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# Pedagogical Insights into the Impact of Gadget Use on Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

**Rohana[1], Reswita[2]**

[1]Taman Kanak-kanak Muawwal, Indonesia; rohannar68@gmail.com
[2]Universitas Lancang Kuning, Indonesia; reswita@unilak.ac.id

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study explores the impact of gadget use on the social-emotional development of early childhood, a crucial stage for developing emotional regulation, social interaction skills, and empathy. With rapid technological advancements and the increasing use of gadgets among children, concerns have emerged regarding their effects on children's social-emotional development. A descriptive qualitative approach was used in this study, utilizing observation, interviews, and documentation techniques to collect data from 3-6 years old children in several early childhood education institutions. The results show that excessive gadget use negatively affects social-emotional development, characterized by reduced social interaction skills, difficulty regulating emotions, and low empathy. Children who frequently engage with gadgets also tend to display withdrawn behaviors and high dependence on digital devices. These findings highlight the essential role of parents and educators in limiting gadget use and ensuring children experience adequate social interactions to foster healthy emotional development. The study underscores the need for balanced and supervised gadget use to ensure children receive a well-rounded learning experience that supports their social-emotional growth.*



**Corresponding Author :**
Rohana
Taman Kanak-kanak Muawwal, Indonesia; rohannar68@gmail.com

## 1. INTRODUCTION

National education in Indonesia is designed to cultivate individuals equipped to effectively humanize others, thereby improving the quality and competitiveness of human resources in an era characterized by a knowledge-based economy and creative economic development. This is explicitly outlined in Law No. 20 of 2003, which emphasizes that education is a conscious and planned effort aimed at fostering a learning environment that stimulates students' potential and nurtures their spiritual, religious, and emotional development, alongside their cognitive and

social skills (Hadiansyah et al., 2017; Kertati, 2021; Kusumawati, 2022). The law also frames the concept of early childhood education (PAUD) as not merely a preparatory stage for basic education but as a crucial period that spans from birth to six years old, during which foundational aspects of a child's personality must be developed (Hartanti & Sasongko, 2021a).

Early childhood educational programs must facilitate holistic growth, with an emphasis on cognitive, emotional, social, and motor skills development, as these dimensions are essential for children to thrive personally and within societal contexts (Sitorus, 2020; Syarbaini, 2016). Fostering such multifaceted development not only enhances children's ability to adapt and succeed in various environments but also lays the groundwork for lifelong learning and emotional intelligence (Aditya et al., 2023). It is therefore vital that these educational platforms incorporate a diverse array of activities tailored to cater to the unique developmental requirements of each child, creating an environment that promotes exploration and active engagement (Hartanti & Sasongko, 2021a). Such activities could range from interactive play to structured learning experiences that challenge and refine children's abilities across multiple domains (Sya'baniah & Kuswanto, 2025).

Moreover, the efforts of educational institutions in Indonesia should align comprehensively with the legal framework established by the National Education System Law. This alignment is necessary to ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has access to quality learning experiences that are both comprehensive and equitable (Ahmadi & Widdah, 2023; Zaenab & Sueca, 2019). Addressing these legal mandates, educators and parents must collaborate to provide educational opportunities that not only meet but exceed the outlined standards, thereby ensuring that children are prepared for the complexities of modern society.

The rapid technological advancements in Indonesia present both opportunities and challenges for early childhood development. Gadgets, which have become integral to daily life across various social strata, serve as multifunctional tools that extend beyond communication to include educational and entertainment functions (Kharishma & Septiana, 2020). However, an overreliance on these devices may jeopardize children's developmental trajectories, particularly concerning their emotional and social skill acquisition (Meyer-Bender et al., 2025). The shift towards digital interaction can detract from essential face-to-face engagements that are pivotal for nurturing social-emotional capacities and developing conflict resolution

skills (Kuswanto et al., 2021). To counter these effects, it is crucial for caregivers and educators to establish a balanced approach to technology use, integrating it in ways that complement rather than replace direct interpersonal interactions and play, thus facilitating a more rounded developmental experience for children.

