional competence (Veríssimo et al., 2022). These frameworks collectively suggest that paternal participation should be considered essential, rather than supplementary, in supporting children's emotional development.

Empirical evidence reinforces the benefits of engaged fathering. For instance, Karim and Begum (2024) found that fathers trained in emotion coaching exhibited improved empathic communication and responsiveness to their children's feelings. Likewise, Spinrad et al. (2022) reported that higher paternal sensitivity predicts lower emotional dysregulation and fewer behavioral problems in preschool-aged children. In a global context, Wilson et al. (2023) demonstrated that father involvement correlates with enhanced prosocial behaviors and resilience across diverse cultural environments.

In South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, gradual shifts are observable. UNICEF (2023) notes increasing interest among urban fathers in actively participating in their children's

socio-emotional growth. However, numerous structural and cultural barriers persist. Fathers frequently face time limitations, lack intergenerational role models for emotional caregiving, and are influenced by societal norms that define emotional nurturance as primarily a maternal responsibility (Sharma & Joshi, 2024). At a policy level, BRAC IED (2023) reports that only a small fraction (14%) of parenting programs explicitly include fathers, highlighting an enduring gap in inclusive programmatic design.

Overall, the literature illustrates that while paternal involvement in SED is increasingly recognized, its integration into Bangladeshi early childhood practices remains limited. Closing this gap necessitates deliberate, father-inclusive strategies within policies and interventions, ensuring that both parents are actively equipped to foster children's socio-emotional development.

Intergenerational Caregiving and Socioemotional Development: Conflict and Continuity

In South Asian contexts, including Bangladesh, childrearing frequently occurs within multigenerational households, where grandparents, especially grandmothers play a significant role in caregiving. This intergenerational support can offer children emotional security, cultural continuity, and practical assistance in daily routines (Hossain & Mannan, 2023). However, it can also introduce tension, as differing generational perspectives on socio-emotional development (SED) may conflict. While parents in contemporary urban settings often prioritize emotional validation and open expression, grandparents may uphold more traditional approaches emphasizing obedience, discipline, and gendered norms (Rahman et al., 2022).

From an ecological systems perspective, grandparents are influential actors within the child's microsystem and mesosystem, shaping the emotional environment through interactions with parents and other family members (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). When parental and grandparental beliefs are aligned, children receive consistent emotional scaffolding. Conversely, conflicting perspectives can generate "mixed messages," potentially confusing children and undermining the development of emotional regulation. Sociocultural theory further suggests that children internalize cultural practices and emotional norms through caregiver interactions;

therefore, intergenerational disagreements may create competing models of emotional expression and management (Fleer, 2021).

Empirical evidence highlights both the advantages and challenges of intergenerational caregiving. Research in India by Sharma and Gupta (2023) indicates that children in joint family settings often develop greater social adaptability due to exposure to multiple adult caregivers, yet they may encounter inconsistent emotional responses depending on whether parents or grandparents intervene. Similarly, UNICEF Bangladesh (2023) emphasizes that such inconsistencies can disrupt the formation of secure emotional patterns during early childhood. Chen et al. (2023) further note that when grandparents emphasize conformity and emotional restraint over exploration, children may face difficulties in cultivating emotional literacy and autonomy.

To address these challenges, interventions promoting intergenerational alignment have shown positive outcomes. Rahman et al. (2022) found that community-based workshops involving both parents and grandparents reduced caregiving conflicts and enhanced shared understanding of children's socio-emotional needs. Programs that frame emotional validation as complementary to traditional caregiving values have proven effective in South Asian settings (BRAC IED, 2023). Establishing structured, community-based learning spaces for extended family dialogue can reconcile traditional practices with contemporary evidence-based approaches, minimizing conflicting messages and fostering a more cohesive caregiving environment.

Parental Approaches to Discipline and Emotion Socialization

Discipline remains a central concern for parents of young children and plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of socio-emotional development (SED). In many cultural contexts, including Bangladesh, parental expectations often equate “good behavior” with obedience, resulting in disciplinary practices that prioritize compliance over emotional understanding (Islam & Jahan, 2020). These strategies commonly involve verbal correction, scolding, or withdrawal of affection, whereas emotion-focused techniques such as validating feelings, labeling emotions, or collaborative problem-solving are infrequently employed.

From a theoretical perspective, these practices have important developmental implications. Erikson's psychosocial framework emphasizes that during the preschool years (initiative vs. guilt stage), children develop confidence and a sense of initiative when supported with sensitive guidance, but may internalize guilt or shame if discipline is harsh or dismissive (Erikson, 1963/1993). Similarly, attachment theory highlights that consistent, emotionally responsive caregiving fosters secure attachment, whereas punitive or inconsistent responses can undermine trust and emotional security (Verissimo et al., 2022). Social learning theory further suggests that children model their emotional regulation strategies on parental behavior; thus, reliance on punishment may encourage emotional suppression and avoidance rather than constructive coping (Bandura, 1977; Spinrad et al., 2022).

Empirical evidence reinforces these theoretical insights. International studies indicate that children exposed to harsh or inconsistent disciplinary approaches are more likely to exhibit emotional dysregulation, heightened anxiety, and behavioral challenges (Denham et al., 2012; Smart & Sinclair, 2022). Within Bangladesh, BRAC IED (2022) reported that fathers, in particular, tend to prioritize behavioral correction over emotional engagement, limiting children's opportunities to develop emotional vocabulary and self-regulation skills. Likewise, Rahman et al. (2024) observed that reliance on punitive strategies often results in emotional withdrawal among children, which may have long-term consequences for both socio-emotional well-being and academic adjustment.

In response, scholars advocate for culturally sensitive, evidence-based alternatives. Approaches such as Positive Behavior Support (PBS) and emotion coaching have emerged as promising strategies within the Bangladeshi context, as they respect parental authority while simultaneously fostering empathy, self-regulation, and resilience in children (OECD, 2021; Sharma & Joshi, 2024). Parenting programs that integrate these methods have demonstrated improvements in children's emotional regulation and reductions in punitive disciplinary practices (Chen et al., 2023).

Overall, the literature indicates that while discipline in Bangladesh is still largely framed around control and obedience, there is increasing recognition of the need to balance authority with emotional responsiveness. Empowering parents, particularly fathers, to adopt non-punitive

strategies represents a critical step toward promoting healthier socio-emotional development during early childhood (Islam & Jahan, 2020; Rahman et al., 2024; Ateah et al., 2023).

Impact of Limited Peer Interaction on Socio-emotional Competence in Early Childhood

Children's capacity to engage with peers represents a critical dimension of socio-emotional competence, influencing emotional regulation, empathy, social problem-solving, and subsequent academic success (Siddiqua & Mahmud, 2021; Chen et al., 2023). Peer interactions offer early opportunities for practicing sharing, turn-taking, negotiation, and conflict resolution, all foundational for cooperation and prosocial behavior (Spinrad et al., 2022; Denham et al., 2012). Conversely, restricted peer engagement whether due to limited preschool attendance, social isolation, or lack of safe play areas can impede the development of these essential skills and heighten the risk of social withdrawal, anxiety, and behavioral challenges (UNICEF, 2023; Chen et al., 2023; Siddiqua & Mahmud, 2021).

Theoretical perspectives help explain why peer interaction is vital for early social competence. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory posits that children acquire cultural norms, social rules, and self-regulatory strategies through collaborative interactions with peers (Fleer, 2021). Parten's stages of play highlight a developmental trajectory from solitary to parallel and ultimately cooperative play, with collaborative engagement fostering empathy, negotiation, and conflict-management abilities (Parten, 1932/2018). In addition, social learning theory suggests that children observe and imitate peers' emotional expressions, problem-solving, and coping strategies, reinforcing prosocial behavior patterns (Bandura, 1977; Spinrad et al., 2022).

Empirical evidence underscores the adverse consequences of limited peer interactions. For instance, Chen et al. (2023) observed that preschool-aged children with minimal peer contact during the COVID-19 pandemic exhibited delays in impulse control, reduced prosocial behaviors, and challenges in collaborative problem-solving. Within Bangladesh, Siddiqua and Mahmud (2021) highlighted that structured peer play enhances negotiation skills, emotional flexibility, and adaptive social behavior. Nonetheless, parental restrictions, stemming from safety concerns, social anxiety, or limited community infrastructure often reduce children's

opportunities for peer engagement, creating a mismatch between developmental needs and real-life experiences. Similarly, UNICEF Bangladesh (2023) reported that urban children with limited peer interaction are more susceptible to emotional withdrawal, lower resilience, and diminished social adaptability.

Family involvement can help mitigate these negative effects. Evidence indicates that when both mothers and fathers actively engage in play or structured activities, children demonstrate improved cooperation, emotional understanding, and conflict-resolution skills (Rahman et al., 2024; Sharma & Joshi, 2024). Additionally, household-based activities, such as storytelling, cooperative games, and parent-child role-play can simulate peer-like experiences, enabling children to practice social skills safely (Sharma & Joshi, 2024; Denham et al., 2012). Participation in preschool programs and peer-rich educational environments further supports social skill acquisition and reduces delays in socio-emotional competence (BRAC IED, 2023).

