

SELF-CONFIDENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: FAMILY COMMUNICATION DYSFUNCTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The quality of communication within the family plays a crucial role in shaping self-confidence in young children and can have a long-term impact. This study aims to identify types of family communication dysfunction, analyze their implications for the development of self-confidence, and explain the factors that shape self-confidence in young children. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation of five young children aged 6–12 years from diverse family backgrounds. This study concludes that there are five types of family communication dysfunction: lack of emotional responsiveness, rejection of children's emotional expressions, the physical absence of parents as attachment figures, a shift in attention due to changes in family structure, and the substitution of affection with material fulfillment. Communication dysfunction leads to the formation of ambivalent and avoidant attachment patterns, withdrawal from social interaction, and the internalization of negative self-beliefs. Determinants of children's self-confidence include the consistency of the attachment figure's responses, emotional validation, the availability of a psychological secure base, emotional recovery after neglect, and the quality of substitute figures. These findings confirm that self-confidence in young children is strongly influenced by the warm and responsive emotional presence of parents.

Keywords: family communication; communication dysfunction; self-confidence patterns

Abstrak

Kualitas komunikasi dalam keluarga berperan penting dalam membentuk rasa percaya diri pada anak usia dini dan dapat berdampak panjang terhadap perkembangan psikologis anak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis disfungsi komunikasi keluarga, menganalisis implikasi dalam membentuk kepercayaan diri, serta menjelaskan faktor-faktor yang membentuk

kepercayaan diri anak usia dini. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Data-data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi terhadap lima informan anak usia dini dengan rentang usia 6-12 tahun yang memiliki latar belakang keluarga berbeda. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahwa lima jenis disfungsi komunikasi keluarga, yaitu minimnya respons emosional, penolakan ekspresi emosi anak, ketidakhadiran fisik orang tua sebagai figure attachment, pergeseran perhatian akibat perubahan struktur keluarga, dan substitusi afeksi dengan pemenuhan materi. Disfungsi komunikasi mengakibatkan terbentuknya pola kelekatan ambivalen dan avoidant, penarikan diri dari interaksi sosial, serta internalisasi keyakinan negatif tentang diri sendiri. Faktor penentu kepercayaan diri anak meliputi konsistensi respons figure attachment, validasi emosi, ketersediaan secure base yang bersifat psikologis, pemulihan emosional pascapengabaian, dan kualitas figur pengganti. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kepercayaan diri anak usia dini sangat dipengaruhi oleh kehadiran emosional yang hangat dan responsif dari orang tua.

Kata Kunci : *komunikasi keluarga; disfungsi komunikasi; kepercayaan diri*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is the foundation of human existence as social beings (Sarnoto, 2022), because the family serves as the primary environment that can shape a child's self-confidence, character, emotions, and social skills (Subagia, 2021). This phenomenon is evidenced by several kindergartens in Salatiga, which report that most children aged 4–5 still lack self-confidence, as indicated by a reluctance to speak up in class, a lack of initiative, a tendency to cry when separated from their parents, and a reluctance to interact with peers all of which are closely linked to a lack of positive communication within the family (Putri Kofan et al., 2024).

(Ferlin, Miranda dan Putri, 2022) states that there is a link between the quality of parenting and parental communication and a child's level of self-confidence. Healthy communication within the family from an early age is not merely a means of ordinary interaction, but rather the primary foundation for the development of a child's personality and self-confidence throughout their life.

This communication problem is not just an issue within households, but a widespread phenomenon. According to data from (Albata, 2025) An environment that lacks verbal encouragement can contribute to low self-esteem in children. They tend to hesitate when making decisions and avoid challenges because they lack confidence in their own abilities. This situation affects their mental health, leading to various issues and behaviors that parents should take seriously.

Chronic low self-esteem can hinder a child's overall development, interfere with their ability to interact with their surroundings, and increase the risk of mental health issues (Smartalent, 2023). More specific effects of communication barriers can be seen in the social-emotional development of young children; children who grow up in

dysfunctional environments often have low self-esteem, lack motivation, and tend to avoid social interaction (Suarna et al., 2025).