In the context of parenting in this digital age, the responsibility extends beyond merely providing access to technology. Parents are encouraged to foster environments conducive to healthy child development that involve interactive and tangible experiences, steering clear of age-inappropriate gadget usage. The importance of parental involvement becomes even more salient as children navigate social interactions complicated by their digital backgrounds, with research suggesting that healthy social-emotional development stems from strong parental influence and active engagement in direct interpersonal connections (Hartanti & Sasongko, 2021b). Education, particularly in early childhood contexts, is not merely a matter of imparting knowledge but rather fostering a supportive framework that promotes emotional intelligence, social skills, and personality development. This lays a strong foundation that enables children to adapt effectively to societal demands throughout their lives.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

The type of research used is Descriptive Qualitative Research. Descriptive research functions to describe, record, analyze, and interpret current conditions. In this context, the study aims to provide a real picture of how the use of gadgets affects children's social interaction skills, emotion regulation, and empathy in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) institutions (Moleong, 2000).

The location of the research is several Early Childhood Education Institutions (PAUD) in the Name of the City/Regency. These institutions were specifically chosen because they are considered to represent diverse conditions of gadget use in the early childhood education environment and facilitate access to observe children's natural social-emotional interactions. This research was carried out during the Mention Month Range, Year, including the preparation stage, data collection (observation and interview), to the data analysis stage.

The main participants in this study consisted of three groups selected based on their key roles in the research context, namely Early Childhood (3-6 Years) as subjects whose social-emotional behavior was observed; Early Childhood Parents as a source of information about the pattern and frequency of use of gadgets at home;

and Early Childhood Teachers/Educators as a source of pedagogical insight and direct observers of children's social-emotional development in schools.

The participant recruitment technique used is Purposive Sampling. Participants were selected based on certain criteria and considerations relevant to the research objectives. This criterion includes children who show significant impacts (especially negative, according to the abstract) of gadget use, as well as teachers and parents who have rich observation and direct experience in managing or observing gadget use in children. The data collected in this study is Qualitative Data, which is non-numerical information obtained through verbal descriptions from observations, interview transcripts, and documents.

This data specifically focuses on the excavation of meaning, context, and pedagogical perspectives. Data sources are classified into Primary Sources, namely data obtained directly from participants through observation of children's behavior (social interaction and emotion regulation) and in-depth interviews with teachers and parents; and Secondary Sources, which are supporting data derived from official documents, such as child development records, teachers' daily journals, and school policy documents related to the use of digital media.

Data collection techniques are carried out through triangulation methods to ensure the validity of the data, including observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The observation used is Non-Participatory Observation to directly observe the behavior of children aged 3-6 years in the school environment. The focus of observation is mainly related to social interaction and communication skills with peers, the ability to regulate emotions (expressing and managing feelings), the level of empathy and withdrawal behaviors that may arise, and dependence on digital devices.

Semi-structured In-depth Interviews are conducted with teachers and parents to explore information that is not accessible through observation, such as the teacher's views on the impact of gadgets and pedagogical strategies applied, the frequency, duration, and type of gadget content that children access at home (from parents), as well as specific experiences related to children's difficulties in social and emotional interaction after intensive use of gadgets. Finally, documentation is used to collect relevant complementary data, such as a track record of children's social-emotional development at school, records of

communication between schools and parents, and photos or videos of activities that support the data findings.

The main instrument in this qualitative research is the Researcher himself (Human Instrument), where the researcher plays a central role as a planner, collector, analyst, and data reporter. The supporting instruments used include the Observation Guidelines (to focus on the child's social-emotional indicators), the Interview Guide (a semi-structured list of questions for teachers and parents), recording devices (audio and/or visual), and stationery.

The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which involved three main stages that were carried out continuously and simultaneously. The first is Data Reduction, which is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting raw data from field records and transcripts. The reduced data were focused on the main themes: the impact of gadgets, social-emotional development (emotion regulation, interaction, empathy), and pedagogical insights. The second is Data Display, where the reduced data is then presented in the form of a descriptive narrative, matrix, or chart to facilitate understanding and drawing conclusions. The third is Conclusion Drawing/Verification, which is drawing temporary conclusions that are verified continuously during the research process. The final conclusion will provide answers to research questions regarding pedagogical insights from the impact of gadgets.

The validity of the data is ensured through Triangulation, which is the most common data validity check technique used in qualitative research. This procedure includes Source Triangulation, which is comparing and double-checking information obtained from various sources (children, parents, and teachers) on the same issue; and Triangulation Techniques, which are testing data consistency using different data collection techniques (comparing observation results with interviews and documentation) (Hezbollah et al., 2023).