Urban contexts in Bangladesh introduce additional constraints that shape peer interaction opportunities. Factors such as high population density, traffic hazards, and limited playground availability restrict outdoor socialization (Siddiqua & Mahmud, 2021). Cultural priorities that emphasize academic achievement over play further limit structured peer engagement (Alam & Kabir, 2023). These environmental and societal barriers underscore the need for policies that integrate safe play spaces, community programs, and parental guidance to facilitate peer-based socio-emotional learning (UNICEF, 2023; BRAC IED, 2023).

In conclusion, limited peer interaction during early childhood can hinder the development of socio-emotional competence, including empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation. Interventions that combine family-based play, father-inclusive participation, safe community spaces, and structured preschool activities are critical for promoting social skills and counteracting the adverse effects of restricted peer engagement. By fostering peer-rich experiences alongside culturally sensitive parenting practices, children in urban Bangladeshi contexts can develop into resilient, socially competent individuals.

Impact of Screen Time on Socio-emotional Development in Early Childhood

In urban Bangladesh, digital device usage has become a common feature of early childhood, prompting parental concerns regarding its effects on socio-emotional development (Kabir & Sultana, 2022; Islam & Chowdhury, 2021). Research by Islam and Chowdhury (2021), Rahman et al. (2024), and Kabir and Sultana (2022) indicates that both mothers and fathers often resort to screens to manage children's boredom, calm distress, or control tantrums. While these strategies may provide immediate convenience, they are associated with negative outcomes, including heightened irritability, shortened attention spans, limited verbal engagement, and reduced face-to-face social interaction. Survey data suggest that preschool-aged children in Dhaka frequently engage with screens for 3–5 hours daily, exceeding internationally recommended limits (Kabir & Sultana, 2022).

Theoretical perspectives further elucidate these concerns. Veríssimo et al. (2022) emphasize that secure and responsive caregiver-child interactions are crucial for emotional regulation and socio-emotional learning. When screen exposure replaces such interactions, children miss essential opportunities to recognize, interpret, and respond to emotional cues. Bandura's social learning theory (1977) highlights that children acquire socio-emotional competencies including empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving through observation and interaction with caregivers and peers, suggesting that excessive screen use limits exposure to appropriate social modeling. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) note that the digital environment, as part of the exosystem, increasingly influences children's routines, sometimes in ways that conflict with their developmental needs. Collectively, these frameworks suggest that while digital devices may offer temporary engagement or convenience, prolonged use can impede emotional growth and social competence in early childhood.

Empirical findings support these theoretical concerns. Chen et al. (2023) reported that preschool-aged children with higher screen exposure demonstrated greater emotional dysregulation, lower empathy, and reduced prosocial behaviors compared to peers with limited screen time. In Bangladesh, Islam and Chowdhury (2021) highlighted that structured parental guidance regarding digital usage is uncommon, revealing a gap in support for effective screen management. UNICEF (2023) further emphasized that extended screen engagement disrupts the interactive feedback loops necessary for socio-emotional learning, weakening both caregiver-child bonding and peer interaction. Rahman et al. (2024) also observed that children

who relied on screens as primary tools for emotion regulation exhibited increased irritability, dependency, and delayed acquisition of social skills.

To address these challenges, scholars recommend culturally relevant, evidence-based strategies for parents. Methods such as co-viewing content, implementing time limits, and incorporating screen-free family routines like shared meals, storytelling, and outdoor play have been shown to enhance socio-emotional learning while still accommodating the use of technology (Sharma & Joshi, 2024; UNICEF, 2023). By equipping parents with practical strategies and alternatives, children can develop improved emotional regulation, social competence, and peer interaction skills, even amidst the pervasive presence of digital devices.

Parental Barriers to Supporting Socio-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

Parental engagement plays a pivotal role in fostering socio-emotional development (SED) in young children; however, caregivers often encounter multiple obstacles that limit effective support. Limited literacy and language proficiency, for instance, can impede parents' capacity to label emotions, guide social interactions, and scaffold self-regulation (Fleer, 2021; Uddin et al., 2021). Without sufficient vocabulary and confidence to articulate feelings, parents may miss opportunities to teach children how to identify, express, and manage emotions constructively. From a theoretical perspective, Vygotsky's sociocultural framework emphasizes that language-mediated guided interactions are essential for children to internalize cultural norms and develop socio-emotional skills. When parental communication is constrained, children's chances to practice empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving diminish. Furthermore, during the initiative versus guilt stage (ages 3–5), consistent and supportive guidance is vital for children to navigate emotions and social situations with confidence; a lack of structured parental strategies can lead to uncertainty, self-doubt, or confusion about social and emotional cues (Erikson, 1963/1993; Spinrad et al., 2022; Uddin et al., 2021).

In addition to literacy-related barriers, parental stress significantly affects children's socio-emotional learning. High levels of financial pressure, work-life imbalance, and caregiving demands can limit emotional availability, reducing the capacity for reflective and supportive

engagement (Spinrad et al., 2022). In South Asian contexts, stressed parents may respond inconsistently to children's emotional expressions, which can hinder the development of self-regulation, resilience, and interpersonal competencies (Sharma & Joshi, 2024). Cultural expectations further influence caregiving patterns, particularly for fathers, as traditional norms emphasizing authority and discipline may discourage nurturing involvement, restricting diverse modeling of social and emotional behaviors (Choudhury & Islam, 2023).

Moreover, the increasing prevalence of digital devices presents another barrier to parent-child interactions. Parents often rely on screens to manage children's boredom or distress, potentially reducing opportunities for direct, face-to-face engagement that is essential for socio-emotional development (Kabir & Sultana, 2022; Islam & Chowdhury, 2021). When screens replace interactive guidance, children may miss critical experiences for developing empathy, cooperation, and emotion regulation (Veríssimo et al., 2022; Bandura, 1977).

Evidence indicates that culturally tailored interventions can help mitigate these barriers. Programs that combine communication guidance, practical strategies for scaffolding emotional and social skills, and stress management for caregivers have been shown to enhance parental confidence and responsiveness (BRAC IED, 2023; Sharma & Joshi, 2024). Longitudinal research further demonstrates that when parents receive structured support, children exhibit stronger self-regulation, prosocial behavior, and resilience, forming a solid foundation for long-term socio-emotional competence (Uddin et al., 2021; Spinrad et al., 2022).

In summary, the literature highlights that parental literacy, communication skills, stress levels, and cultural expectations collectively shape children's socio-emotional outcomes. Addressing these barriers through structured guidance, training, and supportive interventions is essential for promoting emotional regulation, empathy, cooperation, and overall socio-emotional competence, particularly in urban Bangladeshi contexts.

Chapter III: Methodology

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore parents' perceptions of the socio-emotional development of preschool-aged children (ages 3–5) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for understanding parents' lived experiences, beliefs, and values, which influence how they interpret and respond to their children's emotional and social development (Patton, 2015). Unlike quantitative approaches, which focus on measuring developmental outcomes, qualitative research provides an in-depth view of the processes, meanings, and cultural factors that shape parenting practices and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.2 Research Participants

Participants in this study were purposively selected to generate in-depth insights into the socio-emotional development of children aged 3 to 5 years in urban Bangladesh. The sample included parents residing in Dhaka, with representation from both mothers and fathers to capture diverse perspectives on early childhood caregiving. Recruitment was carried out through personal networks, parenting communities, and referrals, which facilitated access to parents who were directly engaged in the daily upbringing of their children.

In total, eighteen parents participated in the study. Six parents (three mothers and three fathers) took part in in-depth interviews (IDIs), allowing for the exploration of individual experiences, while twelve parents joined two focus group discussions (FGDs). One FGD included six mothers, and the other comprised six fathers, enabling gender-specific group dynamics and collective reflections. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, when no new insights were emerging from subsequent interviews or discussions.

Eligibility criteria required participants to be primary caregivers of children aged 3 to 5 years, proficient in Bangla, and willing to share their caregiving experiences. Parents of children with diagnosed developmental disorders or severe chronic health conditions were excluded to maintain focus on typical socio-emotional developmental pathways.

3.3 Participant Selection Procedure

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants who met the primary inclusion criteria: being the parent of a child aged 3 to 5 years and actively involved in caregiving or household decision-making. Both fathers and mothers were included to ensure a balanced and comprehensive understanding of parents' perceptions of children's socio-emotional development. This approach acknowledged that, in the Bangladeshi context, mothers often took the lead in daily emotional caregiving, while fathers typically held decision-making authority that influenced parenting practices and norms.

Participants were selected from diverse household types within Dhaka city, including nuclear and joint/extended families, to reflect variations in caregiving responsibilities and parent-child interactions. Consideration was also given to parents' work status, whether they were employed outside the home or stayed at home, to account for differences in the time and nature of engagement with children.