John Bowlby's attachment theory posits that attachment is a strong emotional bond between a child and a parent. When a secure bond is formed between a child and a parent, the child will feel valued, loved, and able to trust those around them (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022). In the context of family communication, warm, consistent, and loving interactions will strengthen secure attachments and ultimately boost a child's self-confidence.

Previous research serves as an important foundation for understanding the extent to which the topics of communication and the development of self-confidence in children have been studied. Based on this review, there is a research gap: few studies have specifically examined communication dysfunction within intact families and its impact on the development of self-confidence in young children. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by identifying types of family communication dysfunction, analyzing the implications of communication dysfunction on the development of self-confidence in young children, and identifying factors that can foster self-confidence in young children.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach, in which the researcher seeks to construct a comprehensive picture of the meanings attributed by individuals or groups to social issues, as explained by (Creswell W. J. and Creswell J. D., 2014) with a focus on exploring direct experiences and perceptions to understand how dysfunctional family communication can influence the development of self-confidence in young children.

The research subjects consisted of key informants children aged 6-12 from diverse family backgrounds residing in Jayalaksana Village, Kedokan Bunder Subdistrict, Indramayu Regency as well as supporting informants, namely parents or guardians who provided supplementary data and served as a means of data triangulation.

The research focuses on non-constructive family communication patterns (such as interaction patterns, dialogue, and inadequate emotional support), with the analysis focusing on the process of building children's self-confidence and the factors that shape self-confidence in early childhood.

This study employed three data collection methods: in depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach to explore the informants' experiences and interpretations of the factors that shape self-confidence in early childhood.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Sugiono, 2013). To ensure the validity of the data, this study employed source and method triangulation, which involves comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure the consistency and credibility of the research data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of Family Dysfunction in Shaping Self-Confidence in Early Childhood

Based on the results of in-depth interviews, this study identifies five types of family communication dysfunction that can be understood through John Bowlby's Attachment Theory as interpreted by (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022). They emphasized that caregivers who are capable of responding emotionally serve as the primary foundation for fostering a sense of security in children, which in turn forms the basis of self-confidence.

First, regarding the lack of emotional responsiveness—the most prominent communication dysfunction observed in Informants 1 and 2—was the absence of an adequate response from parents or guardians. A lack of emotional responsiveness from caregivers cannot function as a secure base because if a child constantly seeks emotional closeness but receives only cold and inconsistent responses, the child gradually develops the belief that they are not important enough to be noticed. (Albata, 2025) shows that the absence of an immediate emotional response causes children to feel worthless. Findings (Assegap et al., 2025) also supports the view that communication without emotional involvement cannot meet a child's basic psychological needs.

Second, the suppression of children's emotional expression, as observed in informants 1 and 3, involves the rejection of negative emotions, such as “don't cry, you're a big kid now” or “you're a boy, you have to be strong.” When children consistently experience this suppression of emotional expression from their parents, they develop the habit of hiding their emotional needs as a coping mechanism. This mechanism is called deactivation of the attachment system, wherein the child suppresses the urge to seek comfort because they have learned that such efforts will not succeed. Children who internalize this pattern lose the ability to express emotions in a healthy way, which ultimately hinders the development of their self-confidence. When children continually receive the message that their emotions must not be expressed, they learn to deactivate their attachment system (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022). (Sarnoto, 2022) emphasizes the importance of the affective dimension and effective communication with young children, while (Fatimah & Holilah, 2025) found that children who are not given the opportunity to express themselves will face increasingly serious social difficulties as they grow up.

Third, regarding the physical absence of parents as attachment figures, there is a clear dysfunction in Informant 2's case, as the parents work out of town, leaving the child to be raised entirely by their grandparents. However, the grandparents, as substitutes, cannot meet the

child's emotional needs because generational differences make communication feel out of sync. The long-term physical absence of parents as attachment figures deprives children of the opportunity to build secure bonds, which form the foundation of their development. If substitute figures cannot adequately fulfill this role, children will feel that they are not worthy of being prioritized. (Riska et al., 2025) and (Suarna et al., 2025) shows that this situation leads to instability in one's self-concept and lowers self-confidence, particularly in social settings.