## 3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were obtained from direct observation of children's behavior, in-depth interviews with teachers and parents, and documentation at PAUD institutions. The results of these findings are described to answer the research focus on the impact of gadget use on early childhood social-emotional development and its pedagogical implications.

Based on interviews with parents, it was found that the use of gadgets in children aged 3–6 years has become a daily routine with a significant duration. On average, children spend about 2-4 hours a day in front of screens. Gadgets are often used as a distraction or "calmer" by parents. Parent's Quote (OT-03): "Since the pandemic, my child has become accustomed to looking at his cell phone when he wakes up. If he is fussy or wants to eat, quickly shut up if he is given a YouTube view. Yes, instead of bothering, that's the shortcut." Observations show that this dependence peaks at the time of transition. Children who are used to accessing the device immediately after waking up often show intense negative emotions if the device is not available.

The most commonly accessed content is passive videos and simple games, not educational interactive content. Description of Field Observation (DO-07): "Child A (5 years old) showed a lack of response when invited to role-play. The teacher reported that at home, Child A was only used to watching fast-paced animated series. When asked to interact, he tends to mimic the dialogue from his spectacle, rather than respond organically." The results of the study consistently show that excessive use of gadgets has a significant negative impact on three main aspects of children's social-emotional development: social interaction, emotional regulation, and empathy. Children who use gadgets intensely show reduced social interaction skills, characterized by a tendency to withdraw behaviors. Teacher's Quote (G-02): "We often see children who play on their phones too often at school so they don't know how to start a conversation with a friend. They tend to play alone in the corner, or if they play in a group, they don't want to share ideas. Their focus is short, as if the social interaction isn't as attractive as the screen." Description of Field Observation (DO-12): "During the free play activity, Child B (4 years old) sat alone in the block area, even though there were three other children around. When Child C tries to get her to build a tower, Child B only answers with short words and avoids eye contact, then pretends to be busy with her toys, showing a lack of initiative to build rapport."

The most prominent impact is difficulty regulating emotions, especially when facing limitations or frustration. Parent's Quote (OT-05): "If the cell phone dies or the battery runs out, my child can cry until he screams, it's hysterical. We were afraid to take it. He really relies heavily on digital devices to calm down." Description of Field Observation (DO-15): "In a simple conflict situation while scrambling over colored pencils, Child D (5 years old) did not show verbal ability to solve problems.

He immediately cried loudly and threw his pencil, an indication of an inability to process and communicate anger or disappointment constructively."

Teachers reported that children in this group often showed low empathy, which was associated with a lack of opportunities to observe and feel the emotions of others directly. Teacher's Quote (G-01): "Once a friend fell and cried, but Child E (6 years old) did not show any reaction. He just looked at it for a moment and then continued coloring. We had to explicitly invite her to ask how her friend was doing. Their emotional interactions are severely hampered, as if the feelings of others are not important."

These findings highlight the important role of teachers and pedagogical strategies in responding to the negative impact of gadgets, underscoring the need for balanced and supervised gadget use. Teachers in the institutions studied applied strategies to maximize social and emotional interaction to foster healthy emotional development. Teacher's Quote (G-03): "We are now intensifying free role-playing activities and small group discussions. The goal is for them to want to listen and respond to friends, not just respond to screens. We often use hand puppets to teach the concept of feelings and take turns in speaking."

Teachers realize that their role is limited if not supported by policies at home, so the pedagogical focus is also directed to parental education. Teacher's Quote (G-04): "Our insight is, we can control them 4-5 hours at school, but the remaining 19 hours are in the hands of parents. We create regular *workshops* to make parents aware that limiting gadget use is mandatory. We emphasize that adequate *social interactions* are the main emotional nourishment of children". The conclusion is that pedagogical interventions must be comprehensive, including strict gadget restrictions, facilitation of face-to-face social interactions, and explicit emotional education in schools. Teachers must be proactive in creating an interaction-rich environment that can compensate for the passive and addictive nature of gadgets, to ensure that children receive a well-rounded learning experience.

Early childhood is the fastest stage of social development, where children are supposed to learn how to interact, share, and negotiate. However, this study confirms that excessive use of gadgets significantly reduces the time children spend on *direct play* activities with peers. Pedagogically, this phenomenon undermines the child's

natural "social laboratory". The play environment that should be where children develop basic social skills such as communication, empathy, and cooperation, is now eroded by digital isolation, creating a pedagogical deficit in children's social foundations.