Recruitment was conducted through community networks, local preschools, and peer referrals. In cases where formal access was limited, participants were approached in natural social spaces such as neighborhood parks and residential gathering areas where parents commonly engage with their children.

The final sample consisted of parents who were willing to participate and available for at least one data collection session. Participants were selected to represent parents within similar socioeconomic and educational categories to maintain relative homogeneity while capturing relevant perspectives on socio-emotional development. Participation was voluntary, all participants provided written informed consent, and no financial compensation was offered. Participants received a brief summary of the study results as acknowledgment of their contribution.

3.4 Research Site

The study was conducted in home-based and familiar community settings across Dhaka city, including Dhanmondi, Green Road, Kalabagan, Mirpur, and Uttara. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were primarily conducted in participants' homes to ensure privacy and comfort, fostering open and candid conversations. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in accessible, quiet

community locations to facilitate group interaction while maintaining convenience for participants. Using these familiar settings enabled natural discussions about parental beliefs, practices, and caregiving routines, offering rich insights into how parents supported their children's socio-emotional development in everyday life.

3.5 Research Tool

This study used semi-structured interview guides for in-depth interviews (IDIs) and guidelines for focus group discussions (FGDs). These tools were designed to collect detailed information on parents' perceptions and practices regarding children's emotional expression, empathy, social behavior, and regulation, while allowing participants to express their experiences comprehensively.

3.6 Validity and Reliability of the Research Tool

The validity of the research tools was ensured by piloting the interview guides for in-depth interviews (IDIs) with one father and one mother, and the guidelines for focus group discussions (FGDs) with a group of four parents (two fathers and two mothers). This pilot process allowed for refinement of question wording, clarity, and structure prior to the main data collection. Feedback from participants was incorporated to enhance comprehension and cultural appropriateness, ensuring that the tools were reliable, consistent, and suitable for capturing parents' perceptions and practices regarding children's socio-emotional development.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) to capture parents' insights on children's socio-emotional development. IDIs involved six parents (three mothers and three fathers) and lasted approximately 30–40 minutes each, conducted in home settings to encourage detailed personal reflection. Two FGDs, one with six mothers and another with six fathers, were held in accessible community spaces and lasted 40–50 minutes each, allowing participants to share collective experiences and discuss common caregiving practices related to socio-emotional development of their children. The semi-structured guides

allowed for the collection of detailed information on parents' perceptions, daily practices, and approaches to supporting children's emotional expression, empathy, and social skills.

Prior to both IDIs and FGDs, participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality and maintain ethical compliance. Sessions were audio-recorded with permission, and observational notes were taken to supplement the recordings. Conducting all sessions in comfortable and familiar settings allowed participants to express their thoughts freely and provided rich, authentic data on the strategies and perspectives parents employ in supporting the socio-emotional development of preschool-aged children.

3.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Creswell (2021) and Braun and Clarke (2021). The process involved systematically coding the interview and discussion transcripts to identify recurring patterns, themes, and concepts. The analysis specifically focused on parents' perceptions of emotional expression, empathy, social interaction, and emotional regulation, while considering the influence of cultural and social factors on parenting practices. Although NVivo software was initially used to organize the data, manual transcription and coding were necessary due to issues with recording quality. This manual approach ensured that participants' responses were accurately represented and allowed for a deeper understanding of parental perspectives on socio-emotional development in 3-5 years aged children in urban Bangladesh.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of BRAC University, ensuring that all research procedures aligned with ethical standards for conducting studies involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the research. Participants were provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, their role, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.

To protect participants' privacy, all personal information was first removed during transcription and analysis, and data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. Moreover, because the study involved sensitive topics such as parenting practices and perceptions of young children's socio-emotional development, efforts were made to maintain a safe and respectful environment during interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and that their opinions would be treated respectfully. In addition, care was taken to prevent emotional distress, and sessions were paused or stopped if participants felt uncomfortable. Overall, the study adhered to the ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice throughout the research process.

3.10 Limitations of the Study

This study provides insights into parents' perceptions of socio-emotional development in preschool-aged children in urban Dhaka; however, several limitations should be noted. First, fathers' contributions were generally shorter and less detailed than mothers', which may have limited the depth of understanding regarding paternal perspectives and household decision-making in socio-emotional caregiving. Second, cultural sensitivities may have influenced participants' willingness to discuss topics such as gendered emotional expectations, emotional challenges, and screen time, potentially leading to responses that were socially desirable rather than fully reflective of daily practices. These limitations highlight opportunities for future research to include more diverse populations and to explore sensitive topics in ways that encourage more open and detailed responses.

Chapter IV: Results and Discussion

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results/Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study, organized thematically under three main themes aligned with the research questions: parents' understanding of socio-emotional development, strategies to support socio-emotional growth, and challenges in fostering these skills. The

analysis highlights key patterns and factors influencing socio-emotional development in children aged 3–5 years in urban Bangladesh, including cultural norms, family dynamics, urban living conditions, and the role of digital devices.

Theme 1: Parents’ Understanding of Socio-Emotional Development in Children Aged 3–5

Parents viewed socio-emotional development as the ability to recognize and regulate emotions while interacting positively with others. Mothers focused more on emotional awareness and empathy, whereas fathers emphasized discipline, composure, and respect. Together, they saw emotional understanding and social responsibility as interconnected, shaping children’s confidence, relationships, and overall character.

Some mothers described socio-emotional development as helping children express emotions in a respectful and socially acceptable way:

“After school, I always ask how my daughter feels. That way, she knows it’s okay to talk about her feelings.” (FGD 1, July 12, 2025)

“When my son looks upset, I try to ask what happened. Sometimes he tells, sometimes I wait until bedtime.” (FGD 1, July 12, 2025)

Fathers connected socio-emotional development to self-control and respect:

“Crying and showing anger are signs of weakness. I tell him to stay quiet and focus. This is how I raised my elder son too.” (IDI-6, July 11, 2025)

“I teach him to bow his head when elders speak. That’s part of our values.” (IDI-6, July 11, 2025)

Fathers reflected on balancing traditional expectations with newer ideas of emotional openness:

“Boys need to be emotionally strong, but I also want him to talk to me. That’s new for me

as a father.” (FGD 2, July 14, 2025)

“At first, I used to tell him not to cry. Now I hug him first and ask why he’s upset.” (FGD 2, July 14, 2025)

Sub-theme 1.1: Understanding Children’s Emotional Expression

Parents highlighted the importance of helping children identify their feelings and express them appropriately. Mothers particularly emphasized naming emotions and validating feelings, while fathers sometimes encouraged self-control to maintain composure.

“My daughter expresses her emotions when she feels safe. When she’s sad, I sit beside her and tell her it’s okay to feel sad, but she should also try to talk about it.” (IDI-1, July 10, 2025)

“She gets emotionally affected when I raise my voice. So now I lower my tone and ask her to tell me what upset her. She opens up more this way.” (IDI-3, July 11, 2025)

“Sometimes I ask my daughter to draw her feelings. It helps her to show what she can’t say in words.” (IDI-2, July 10, 2025)

Sub-theme 1.2: Understanding and Fostering Social Skills

Parents emphasized early social skills such as sharing, turn-taking, greeting, and respecting others. Mothers often encouraged empathy and relationship-building, while fathers stressed adherence to rules and group behavior. Home and school environments were both seen as vital in shaping social competence.

“I watch how my daughter plays with others—if she waits her turn or grabs toys. That shows me how socially aware she is.” (IDI-1, July 10, 2025)

“We organize small playdates so our children learn to share toys and ideas.” (IDI-5, July 11, 2025)

“When he plays with cousins, I watch how he handles conflicts and guide him afterward.” (FGD-2, July 14, 2025)

“I teach him to bow his head when elders speak. That’s part of our values.” (IDI-6, July 11, 2025)

Sub-theme 1.3: Observing and Responding to Children’s Socio-emotional Expressions

Parents described observing both verbal and nonverbal cues to understand their children’s emotions. Mothers were generally more attentive to immediate signs and often responded promptly, while fathers sometimes preferred to observe before intervening, allowing the child time to self-regulate. Extended family members also contributed to recognizing emotional changes.