Fourth, a shift in the attachment figure's attention due to changes in family structure; this fourth form of dysfunction was observed in Informant 3, who was experiencing both a change in family structure and the arrival of a new family member. A shift in attention from an attachment figure due to changes in family structure can lead to an attachment crisis in the child. The child interprets this shift in attention as a signal that they have become less important than the new family member, which causes emotional distress and affects the child's self-worth. This is evident in Informant 3, who has become very compliant, afraid of making mistakes, and has lost initiative—all of which are indications of declining self-confidence. (Ponidjan et al., 2025) and (Subagia, 2021) states that family transitions that are not properly communicated lead children to fill that void with negative narratives about themselves.

Fifth, the substitution of affection with material fulfillment a phenomenon observed in Informants 1 and 3 where parents replace their emotional role with material provision. However, Informants 1 and 3 did not mention a single example of material fulfillment when asked to recall moments when their parents offered encouragement or praise, indicating that this material substitution left no psychological trace. Secure attachment is not formed through the fulfillment of physical needs. Rather, it is formed through warm, consistent, and timely emotional responses from caregivers. When parents exchange emotional needs for material ones, the child's need to feel accepted, understood, and valued as a person of worth remains unmet. (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022) reveals that it clearly distinguishes between physical needs and attachment needs as two systems that cannot substitute for one another. (Gustiani et al., 2025) and (Smartalent, 2023) confirms that a child's self-confidence is built through the experience of being listened to and emotionally accepted, not through an abundance of material possessions.

Implications of Family Communication Dysfunction in Building Self-Confidence in Young Children

The implications of family communication dysfunction on children's self-confidence can be explained in a structured manner using the Attachment Theory framework (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022). This theory asserts that the quality of early-life attachments determines how children perceive themselves when interacting with others and facing challenges which lies at the core of self-confidence. First Implication: The formation of an ambivalent attachment style. Informant 1 exhibits the characteristic traits of an ambivalent attachment style, in which they deeply long for their parents'

presence but are forced to suppress that desire because they recognize their parents' busyness. Ambivalent attachment results from inconsistent caregiver responses. Children who grow up in this environment of inconsistency become anxious and doubt whether their attachment figure will be present when needed. This doubt affects how the child views themselves; they are unable to cope with new situations and are reluctant to ask for help for fear of rejection. (Ferlin, Miranda dan Putri, 2022) shows that children with unstable parenting have extremely high fluctuations in self-confidence. Meanwhile, (Amaliya & Aprilliani, 2025) emphasizes that the approach must involve improving family communication, not just individual training.

Second, the development of an avoidant attachment style: Informant 2 exhibited an avoidant attachment style characterized by confusion when meeting parents who work far away, a preference for solitude, and discomfort with physical affection such as hugs. Avoidant attachment emerges when a child consistently experiences a lack of emotional presence from a caregiver, leading the child to conclude that seeking closeness will not yield a satisfying response. As a defense mechanism, the child deactivates the attachment system and acts as if they do not need emotional closeness. (Riska et al., 2025) states that the long-term absence of a consistent attachment figure causes children to adopt avoidant strategies as a seemingly adaptive coping mechanism. (Yulianti, 2023) added that family harmony is a prerequisite for children to feel confident enough to express themselves authentically in social settings.

Third, withdrawal from social interaction, as experienced by informants 1, 2, and 3, who tend to be quiet, shy, and passive both at home and at school. Withdrawal from social interaction arises from insecure attachment, which lacks a secure base, making exploration of the social environment feel too risky. Withdrawal from social interaction is a concrete manifestation of the loss of that sense of security; the child prefers not to try rather than face the risk of rejection, which is already very familiar to them. This condition aligns with the tendency of those lacking a secure base to choose solitude to avoid potential rejection (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022). (Saleh, 2018) explains that children who rarely receive positive feedback from authority figures at home experience similar difficulties when interacting with teachers at school.