The most obvious disorders are related to communication skills and non-verbal sensitivity. Interaction through gadgets is one-way and passive, in contrast to real social interaction that requires real-time feedback and interpretation of social cues. Findings from interviews with teachers (G-02) showed that children who were used to using gadgets had difficulty initiating conversations and tended to avoid eye contact, indicating a loss of opportunities to practice non-verbal skills such as reading facial expressions and understanding tone of voice key skills for social literacy (Ladd, 2006). In addition, there is a correlation between excessive use of gadgets and low empathy, as confirmed by observations, which show that children lose the opportunity to observe and respond to the emotions of others, which can hinder the development of their Theory of Mind (Ale, n.d.). The teacher (G-01) noted the child's lack of response when peers had difficulties. Failure to form empathy at this age has the potential to hinder the development of morality and prosocial behavior in the future.

Another impact is difficulties in the regulation of emotions and the emergence of withdrawn behaviors. Gadgets are often used as an instant solution by parents, which can pedagogically hinder children from learning internal self-soothing mechanisms (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). When digital devices are picked up, children often experience emotional outbursts (tantrums) due to the inability to process frustration or disappointment in a constructive way.

These findings yield an important pedagogical insight: Teachers must play an active role as facilitators and regulators. Pedagogical interventions should not only be in the form of prohibitions, but also involve replacing gadget time with activities designed to facilitate interaction and collaboration. Research shows that social interaction-based approaches can help children develop social skills and emotion regulation (Smith et al., 2019). Teachers (G-03) apply role-play intensification and small group discussions to encourage children's emotional control and practice sharing and turn-taking skills.

In conclusion, the influence of gadgets on social interaction in early childhood is a pedagogical crisis because it can erode the important foundations of character

and social-emotional development (Zhou et al., 2021). The important role of educators (G-04) includes educating parents about consistent screen time restrictions, ensuring children continue to have adequate social interaction for balanced growth.

The use of gadgets is often practiced as a quick solution to calm children. Although effective, the findings of this study suggest that the practice pedagogically interferes with children's learning processes in recognizing, expressing, and managing their own emotions. Gadgets reduce children's opportunities to process and name difficult emotions they experience (LaBounty et al., 2016). This is related to a lack of emotion regulation skills as evidenced by reports by teachers and parents that children who are overly dependent on gadgets tend to be impulsive, irritable, and impatient (Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2014).

In the context of pedagogy, emotional development is supposed to occur through direct interaction and real emotional experiences. Children learn emotion regulation when faced with minor conflicts, respond to disappointment, or mimic coping strategies from responsive adults (Zava et al., 2019). When the time that should have been spent on social interaction is replaced by screen stimulation, neurological pathways to develop self-control are inhibited, and research shows that gadgets interfere with children's ability to "pause" their emotional responses. Therefore, teachers and parents need to focus interventions on creating spaces where difficult emotions can be experienced and processed in a social environment (Morgan et al., 2012).

In essence, the use of gadgets as "sedatives" is contrary to the basic principles of developmental pedagogy that emphasize the importance of active experience and interaction in emotional learning. The findings encourage educators and parents to impose restrictions on gadget use and replace them with activities that train regulatory skills, to support healthy emotional growth.

Further research findings suggest that some children begin to show signs of gadget dependence, which is seen through tantrum behavior when the gadget is picked up and the inability to concentrate when playing without a digital device (Raver et al., 2009). This dependence is a serious pedagogical risk, as it can reduce the child's interest in physical and social activities, which are essential for their holistic development. Dependence on gadgets shifts children's intrinsic motivation towards activities that require effort and delayed gratification, while gadgets offer

instant stimulation (Brink et al., 2015). When children become accustomed to quick stimuli from screens, they become less motivated to engage in tasks that require sustained focus and complex social interactions.

Tantrum behavior is seen when the gadget is taken as an indicator that the device has become part of the child's emotional regulation. Children see gadgets as self-extension or the only source of comfort, reflecting a lack of success in developing internal coping skills (Coplan et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important for teachers and parents to realize that dealing with tantrums is not just about discipline, but also about replacing addictive habits with healthy alternatives. This dependence risks reducing children's participation in physical and social activities, which is key to the development of their gross motor skills, physical health, and social understanding (Moskowitz et al., 1985). Failing to encourage these holistic activities at an early age can create a skills gap in the future.