Recognizing Nonverbal Cues of children aged 3-5 years:

One of the mothers responded:

“My daughter becomes quiet when something bothers her. I sit with her without asking too much. She eventually tells me what went wrong.” (IDI-3, July 11, 2025)

Another mother said:

“When she hides in a corner or pulls her bedsheet over her face, I know she’s emotionally unsettled.” (IDI-1, July 10, 2025)

One of the mothers shared:

“Sometimes a sigh or frown is enough for me to know something is wrong.” (FGD-1, July 12, 2025)

Parents’ Immediate versus Delayed Responses to Children’s Emotions:

A mother mentioned:

“Sometimes my son yells when he doesn’t get what he wants. I tell him to sit quietly, then explain why he cannot have it.” (FGD-1, July 12, 2025)

Father responded:

“I usually wait till he calms down. Then I ask if he was angry or hurt.” (FGD-2, July 14, 2025)

One of the fathers mentioned:

“I intervene quickly only if I see he is too upset or might hurt himself.” (IDI-5, July 11, 2025)

Parents’ Experiences in Collaborative Family Observation:

“His grandmother notices before I do. Then we sit together and ask what happened, making him feel like we are listening.” (IDI-5, July 11, 2025)

A mother said:

“I discuss with my wife how our child reacted today, then we decide the best approach.” (IDI-2, July 10, 2025)

One of mother shared:

“We all notice patterns—like when he gets frustrated after screen time, we step in together.” (FGD-1, July 12, 2025)

Theme 2: Parents’ Strategies to Support Socio-Emotional Development

Parents described various strategies to help children manage emotions such as anger, frustration, and disappointment. Mothers predominantly used nurturing, dialogue-based approaches encouraging reflection and emotional understanding, whereas fathers emphasized structured guidance, calm modeling, or temporary separation to support emotional self-regulation. Cultural, family, and environmental factors also shaped these strategies.

Parents reported using multiple strategies to help their children manage emotions, develop coping skills, and interact positively with others. Mothers typically favored nurturing, dialogue-based methods to promote reflection and emotional understanding, while fathers

emphasized structured guidance, calm modeling, and temporary separation to teach self-regulation. Cultural, family, and environmental factors also influenced these strategies, shaping the ways parents guided children in real-life contexts.

Sub-theme 2.1: Storytelling and Emotional Naming for Children Aged 3–5

Parents used storytelling and verbal labeling to help children identify and process emotions, expand emotional vocabulary, and reflect on personal experiences.

“I tell her bedtime stories where the characters get angry but later say sorry. She learns that even good people can get upset, but they should also make amends.” (IDI-1, July 10, 2025)

“I give him names for his emotions — ‘You seem frustrated’ or ‘Are you disappointed?’ It helps him understand and process his feelings.” (IDI-2, July 10, 2025)

Sub-theme 2.2: Modeling Calm Behavior and Positive Interaction

Caregivers demonstrated calm, controlled, and patient behavior to provide children with real-life examples of emotional regulation.

“When I get annoyed, I say out loud, ‘I’m upset but I will not shout.’ My son hears that and copies it sometimes.” (IDI-5, July 11, 2025)

“I remain calm when she throws tantrums. Showing patience teaches her to manage anger.” (IDI-1, July 10, 2025)

Sub-theme 2.3: Structured Guidance and Discipline in Supporting Children’s Socio-Emotional Development

Structured approaches included setting boundaries, temporary separation, and calm discipline to teach children appropriate emotional expression and self-control.

“If he’s very angry, I send him to his room for a few minutes. Then I call him back and talk. He listens better then.” (IDI-4, July 10, 2025)

“Sometimes we set small rules for expressing anger, like using words instead of hitting.”
(FGD-1, July 12, 2025)

Sub-theme 2.4: Cultural, Environmental, and Family Influences on Children’s Socio-Emotional Development

Cultural norms, religious teachings, extended family involvement, urban living conditions, and screen exposure shaped parents’ strategies and children’s socio-emotional experiences.

“We teach values through Islamic stories. For example, the Prophet forgiving others — I use that to explain why forgiveness matters.” (IDI-2, July 10, 2025)

“Sometimes his grandmother notices mood changes before I do. Then we sit together and talk.” (IDI-5, July 11, 2025)

“Screens are easy. But when he watches too long, he becomes less interested in playing with others.” (IDI-5, July 11, 2025)

Sub-theme 2.5: Managing Screen Time and Emotional Disconnection of Children Aged 3–5

Parents highlighted that excessive use of mobile phones, tablets, or televisions can interfere with children’s emotional regulation and social engagement. While screens were often used to manage behavior, maintain calm, or occupy children during household tasks, parents observed that prolonged exposure reduced opportunities for emotional expression, face-to-face interaction, and peer engagement. Both mothers and fathers acknowledged that screen time sometimes led to emotional detachment or delayed responsiveness, requiring deliberate efforts to restore connection and communication.

“When she watches cartoons too much, she imitates the shouting. Then I have to explain that real life is different.” (IDI-1, July 10, 2025)

“Sometimes I feel she’s emotionally disconnected when she watches too much. It takes time to bring her back to real conversations.” (IDI-3, July 11, 2025)

“Screens are easy. But when he watches too long, he becomes less interested in playing with others. That worries me.” (IDI-5, July 11, 2025)

“He stays immersed in the phone. We can't even tell how he's feeling.” (FGD-1, July 14, 2025)

“After screen time, he doesn't talk much. I try to sit beside him and ask questions, but sometimes he just nods.” (FGD-2, July 12, 2025)

Parents reported strategies to manage screen time, such as co-viewing, time restrictions, and post-screen verbal discussions, but acknowledged a lack of structured guidance or formal knowledge on digital habits in early childhood. This sub-theme underscores the importance of parental awareness and targeted support to mitigate potential emotional disconnection caused by excessive screen use in urban Bangladeshi households.

“Sometimes we watch cartoons together and talk about what's happening. I explain what's real and what's pretend, so she understands and doesn't just mimic shouting.” (IDI-1, July 10, 2025)

Theme 3: Challenges Faced by Parents in Supporting Socio-Emotional Development

Parents reported facing multiple challenges while supporting their children's socio-emotional development. These challenges included personal time and energy constraints, gaps in knowledge and emotional literacy, and difficulties managing digital screen exposure. Parents expressed frustration, uncertainty, and guilt about not always being able to provide adequate guidance, highlighting the complex nature of early childhood caregiving in urban Bangladeshi households.

Sub-theme 3.1: Time and Energy Constraints in Nurturing Socio-Emotional Development

Working parents often struggled to engage consistently in activities that nurtured socio-emotional skills due to fatigue or competing responsibilities.

“Sometimes after work, I am too tired to play or talk with him. I feel like I’m missing out on teaching him how to share or express himself.” (IDI-4, July 10, 2025)

“I want to teach her patience and kindness, but with so many chores, I can’t always give her my full attention.” (FGD-2, July 14, 2025)

Sub-theme 3.2: Knowledge Gaps in Supporting Socio-Emotional Skills

Many parents reported uncertainty about age-appropriate strategies for emotional regulation and social interactions. A lack of formal guidance often left them relying on personal experience or trial-and-error approaches.

“I see my son struggling to wait his turn, but I don’t know how to explain it properly. I just tell him to be patient.” (IDI-6, July 11, 2025)

“I want to help her manage anger without scolding, but I’m not sure what’s the right way for her age.” (FGD-1, July 12, 2025)

Sub-theme 3.3: Digital Challenges Affecting Socio-Emotional Development

Parents highlighted the negative impact of screen time on emotional and social skills. Excessive exposure to mobile devices, tablets, or television often reduced face-to-face interactions, peer engagement, and opportunities to practice emotional expression.

“When he spends too much time on the tablet, he ignores his friends at home. I try to ask him to play with them, but he doesn’t want to.” (IDI-3, July 11, 2025)

“After screen time, she doesn’t respond to questions properly. It’s like she’s in her own world.” (FGD-2, July 14, 2025)

The findings reveal that parents play a central role in shaping the socio-emotional development of children aged 3–5 years, using a combination of emotional guidance, behavioral strategies, and family collaboration. While parents demonstrate awareness of the importance of emotional and social skills, they face challenges related to time constraints, knowledge gaps, digital

influences, and environmental limitations. These insights underscore the need for culturally relevant guidance and support to help parents foster socio-emotional growth effectively in early childhood.

4.2. Discussion

The findings of this study offer in-depth insights into how parents in urban Bangladesh understand and respond to their young children's socio-emotional development. Drawing on both in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), five themes emerged that not only highlight variations in parental perspectives but also reflect broader cultural, structural, and informational influences shaping child-rearing practices. This section analyzes these themes in light of recent scholarly literature considering implications for policy and practice.

Theme 1: Parents' Understanding of Socio-Emotional Development in Children Aged 3–5

Parents in this study consistently described socio-emotional development as a foundational aspect of their children's growth, shaping personality, preparing them for formal schooling, and enabling successful peer and family relationships. Their understandings reflected a blend of emotional nurturing, moral discipline, and cultural traditions, showing how parental perceptions are influenced by both individual experiences and broader socio-cultural contexts. Notably, mothers and fathers demonstrated different emphases in their interpretations. Mothers focused more on fostering emotional awareness, empathy, and openness, while fathers highlighted discipline, composure, and respect for authority. Taken together, these perspectives reflect an integrated view of socio-emotional development, where emotional understanding and social responsibility are perceived as interconnected qualities that shape children's confidence, resilience, and character.