Fourth, self-confidence in children with secure attachment: unlike the previous three informants, informants 4 and 5 demonstrated higher levels of self-confidence. Although informant 4's parents worked out of town and informant 5's mother had remarried resulting in a new family structure they continued to communicate regularly, responsively, attentively, and warmly. These two children were more willing to voice their opinions, did not exhibit withdrawn behavior, and were more open in their interactions. These conditions reflect the impact of secure attachment. (Putri Kofan et al., 2024) added that external interventions are only successful when accompanied by improvements in the quality of attachment at home.

Factors That Shape Self-Confidence in Young Children

The factors that shape children's self-confidence in this study interact within a framework centered on the main question: to what extent can caregivers be relied upon to meet children's emotional needs (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022). First, regarding the consistency of attachment responses, all five informants demonstrated the same pattern. Children who received consistent responses meaning their caregivers always listened to them, were always present when needed, and provided warm responses exhibited high levels of self-confidence, which depends not only on physical presence but also on the quality of communication, as indicated by the informant 4. Consistency is at the heart of forming a secure attachment. Children do not need a perfect caregiver, but rather one who is predictable and whose responses they can rely on when needed. (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022). Emphasizing that consistency is considered an indispensable element because children need a predictable figure, not a perfect one, and (Riska et al., 2025), added that inconsistent responses are a major predictor of low self-confidence in children, which explains why Informant 1 whose mother is present every day has as low self-confidence as Informant 2, whose parents live out of town.

Second, the quality of emotional responses: a striking difference between children with high and low self-confidence lies in the quality of their caregivers' emotional responses, with the families of informants 4 and 5 providing validating responses that acknowledge the child's feelings and respect their wishes. Meanwhile, the families of informants 1, 2, and 3 tended to reject and suppress the children's emotional expressions with commands to be quiet, strong, and obedient. Emotional validation through attachment teaches children that their feelings are real, important, and acceptable. When children feel that their emotions are accepted, they learn to accept themselves as individuals, which becomes the primary foundation of self-confidence. Repeated rejection sends the message that the most authentic parts of themselves are unacceptable, leading to a decline in self-confidence. (Suarna et al., 2025) found that emotional validation is a strong predictor of positive self-concept, while (Assegap et al., 2025) emphasizes that validation does not mean agreeing with every feeling, but rather acknowledging the existence and validity of those feelings a simple acknowledgment whose impact goes beyond any material gift.

Third, the availability of an attachment figure as a secure base relates to the extent to which the caregiver can function as a real secure base for the child. In the families of Informants 1 and 3, although the caregivers were physically present at home, they were not emotionally available due to work-related exhaustion and the demands of managing the household. In Informant 2's case, the primary attachment figure was not even physically present, and the substitute figure was unable to fulfill the role of a secure base. Without a real secure base, the child cannot develop the courage to explore the environment and face new challenges, two things that are crucial for building self-confidence. A child who lacks a safe place to return to will avoid taking risks, refrain from trying new things, and shun challenges, which directly limits the development of their self-confidence. Parents who are physically

exhausted or unaware of their child's emotional needs will struggle to be psychologically present (Subagia, 2021). (Nurfalah & Lestari, 2020) found that families with open and warm communication raise children who are more willing to express themselves and more confident in dealing with social conflicts.