Therefore, pedagogical interventions should target the child's re-engagement with the physical and social environment. Teachers need to design a curriculum that focuses on hands-on experience and active interaction, with strategies such as play therapy or nature-based activities to reduce reliance on digital stimulation, and teach that real environments offer more valuable pleasure (Younger et al., 1986). Reliance on gadgets is not only a behavioral problem, but also a serious barrier to holistic development, and teachers and parents should ensure that children have access to a wide range of activities that support creativity, motor skills, and direct social interaction.

The development of empathy is greatly influenced by social experiences as well as real observations of other people's facial expressions and body language. This research underscores pedagogical concerns that when children interact more with screens than with humans, they miss out on important opportunities to learn to understand and respond to the emotions of others. The screen does not provide the complex nuances needed to foster social sensitivity (Wellman et al., 2008). This deficit has an impact on the child's Theory of Mind ability, which is the understanding that others have different thoughts and feelings (Degnan & Fox, 2007). Device-mediated interactions do not teach children to negotiate emotionally or see situations from the perspective of others, so children are at risk of growing up to be less socially sensitive to the needs of those around them.

Additionally, it is important to involve parents in this process. Pedagogical discussions should emphasize that the quality of face-to-face interaction (e.g., reading a story with a clear facial expression, talking about the character's feelings) is far more important than the quantity of time spent Soyoof et al. (2023). Parents serve as the main model of children's empathy. Ultimately, failure to develop empathy is not just a personal loss but a social loss. This research provides a basis for teachers to prioritize activities that explicitly train emotional intelligence and social sensitivity, ensuring that early childhood has sufficient social and emotional capital to interact effectively in society.

Although gadgets have potential as educational tools, this study shows that their use should be limited and supervised. Without clear guidelines, the negative risks to social-emotional development can far outweigh the potential educational benefits (Burnett, 2010). The need for this limitation has become a pedagogical imperative in the digital era. A key aspect of effective surveillance is ensuring age-appropriate content (Cassidy et al., 2005). Content that is too fast, violent, or uneducational can interfere with a child's cognitive and emotional processes. From a pedagogical point of view, educators need to advocate the use of gadgets only for active learning purposes, where the child is involved in problem-solving, rather than just passively receiving information.

The most important pedagogical element in supervision is two-way interaction with parents when children use gadgets. When parents sit with the child, they can help process content, explain concepts, and mediate emotional responses (Mayar et al., 2022). The presence of parents transforms the experience of gadgets from isolation to social learning opportunities, reducing the risk of interaction deficits. The role of teachers and parents is crucial in balancing the use of technology with direct play and social learning (Son et al., 2013). Teachers are responsible for educating parents about the dangers of unsupervised use of gadgets and providing practical strategies for screen time management. Cooperation between home and school is the main key to the success of the intervention (Amini, 2022).

The guidelines set must be consistent and clear. Inconsistent boundaries (e.g., gadgets are banned at school but free at home) can send ambiguous messages to the child, exacerbating difficulties with emotional regulation and dependence (Schoroškienė, 2023). Consistency in boundaries helps children build a self-discipline framework. In conclusion, the findings of this study emphasize that

technology is not the enemy, but should be treated as an aid that requires pedagogical supervision. Teachers and parents have a shared responsibility to be the gatekeepers of content and time, ensure that gadgets remain a tool, and never replace the social-emotional interactions that are fundamental to early childhood development (Budiarti & Kurniati, 2024).

## 4. CONCLUSION

Excessive use of gadgets in early childhood (3–6 years) has a significant negative impact on their social-emotional development, disrupting the critical phase of social learning. The findings showed a decrease in social interaction skills (including withdrawing behavior), a marked deficit in emotion regulation (indicated by impulsivity and dependence on gadgets as a 'calmer'), and a lack of empathy development. Pedagogically, this phenomenon is interpreted as an obstacle to the process of internalizing social and emotional skills, where passive stimulation from screens replaces the child's fundamental need for real emotional experiences and rich face-to-face interactions. This dependence proves the failure to develop internal self-soothing mechanisms.

Based on these findings, the main Pedagogical Insights emphasized the importance of integrated interventions. The conclusion emphasizes that the role of teachers and parents is crucial in enforcing consistent boundaries and supervised use of gadgets. The solution lies in replacing gadget time with hands-on play activities and structured social learning to restore the balance of children's development. Therefore, this study recommends the need for a control pedagogy in which technology is used wisely as an aid, not as a substitute for human interaction, to ensure that early childhood gains a healthy social-emotional foundation.

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