Mothers frequently described strategies that encouraged their children to share feelings in safe and socially acceptable ways, such as asking about their emotions after school or giving them space to communicate when ready. Such practices reveal the importance of parental scaffolding in promoting emotional literacy, a process known to enhance children's self-regulation and

empathy (Denham et al., 2021; Eisenberg et al., 2022). These maternal practices align with contemporary evidence that parental validation of emotions helps children develop the capacity to recognize and manage feelings in themselves and others, a skill particularly critical in the preschool years (Spinrad et al., 2022).

Fathers, in contrast, often associated socio-emotional development with discipline, self-control, and respect for elders, underscoring the cultural significance of composure within Bangladeshi society. Their approaches emphasized the value of restraint, viewing it as essential for preparing children to function within social hierarchies and collective family systems. This finding is consistent with broader South Asian research that highlights how collectivist norms encourage obedience and deference to authority in early childhood (Kabir & Sultana, 2023; Rahman & Chowdhury, 2024). From Erikson's psychosocial perspective, such practices connect to the developmental stage of "initiative versus guilt," where children are negotiating the balance between personal expression and meeting social expectations (Erikson, 1963/1995). While fostering composure can provide children with social order and predictability, research cautions that excessive emphasis on suppression may limit opportunities for healthy emotional expression and coping (Jones et al., 2023).

At the same time, some fathers reported gradual changes in their parenting practices, moving toward greater openness in allowing children to express their emotions. For instance, fathers described encouraging boys to discuss their feelings or offering comfort before addressing discipline. This reflects a broader cultural shift in paternal roles, as fathers globally are increasingly engaging in emotional coaching alongside traditional disciplinary functions (Eisenberg et al., 2022; Rao & Li, 2024). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory further explains these shifts by suggesting that parenting practices are dynamic, adapting through social interaction and exposure to evolving cultural tools and expectations (Miller, 2023).

Therefore, the findings indicate that parents in this study understood socio-emotional development as both an individual and relational process. Mothers tended to highlight the importance of emotional validation and empathy, whereas fathers emphasized composure and respect. Yet both perspectives converge in recognizing socio-emotional skills—whether emotional literacy, empathy, or discipline such as central to children's readiness for school,

capacity for positive relationships, and moral character. These insights echo recent scholarship that frames socio-emotional development in collectivist societies as a dynamic interplay between traditional cultural norms and emerging child-centered practices (Haque & Imtiaz, 2021; Jones et al., 2023).

Sub-theme 1.1: Understanding Children’s Emotional Expression

Parents identified emotional expression as the first step in socio-emotional growth. Mothers often highlighted the importance of allowing children to articulate feelings through words, play, or non-verbal behaviors. They reported using strategies such as labeling emotions (“you are sad,” “you look angry”) or storytelling to help children understand and communicate internal states. This practice aligns with research demonstrating that parental emotion socialization, particularly labeling, helps preschool-aged children build an emotional vocabulary and supports emotional regulation (Denham et al., 2021; Eisenberg et al., 2022). Fathers, however, emphasized emotional restraint, encouraging children to calm down quickly or discouraging open crying. This gendered difference resonates with cultural norms in South Asian societies, where emotional control, especially for boys, is equated with maturity and strength (Kabir & Sultana, 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, Erikson’s psychosocial theory situates early childhood within the stage of “initiative versus guilt,” highlighting the importance of balancing self-expression with social expectations (Erikson, 1963/1995). Parents’ practices reveal this tension, where mothers’ encouragement of openness fosters initiative, while fathers’ emphasis on restraint reinforces socially appropriate behavior. Similarly, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory underlines that children’s emotional learning emerges through guided participation in cultural practices (Miller, 2023). In this case, parental guidance simultaneously enables and constrains emotional expression, illustrating the dual role of family influence in shaping socio-emotional development.

Sub-theme 1.2: Understanding and Fostering Social Skills

Beyond emotional expression, parents framed socio-emotional development as the cultivation of social skills such as cooperation, empathy, and respect for elders. Mothers stressed the

importance of teaching children to share, take turns, and express care for peers and siblings. Fathers, on the other hand, emphasized discipline, politeness, and adherence to social norms, such as greeting elders and following household rules. Parents often reported observing children during family gatherings or playdates as a way to assess whether they were learning to navigate social interactions successfully.

These insights align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes how children's social behavior is shaped by immediate relationships (microsystem) and cultural norms (macrosystem) (Neal & Neal, 2022). In Bangladesh, where collectivist values predominate, parents' stress on respect, obedience, and group harmony reflects the integration of cultural expectations into children's early development (Haque & Imtiaz, 2021). At the same time, international research confirms that structured social interactions in early childhood—such as sharing, cooperative play, and conflict resolution predict later peer competence and empathy (Spinrad et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, there appeared to be a tension between fostering social conformity and encouraging autonomy. While discipline and respect help maintain cultural continuity, they may restrict opportunities for children to independently negotiate conflicts or exercise problem-solving. This hybrid approach reflects the interplay between tradition and modernity in Bangladeshi families, where parents seek to raise children who are socially respectful but also adaptable to the demands of contemporary schooling.

Sub-theme 1.3: Observing and Responding to Children's Socio-emotional Expressions

Parents highlighted the importance of attentively observing children's behaviors as indicators of emotional and social development. Three dimensions emerged from their accounts.

Recognizing Nonverbal Cues of Children Aged 3–5 Years: Parents reported that children often communicated feelings indirectly through body language, silence, withdrawal, or changes in play behavior. Mothers tended to identify these cues quickly, while fathers adopted a more observational approach, intervening only when behaviors persisted. This finding supports evidence that young children frequently express emotions nonverbally and that parental sensitivity to these signals is crucial for emotional literacy (Eisenberg et al., 2022; Rao & Li,

2024). Studies in Bangladesh also suggest that maternal attentiveness is a significant predictor of children's socio-emotional competence (Akter & Rahman, 2023).

Parents' Immediate versus Delayed Responses to Children's Emotions: Mothers typically responded immediately to emotional displays, offering comfort, explanations, or redirection. Fathers, by contrast, often waited until the child calmed down before engaging, believing this approach would strengthen self-control. This duality reflects two philosophies of emotional guidance: co-regulation and self-regulation. While immediate intervention supports emotional processing and co-regulation (Denham et al., 2021), excessive reliance on delayed responses may reduce opportunities for guided emotional learning (Patel & Kumar, 2022). In cultural contexts where stoicism is valued, delayed responses can reinforce restraint but may risk emotional suppression (Rahman & Chowdhury, 2024).

Parents' Experiences in Collaborative Family Observation: Parents described socio-emotional caregiving as a collective effort involving grandparents, siblings, and spouses. Extended family members often noticed changes in children's behavior, contributing to a broader system of emotional guidance. This reflects the collectivist caregiving model common in South Asia, where multiple adults are engaged in nurturing children's growth (Hossain & Mannan, 2023). However, intergenerational differences sometimes created inconsistencies: younger parents favored emotional validation, while grandparents promoted restraint or distraction. Such discrepancies can confuse children regarding acceptable emotional behaviors, a finding consistent with studies linking intergenerational variation to mixed socio-emotional outcomes (Islam & Rahman, 2022). From a theoretical perspective, this resonates with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of multiple caregiving systems in shaping child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979/2020).

Theme 2: Parents' Strategies to Support Socio-Emotional Development

Parents in this study emphasized that supporting socio-emotional development requires intentional, context-sensitive strategies that foster emotional awareness, social competence, and self-regulation during the preschool years. Denham et al. (2021) note that early childhood represents a critical period for establishing foundational skills in empathy, emotional regulation, and social interaction, and the strategies reported by parents in this study reflect this

understanding. Importantly, these strategies are embedded within broader cultural expectations, family structures, and environmental contexts, highlighting the complex interplay between traditional values and emerging child-centered approaches. Parents acknowledge that socio-emotional development is not solely the result of individual parenting practices but emerges from consistent guidance, observation, and adaptation to both social and technological challenges.

Sub-theme 2.1: Storytelling and Emotional Naming for Children Aged 3–5

Storytelling and explicit labeling of emotions emerged as a fundamental strategy to enhance children's emotional literacy. Mothers described narrating daily events, discussing feelings, and encouraging children to identify and articulate their emotions, a practice that aligns with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, emphasizing learning through guided social interaction (Miller, 2023). Fathers, while less involved in direct emotional conversations, contributed by framing emotions in culturally appropriate ways, encouraging patience and self-control. Research indicates that consistent exposure to emotional labeling supports self-regulation, empathy, and prosocial behavior in preschoolers (Spinrad et al., 2022; Eisenberg et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2023). Furthermore, recent studies in South Asian contexts suggest that culturally sensitive storytelling practices can strengthen emotional understanding while respecting local norms, highlighting the dual function of this strategy as both educational and culturally reinforcing (Haque et al., 2024).

The use of emotional naming also facilitates co-regulation, allowing parents to model appropriate emotional responses while helping children interpret their internal states. As such, these practices illustrate how structured yet nurturing strategies serve as critical scaffolds for socio-emotional development, enabling children to integrate emotional awareness with social interaction (Jones et al., 2023).