Fourth, experiences of abandonment and emotional recovery, how children process experiences of being neglected by their attachment figures both physically and emotionally as well as the parents' efforts at recovery. Informants 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate the dysfunction of experiencing repeated emotional neglect, as seen in Informants 1 and 2 who are accustomed to being alone, receive praise only when they achieve something, and have their stories frequently interrupted which accumulates emotional wounds that trigger a lack of trust in themselves and their surroundings. Children who continue to experience emotional neglect without a healing process that is, when the attachment figure fails to recognize, repair, and strengthen the broken bond accumulate emotional wounds that lead to a lack of self-confidence. Conversely, in Informants 4 and 5, every decision or distance that arises is always followed by active efforts by the parents to repair the bond, resulting in improved self-confidence. (Zahroh & Annisa, 2022) states that it does not require a perfect attachment figure, but the difference between functional and dysfunctional families lies in the active effort to repair relationships after a mistake and (Rafi'i, 2023) emphasizes that it is through this healing process that children learn that broken relationships can be mended and that they are worth fighting for.

The fifth factor the quality of the surrogate figure in mitigating the impact of dysfunction focuses on the role of the surrogate figure when biological parents are unable to be sufficiently present. In the case of Informant 2, the grandparents, as surrogate figures, were unable to fulfill the attachment functions needed by Informant 2 due to a generational gap that created a communication barrier. In situations where biological parents are absent, the quality of the substitute figure becomes a determining factor in whether the negative impact on the child's self-confidence can be minimized. A substitute figure who acts as a secure base being emotionally present, responsive to the child's needs, and consistently providing affective support can mitigate most of the effects of dysfunction arising from the absence of biological parents. (Riska et al., 2025) found that a responsive surrogate figure who is psychologically present can be an important protective factor. However, (Suarna et al., 2025) noted that its effectiveness depends heavily on the ability to understand a child's developmental needs according to their age, and that the grandparents' inability to fulfill that role in the case of Informant 2 due to a generational gap in understanding resulted in the most severe impact of communication dysfunction on the child's self-confidence among all informants.

ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

This study offers a new perspective by examining communication dysfunction in families that remain structurally intact and its impact on the development of self-confidence in young children through the lens of Attachment Theory. Unlike previous studies, which have largely focused on effective communication, positive parenting, or families experiencing separation, this study reveals that the presence of both parents does not always guarantee the formation of a secure emotional bond. Communication dysfunction including a lack of openness, inadequate emotional validation, judgmental communication, neglect of emotional needs, and low-quality interactions between parents and children can hinder the development of self-confidence, even when the family structure remains intact.

Findings show that the quality of communication within the family plays a crucial role in the development of a child's self-confidence. Warm, supportive, and responsive communication encourages children to be more confident in expressing their opinions, interacting with others, and demonstrating their abilities. Conversely, unhealthy communication makes children more likely to withdraw, fear making mistakes, hesitate when making decisions, and have low self-esteem. This underscores that family communication is a key mechanism in shaping a child's self-perception.

These findings are consistent with those of (Sabarua & et al., 2020) and (Morris et al., 2017), who emphasize the importance of family interactions and emotional bonds in developing children's self-concept, emotional regulation, and social adjustment. This study shows that when parents fail to provide consistent emotional responses, children struggle to recognize and express their emotions, leading them to prefer hiding their feelings, being reluctant to speak, and fearing making mistakes. Findings regarding the lack of emotional responsiveness also expand upon the results of (Pinquart & Fischer, 2022), which suggest that the quality of everyday emotional communication has a greater influence than parenting style categories alone. A parent's physical presence without emotional validation can still create an insecure attachment, thereby complementing (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019) explanation regarding the importance of a balance between control and emotional warmth. Rejecting children's emotional expressions such as forbidding them to cry or demanding that they always be strong not only hinders emotional regulation, as described by (Morris et al., 2017), but also fosters avoidant attachment, which diminishes children's courage and self-confidence. This study also found that the presence of other family members cannot fully replace an attachment figure.