Sub-theme 2.2: Modeling Calm Behavior and Positive Interaction

Parents highlighted modeling as another central strategy for fostering socio-emotional competence. Bandura's social learning theory (1977/2020) suggests that children acquire both behavioral and emotional skills through observation of significant adults. Mothers frequently

modeled empathy, active listening, and nurturing behaviors, whereas fathers emphasized composure, respect for social hierarchies, and calm conflict management. By observing these complementary behaviors, children learn not only to recognize emotions but also to respond adaptively in social situations (Eisenberg et al., 2022; Rao & Li, 2024).

Recent research underscores that modeling prosocial behaviors contributes to emotional resilience and peer competence (Neumann et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2023). Additionally, these observations suggest that parental modeling is particularly effective when children are encouraged to reflect on observed behaviors, bridging Bandura's theory with practical co-regulation strategies. Modeling thus functions as both an immediate teaching tool and a long-term mechanism for shaping children's social and emotional trajectories.

Sub-theme 2.3: Structured Guidance and Discipline in Supporting Children's Socio-Emotional Development

Parents in this study emphasized structured guidance as a foundational strategy for supporting socio-emotional development, highlighting the importance of consistent routines, clearly defined expectations, and designated spaces for both play and reflective activities. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979/2020) underscores the centrality of proximal processes in the microsystem, showing that consistent caregiver-child interactions are essential for fostering social-emotional competence (Neal & Neal, 2022). In the Bangladeshi context, adherence to family routines, respect for elders, and culturally embedded behavioral norms function as scaffolds through which children learn about social hierarchies, responsibility, and acceptable behavior (Kabir & Sultana, 2023).

Parents also highlighted the importance of balancing structured guidance with autonomy. They recognized that children benefit from safe opportunities to explore emotions, make decisions, and engage in problem-solving, which enhances self-confidence, adaptive coping, and self-regulation. Recent evidence suggests that environments combining structure with flexibility promote emotional resilience, social competence, and independent decision-making during early childhood (Spinrad et al., 2022; Patel & Kumar, 2022).

Therefore, structured guidance and discipline are not merely mechanisms for control; they act as supportive frameworks that integrate boundaries with freedom, enabling children to internalize social norms while practicing emotional expression and independence. This dual approach reflects parents' understanding that fostering socio-emotional competence requires both consistent guidance and opportunities for experiential learning, positioning structure as a facilitator rather than a limitation in early childhood development.

Sub-theme 2.4: Cultural, Environmental, and Family Influences on Children's Socio-Emotional Development

Parents in this study consistently emphasized the influence of extended family, neighborhood, and early education environments in shaping socio-emotional development. These factors align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, where multiple interrelated systems influence children's growth (Neal & Neal, 2022). Cultural expectations, particularly regarding respect, deference, and group cohesion, were reinforced through extended family practices and community norms. Parents actively adapted strategies to align with these cultural and environmental cues, demonstrating context sensitivity in caregiving practices (Hossain & Mannan, 2023; Rao & Li, 2024).

Recent literature suggests that culturally congruent parenting enhances socio-emotional skills and resilience, emphasizing that interventions promoting emotional development must consider familial and societal norms to be effective (Haque & Imtiaz, 2021; Jones et al., 2023). Therefore, parental strategies in Bangladesh reflect a sophisticated understanding of socio-emotional learning as embedded within broader socio-cultural and environmental systems.

Sub-theme 2.5: Managing Screen Time and Emotional Disconnection of Children Aged 3–5

Managing digital technology emerged as a contemporary challenge for parents, who recognized that excessive screen time could disrupt emotional connection, reduce opportunities for co-regulation, and limit social interaction. Empirical studies show that prolonged screen exposure during preschool years can negatively affect imaginative play, empathy, and peer competence (Domoff et al., 2022; Neumann et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Parents described

proactive strategies to limit screen time, encourage interactive play, and promote joint activities that foster emotional expression and cooperation.

These strategies highlight the growing recognition that socio-emotional development is influenced not only by interpersonal interactions but also by environmental management. By regulating exposure to digital media, parents aim to maintain opportunities for co-regulation and relationship building, illustrating a contemporary adaptation of traditional caregiving strategies to modern developmental risks (Rao & Li, 2024; Jones et al., 2023).

Collectively, the strategies reported by parents demonstrate a multidimensional and integrated approach to socio-emotional development. Emotional literacy through storytelling, behavioral modeling, structured guidance, cultural sensitivity, and environmental management interact to create rich, supportive developmental contexts. Maternal and paternal contributions are complementary, with mothers generally emphasizing emotional expression and fathers focusing on composure and structure, together shaping children's competencies in social interaction, self-regulation, and emotional awareness (Denham et al., 2021; Eisenberg et al., 2022).

These findings underscore that fostering socio-emotional competencies in children aged 3–5 requires deliberate parental engagement, guided by both theoretical principles and culturally informed practices. Parents' adaptive responses to contemporary challenges, such as screen time, highlight the dynamic nature of caregiving in the modern era. Therefore, supporting socio-emotional development involves not only nurturing skills and behaviors but also understanding the socio-cultural, familial, and technological contexts that shape children's experiences (Jones et al., 2023; Rao & Li, 2024; Chen et al., 2024).

Theme 3: Challenges Faced by Parents in Supporting Socio-Emotional Development

Parents in this study reported a range of challenges that hinder their ability to consistently support the socio-emotional development of children aged 3–5 years. These challenges emerged as multifaceted, spanning time and energy constraints, knowledge gaps, and digital-related disruptions, all of which can impede the cultivation of emotional awareness, empathy, and social competence. According to Denham et al. (2021), the preschool period is critical for developing

foundational socio-emotional skills, and any barriers that reduce the quality or frequency of parent-child interactions can have long-term developmental consequences. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979/2020) highlights that children's development is embedded within multiple interacting systems, indicating that parental challenges do not operate in isolation but are influenced by broader socio-cultural, economic, and technological contexts (Neal & Neal, 2022).

Sub-theme 3.1: Time and Energy Constraints in Nurturing Socio-Emotional Development

Recent studies by Rao and Li (2024) emphasize that parents' time availability is a critical determinant of the quality of socio-emotional support. In line with this, participants described juggling work, household responsibilities, and caregiving as a primary barrier to providing consistent emotional guidance. Mothers, particularly those managing domestic responsibilities alongside part-time or full-time work, often experienced fatigue and limited energy, which restricted opportunities for engaging in reflective conversations or joint play activities with children. Fathers similarly reported that work commitments constrained the frequency of their interactions, reducing their ability to model calm behavior, regulate conflicts, or scaffold emotional learning.

According to Spinrad et al. (2022), such constraints can compromise co-regulation, an essential process in which caregivers help children understand and manage their emotions through responsive support. When daily routines do not allow for consistent caregiver engagement, children may have fewer opportunities to practice emotional expression, empathy, and conflict resolution, potentially slowing the development of self-regulation. Haque and Imtiaz (2021) note that in collectivist societies like Bangladesh, extended family support can sometimes mitigate these limitations, but inconsistency in caregiving practices across family members can create confusion for children regarding acceptable emotional expression. Therefore, addressing time and energy constraints is vital for enhancing parents' capacity to actively scaffold socio-emotional competencies.

Sub-theme 3.2: Knowledge Gaps in Supporting Socio-Emotional Skills

Eisenberg et al. (2022) assert that parental knowledge and understanding of emotional processes strongly influence children's socio-emotional outcomes. In the present study, parents reported uncertainty regarding the most effective strategies to foster emotion recognition, empathy, and social competence. Some expressed difficulties in responding appropriately to children's intense emotions, while others were unsure how to integrate guidance on moral behavior with encouragement for emotional expression. These gaps in knowledge often intersected with cultural expectations, where traditional norms emphasize composure, obedience, and respect, particularly for boys (Kabir & Sultana, 2023).

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978/2023) emphasizes that children internalize social and emotional norms through guided interactions with more knowledgeable others. If parents lack confidence or skills, the quality of such scaffolding diminishes, potentially affecting children's ability to label emotions, negotiate conflicts, or display prosocial behavior (Miller, 2023). Contemporary research by Jones et al. (2023) further indicates that targeted interventions, including parent training programs, enhance parents' competence in nurturing socio-emotional skills, demonstrating the value of equipping caregivers with knowledge and practical tools. In the Bangladeshi context, integrating culturally relevant examples and family values into such training can improve acceptance and efficacy, bridging the gap between knowledge and practice.

Sub-theme 3.3: Digital Challenges Affecting Socio-Emotional Development

Domoff et al. (2022) highlight that digital media use in early childhood can interfere with opportunities for guided interaction, emotional attunement, and peer cooperation. Parents in this study expressed concerns that screen exposure could reduce engagement in imaginative play, hinder socialization, and contribute to emotional disconnection. While screens are sometimes used for educational purposes, excessive reliance on digital devices limits opportunities for parents to model empathy, respond to nonverbal emotional cues, and facilitate co-regulation, all of which are foundational for socio-emotional development (Neumann et al., 2023).

From the perspective of Bandura's social learning theory (1977/2020), children learn behavioral and emotional competencies by observing and imitating adults. If screen time substitutes for

parent-child interactions, children miss critical opportunities to internalize socio-emotional norms through modeling. Furthermore, in collectivist cultures such as Bangladesh, where family-based guidance and extended-family interactions traditionally shape emotional and moral development, digital distractions may disrupt established socialization pathways (Rahman & Chowdhury, 2024). Recent studies suggest that structured parental mediation, including setting screen limits, co-viewing, and promoting interactive play, can mitigate these risks while supporting emotional connectivity (Eisenberg et al., 2022; Rao & Li, 2024).

Overall, this theme illustrates that supporting socio-emotional development is a complex task constrained by time, knowledge, and environmental challenges. Specifically, parents' accounts reveal that limited availability and energy reduce opportunities for consistent engagement, while gaps in understanding can hinder effective scaffolding, and modern digital environments introduce additional risks of emotional disconnection. From a theoretical perspective, frameworks from Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky, and Bandura converge to highlight that children's socio-emotional development relies on proximal interactions, guided learning, and modeled behaviors within supportive environments. Moreover, empirical studies corroborate these findings, emphasizing that interventions aimed at enhancing parental capacity, addressing knowledge deficits, and managing environmental risks are essential to optimize socio-emotional outcomes in preschool-aged children (Denham et al., 2021; Spinrad et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2023; Rao & Li, 2024).

Building on this understanding, relating to Spinrad et al. (2022), Hossain and Mannan (2023), Begum (2023), and Sharma and Joshi (2024), parental modeling, cultural norms, and the balance between discipline and child-centered practices are crucial in shaping children's socio-emotional development. Consequently, the findings of this study indicate that parents in collectivist societies like Bangladesh often experience uncertainty about how to best nurture socio-emotional skills. Many are conflicted over whether to provide structured guidance, enforce behavioral control, or allow children to learn through experiential exploration, reflecting tensions between traditional discipline-oriented norms and emerging child-centered approaches. Additionally, this dilemma is further compounded by societal priorities that emphasize academic achievement and physical health, leaving socio-emotional development underrecognized.

Notably, mothers generally emphasize empathy, emotional expression, and nurturing strategies, whereas fathers tend to focus on behavioral regulation and composure, highlighting complementary but sometimes conflicting approaches. Furthermore, extended family involvement occasionally introduces mixed messages, further complicating decisions about consistent support. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of culturally attuned interventions that address gendered expectations, multigenerational caregiving roles, and the negotiation between traditional and modern practices, thereby enabling parents to prioritize socio-emotional learning alongside academics and health, and ensuring that children aged 3–5 develop the emotional competence, social adaptability, and resilience necessary for a secure and well-rounded future.

4.3 Conclusion

This study explored urban Bangladeshi parents' understanding, strategies, and challenges regarding the socio-emotional development of children aged 3 to 5 years. According to Denham et al. (2021), early childhood represents a critical period for acquiring emotional awareness, social competence, and self-regulation. Consistent with this, parents in the present study emphasized that socio-emotional development is foundational to children's personality formation, school readiness, and the ability to establish positive peer and familial relationships. Parents' understandings were shaped by both individual experiences and broader socio-cultural norms, with mothers generally emphasizing emotional expression, empathy, and nurturing practices, while fathers highlighted discipline, composure, and respect for authority (Kabir & Sultana, 2023; Hadi et al., 2023). These findings reflect the dual influence of emotional and disciplinary frameworks, underscoring the integrated nature of socio-emotional development in the Bangladeshi urban context.

In line with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (Miller, 2023), mothers' strategies such as storytelling, emotional labeling, and guided dialogue facilitate children's capacity to recognize and articulate feelings, fostering emotional literacy and self-regulation. Fathers, on the other hand, increasingly incorporate supportive approaches, including calm guidance and reflective discussions, illustrating a gradual shift from strict disciplinary norms to a more balanced parenting model that nurtures emotional understanding alongside behavioral regulation.

(Eisenberg et al., 2022; Rao & Li, 2024). The complementarity of maternal and paternal roles highlights the importance of collaborative caregiving in promoting socio-emotional competencies, with each parent contributing distinct yet interrelated influences on children's development (Spinrad et al., 2022).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979/2020) provides further insight into the role of contextual influences. Parents reported that extended family, school environments, and peer interactions significantly shape socio-emotional learning. Mothers often observed and responded immediately to children's emotional cues, while fathers preferred reflective engagement, allowing for self-regulation and internalization of emotional norms. The interplay between immediate responsiveness and delayed intervention illustrates the negotiation between cultural expectations of composure, individual emotional expression, and contemporary parenting practices (Hossain & Mannan, 2023; Spinrad et al., 2022). Moreover, collaborative family observation where grandparents, siblings, and caregivers collectively monitor and support children emerged as a vital mechanism for reinforcing emotional and social learning, emphasizing the extended-family dynamics typical of South Asian societies (Neal & Neal, 2022; Islam & Rahman, 2022).

Parents' strategies to support socio-emotional development were diverse and adaptive, reflecting both traditional and modern approaches. According to Bandura's social learning theory (1977/2020), modeling calm behavior, empathy, and respectful interaction is central to children's acquisition of emotional and social skills. Mothers' demonstrations of empathy, nurturing, and supportive communication, coupled with fathers' emphasis on self-control, patience, and respect for hierarchy, provided complementary behavioral models for children. Structured routines, clearly defined expectations, and designated play spaces further reinforced emotional regulation, social cooperation, and problem-solving abilities, illustrating the value of structured guidance and safe exploration for early emotional and social development (Spinrad et al., 2022; Patel & Kumar, 2022).

However, the findings also present a sense of parental uncertainty and confusion. To some extent, parents struggle to balance providing structured guidance and discipline with allowing children to learn through experiences. Many parents expressed uncertainty about how to nurture

socio-emotional skills with the same priority given to academic achievement or health, reflecting the societal tendency to emphasize cognitive and physical development over emotional and social growth. This tension illustrates the challenges of integrating intentional socio-emotional learning into daily routines while managing expectations about control, freedom, and experiential learning.

The study further highlighted contemporary challenges impacting socio-emotional development. According to WHO (2021), excessive digital screen exposure can impede emotional engagement, peer interaction, and empathy in preschool-aged children. Parents in this study reported using screens as practical tools to manage daily routines, yet acknowledged the potential for emotional disconnection and delayed socio-emotional skills. Consequently, strategies such as co-viewing, time restrictions, and post-screen discussions were employed to mitigate negative effects, reflecting awareness of digital risks alongside the need for balanced modern parenting practices (Domoff et al., 2022; Neumann et al., 2023).

Time and energy constraints emerged as another significant challenge, particularly for working parents. As Hadi et al. (2023) note, urban lifestyles often limit opportunities for consistent, intentional emotional and social engagement. Parents described struggling to balance professional commitments with attentive caregiving, which can affect the consistency of socio-emotional support. Knowledge gaps were also evident, as some parents were uncertain about how to scaffold emotional recognition, conflict resolution, or empathy development effectively. These gaps underscore the importance of accessible, evidence-based guidance and parent-focused interventions (Karim & Begum, 2024; CASEL, 2020).

Overall, the study demonstrates that socio-emotional development in early childhood is a dynamic, contextually embedded process, shaped by parental perceptions, caregiving strategies, gender roles, cultural expectations, and environmental constraints. Integrating these insights into early childhood education, public health initiatives, and community programs is essential for promoting emotional literacy, resilience, and social competence. National-level initiatives, such as father-inclusive parenting programs, school-based SEL curricula, and culturally sensitive awareness campaigns, can provide the knowledge and resources needed to bridge intergenerational gaps and standardize best practices (OECD, 2021; BRAC IED, 2023).

In conclusion, while urban Bangladeshi parents increasingly recognize the importance of socio-emotional development, challenges related to time, knowledge, intergenerational inconsistencies, digital exposure, and balancing structured guidance versus experiential learning persist. Addressing these challenges requires holistic, culturally responsive strategies that combine parent education, collaborative caregiving, structured routines, and mindful engagement with digital technologies. By fostering both emotional literacy and social competence, Bangladesh can cultivate a generation of children who are resilient, empathetic, and socially adept, prepared to navigate the complexities of contemporary family and societal contexts (Hadi et al., 2023; Kabir & Sultana, 2023; Denham et al., 2021).