These findings complement the research by (Suarna et al., 2025) by demonstrating that the loss of an attachment figure can occur even when the family remains intact if parents are emotionally absent. Furthermore, the tendency to substitute emotional warmth with material provision suggests that emotional needs have a far greater influence on the development of self-confidence than the fulfillment

of physical needs, as supported by (Rubin, 2023). The findings of this study are also consistent with those of (Pandemic et al., 2020), (Zhang et al., 2023), (Cohen & Anders, 2020), and (Brummelman et al., 2017), who emphasize the importance of the quality of family relationships and parental communication for children's social-emotional development and self-evaluation. This study expands on these findings by demonstrating that emotional neglect occurs not only through parental phubbing but also through indifference, lack of responsiveness, and psychological absence all of which hinder the formation of secure attachment and give rise to negative internal working models. Unlike (Nwokolo & Osemwegie, 2021), who used a quantitative approach with adolescents, this study employs a qualitative approach with young children, which allows for a more in-depth description of children's emotional experiences and explains the mechanisms through which self-confidence is formed via attachment relationships.

Differences among previous studies are influenced by context, participant characteristics, and methodological approaches. While previous studies generally used quantitative methods to test relationships between variables, this study employs a qualitative approach, thereby enabling it to describe children's subjective experiences and explain in greater depth how communication dysfunction shapes children's self-confidence.

The main contribution of this study is to demonstrate that communication dysfunction within the family influences the development of self-confidence through the mechanism of emotional attachment. This study expands the application of Attachment Theory by showing that communication disruptions hinder the formation of secure attachment, which in turn affects children's self-concept and self-confidence, while also filling a gap in the literature, which has traditionally focused more on effective families than on the impact of dysfunctional communication.

In practical terms, the results of this study underscore the importance of open, empathetic, and responsive communication within the family to support children's self-confidence development. These findings can serve as a basis for parents, teachers, and counselors in identifying children who face obstacles due to family communication issues. Academically, this study enriches the fields of family communication and developmental psychology by positioning the quality of communication as a factor in the development of self-confidence. From a policy perspective, the study's findings can serve as a basis for developing family education programs, training, and counseling services centered on family communication. Future research is recommended to involve a more diverse sample, employ mixed methods, and combine the family communication perspective with other developmental theories to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study identified five types of family communication dysfunction that consistently shape the self-confidence of young children. Based on Attachment Theory, these dysfunctions include a lack of emotional responsiveness, where parents only meet functional needs without genuine emotional involvement. The rejection of a child's emotional expressions through responses such as "don't cry" or "you have to be strong," which encourages the child to shut down their attachment system and grow up without the ability to express themselves authentically. Furthermore, the physical absence of parents as a secure base a role that cannot be replaced by older siblings or grandparents. Additionally, a shift in attention due to changes in family structure that are not well-communicated, causing the child to feel unimportant, as well as a tendency for parents to substitute emotional warmth with material possessions collectively deprive the child of emotional validation, leading to the loss of the foundation of their self-confidence.

Family communication dysfunction has four interrelated implications for young children's self-confidence. First, inconsistent parenting fosters an ambivalent attachment style, resulting in fluctuating self-confidence that is highly dependent on momentary attention. Second, the long-term absence of a parental figure triggers an avoidant attachment style, in which children build emotional walls that erode their ability to appear confident. Third, the lack of a secure base causes children to withdraw from social interactions, as evidenced by behaviors such as not daring to speak in public, avoiding attention, and showing little initiative. In contrast, children with secure attachment demonstrate far more positive self-confidence, proving that responsive, empathetic, and consistent family communication directly builds a strong psychological foundation for the child.

Five factors that can influence the development of a child's self-confidence in early childhood. First, consistency in predictable responses is far more important than a perfect caregiver, while uncertainty is actually the strongest indicator of low self-confidence in children. Second, the quality of emotional responses specifically, acknowledging the child's feelings has a far greater impact on affirming their sense of self than material fulfillment. Third, the psychological readiness of the attachment figure as a secure base meaning that a parent's physical presence will be ineffective if they are not emotionally present. Fourth, the experience of emotional repair, where parents' active efforts to mend relationships after making parenting mistakes are a key determinant of a well-functioning family. This simultaneously teaches children that they have value. Fifth, the quality of substitute figures in mitigating dysfunction, where the presence of responsive substitute figures can serve as an important protective factor, while their inability to understand the child's needs will exacerbate the damage to the child's trust during early childhood.

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