4.4. Recommendations

1. **Enhancing Parental and Family Capacities:** Develop structured programs to equip mothers, fathers, and extended family members with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize, label, and respond effectively to children's emotional cues. Emphasis should be placed on fostering shared caregiving responsibilities and addressing restrictive cultural beliefs that may hinder children's emotional expression.
2. **Integrating Socio-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Education:** Incorporate developmentally appropriate socio-emotional learning (SEL) activities, such as storytelling, role play, and collaborative group exercises, within preschool curricula. Alignment between school-based SEL initiatives and home practices should be promoted to ensure consistency in fostering children's emotional literacy, empathy, and social competencies.
3. **Promoting Balanced Digital Engagement and Active Participation:** Provide families with evidence-informed guidance on regulating screen time and encourage alternative activities that facilitate emotional connection, imaginative play, and cooperative social interaction. Strategies should aim to enhance parent-child bonding while mitigating the risks of emotional withdrawal associated with excessive digital exposure.
4. **Fostering Active Paternal Involvement:** Develop targeted interventions and community initiatives to engage fathers directly in supporting their children's socio-emotional development. Programs should highlight positive paternal role models, challenge traditional norms, and promote collaborative approaches to emotional caregiving.
5. **Context-Sensitive and Sustainable Interventions:** Design interventions that account for the specific challenges of urban and rural settings, including space limitations, access to preschool programs, and sociocultural variations. Localized parenting resources and policy frameworks should be developed, and longitudinal monitoring should be supported to ensure sustained improvements in early childhood socio-emotional outcomes.

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Appendices

Research Tools

To explore parental perceptions of socio-emotional development in children aged 3 to 5 in Bangladesh, this study employed qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both mothers and fathers to gather insights into their perspectives, beliefs, and everyday practices related to their children's emotional and social development. Additionally, focus group discussions facilitated the sharing of common experiences and cultural viewpoints that shape parenting approaches. Field notes were used throughout the data collection process to document contextual details and researcher reflections. Combined, these methods provided a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of how parents perceived, interpreted, and supported the socio-emotional development of preschool-aged children within the Bangladeshi cultural context.

IDI Guideline

Background Information from Participant

1. Parent's Name (অভিভাবকের নাম):

.....

2. Gender (লিঙ্গ):

☐ Male (পুরুষ) ☐ Female (নারী)

3. Age (বয়স):

.....

4. Education Level (শিক্ষাগত যোগ্যতা):

.....

5. Occupation (পেশা):

.....

6. Family Type (পরিবারের ধরন):

☐ Joint (যৌথ পরিবার) ☐ Nuclear (একক পরিবার)

7. Number of Children (সন্তান সংখ্যা):

.....

8. Child's Name (শিশুর নাম):

.....

9. Child's Age (শিশুর বয়স):

.....

10. Child's Gender (শিশুর লিঙ্গ):

☐ Boy (ছেলে) ☐ Girl (মেয়ে)

IDI Interview Questions

1. What do you understand about emotional development in children aged 3 to 5?

৩ থেকে ৫ বছর বয়সী শিশুদের মানসিক বিকাশ সম্পর্কে আপনি কী মনে করেন বা কী বোঝেন?

2. What do you understand about social development in children?

আপনার মতে শিশুদের সামাজিক বিকাশ বলতে কী বোঝায়?

3. How do you relate these understandings to how your child expresses emotions like happiness, anger, fear, or sadness?

এই ধারণাগুলোর সঙ্গে আপনি কীভাবে আপনার শিশুর খুশি, রাগ, ভয় বা দুঃখের মতো অনুভূতির প্রকাশ মিলিয়ে দেখেন?

4. What do you usually do when your child is going through a strong emotional reaction (e.g., crying, shouting, withdrawing)?

যখন আপনার শিশু কোনো তীব্র আবেগ প্রকাশ করে (যেমন কান্না, চিৎকার, একা হয়ে যাওয়া), তখন আপনি সাধারণত কী করেন?

5. How do you think you help your child recognize and deal with emotions like frustration or anger?

আপনার মতে আপনি কীভাবে আপনার শিশুকে বিরক্তি বা রাগের মতো আবেগ চিনতে ও সামাল দিতে সাহায্য করেন?

6. What is your view on how other family members (e.g., grandparents or siblings) support your child's emotional development?

আপনার মতে পরিবারের অন্য সদস্যরা (যেমন দাদা-দাদি, ভাইবোন) কীভাবে আপনার শিশুর মানসিক বিকাশে সহায়তা করেন?

7. What do you think about how your child interacts with others during play or social situations?

আপনার মতে আপনার শিশু খেলার সময় বা সামাজিক পরিবেশে অন্যদের সঙ্গে কীভাবে মিশে?

8. What is your understanding of how your child learns to share, take turns, or solve small problems with others?

আপনার মতে আপনার শিশু কীভাবে ভাগাভাগি করা, পালক্রমে খেলা বা ছোট সমস্যা সমাধান শেখে?

9. What do you think about how your child understands and responds to others' emotions?

আপনার মতে আপনার শিশু কীভাবে অন্যের অনুভূতি বোঝে এবং প্রতিক্রিয়া জানায়?

10. What are your thoughts on the home routines or daily practices that support your child's emotional and social development?

আপনার মতে কোন পারিবারিক রুটিন বা দৈনন্দিন অভ্যাস আপনার শিশুর মানসিক ও সামাজিক বিকাশে সাহায্য করে?

11. What do you think about the impact of screen time (TV, mobile, tablet) on your child's emotions and social behavior?

আপনার মতে মোবাইল, টিভি বা ট্যাবলেট দেখার অভ্যাস আপনার শিশুর অনুভূতি ও সামাজিক আচরণে কী প্রভাব ফেলে?

12. What kind of support or information do you think would help you better promote your child's socio-emotional development?

আপনার মতে কোন ধরনের সহায়তা বা তথ্য আপনার শিশুর সামাজিক ও মানসিক বিকাশে আপনাকে আরও ভালোভাবে সাহায্য করতে পারে?

FGD Guidelines

Group Type: ☐ Fathers ☐ Mothers

Location:

Date of FGD:

Facilitator's Name:

FGD Questions

1. What do you think social and emotional development means for children aged 3 to 5?

৩ থেকে ৫ বছর বয়সী শিশুদের সামাজিক ও মানসিক বিকাশ বলতে আপনারা কী বোঝেন বা কী মনে করেন?

2. How do you see your child expressing emotions and building relationships in daily life?

আপনারা কীভাবে দেখেন, আপনার শিশু প্রতিদিনের জীবনে অনুভূতি প্রকাশ করে এবং অন্যদের সঙ্গে সম্পর্ক গড়ে তোলে?

3. How do you help your child express feelings and behave well with others?

আপনারা কীভাবে সন্তানের অনুভূতি প্রকাশ ও অন্যদের সঙ্গে ভালো আচরণ করতে সাহায্য করেন?

4. What kind of daily routines or home activities support your child's social and emotional development?

আপনারা কী মনে করেন, বাসার কোন রুটিন বা কাজ শিশুর সামাজিক ও মানসিক বিকাশে সহায়তা করে?

5. How do other family members, like grandparents or siblings, help your child learn and grow socially and emotionally?

আপনারা কীভাবে দেখেন, দাদা-দাদি বা ভাইবোনের মতো পরিবারের অন্য সদস্যরা শিশুর মানসিক ও সামাজিক বিকাশে সহায়তা করেন?

6. How do your cultural or religious values influence the way you raise your child emotionally and socially?

আপনাদের মতে, সাংস্কৃতিক বা ধর্মীয় মূল্যবোধ শিশুর মানসিক ও সামাজিক গঠনে কীভাবে প্রভাব ফেলে?

7. How does your child usually behave in social situations like family gatherings or preschool?

পারিবারিক অনুষ্ঠান বা প্রিস্কুলের মতো পরিবেশে আপনারা সাধারণত শিশুর কী ধরনের আচরণ লক্ষ্য করেন?

8. What challenges do you face while guiding your child about emotions and social behavior?

আপনারা সন্তানকে অনুভূতি ও সামাজিক আচরণ শেখাতে গিয়ে কী ধরনের চ্যালেঞ্জ বা অসুবিধা অনুভব করেন?

9. How do you think screen time (TV, mobile) affects your child's emotional and social development?

আপনাদের মতে, টিভি বা মোবাইল ব্যবহারের অভ্যাস শিশুর সামাজিক ও মানসিক বিকাশে কী প্রভাব ফেলে?

10. What kind of support or information would help you to better support your child's social and emotional development?

আপনারা কী মনে করেন, সন্তানের মানসিক ও সামাজিক বিকাশে সহায়তা করতে আপনাদের কী ধরনের সাহায্য বা তথ্য দরকার?

Consent Form

Consent Form for Parents

Dear Parent,

I am Farsin Binte Sultan, a student in the Master of Science in Early Childhood Development program at BRAC Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University. I am conducting research titled “**Parents’ Perceptions of Socio-Emotional Development of Children Aged 3 to 5 Years in Bangladesh**”.

The study will involve a focus group discussion about your parenting practices and how they influence your child’s emotional and social development. The discussion will last 40 to 50 minutes and may be recorded for research purposes only. Your participation is voluntary, and all information will remain confidential.

You can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.

By signing below, you agree to participate in the study.

Name of Parent (Print): _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ **Date:** _____