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Development Of Children's Adaptive Behavior Through Learning Activities In Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Adaptive behavior refers to children's ability to adjust to environmental demands, regulate their behavior and emotions, interact appropriately with others, and perform everyday activities according to their developmental level. Developing these abilities is important in early childhood education because the preschool period is a critical stage for establishing self-regulation, social-emotional competence, independence, and readiness to participate in broader learning environments. This article aims to describe the development of children's adaptive behavior through learning activities in early childhood education and to identify activities and teacher strategies that can support this development. The study employed a literature review by examining relevant international journal articles and academic books. The review indicates that adaptive behavior can be developed through daily routines, guided play, group games, problem-solving activities, independence training, emotion regulation, and warm, responsive teacher-child interactions. Activities that allow children to choose, try, wait for turns, follow rules, express feelings, and complete tasks gradually support the development of self-regulation and appropriate social behavior. The review also indicates that teacher support and family involvement need to be implemented consistently. Therefore, adaptive behavior development should be integrated into everyday learning activities rather than treated as an additional, separate activity.

Keywords: *adaptive behavior; early childhood; self-regulation; social-emotional development; learning activities*

1. Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is an educational stage that provides a foundation for children's holistic development. At this stage, children need not only cognitive stimulation but also experiences that help them develop attention, emotional regulation, behavior, social relationships, and everyday functioning. These abilities are closely related to children's readiness to learn and participate effectively in social environments. Developmental research indicates that self-regulation during the preschool years contributes to children's later social development as they transition into primary school [1].

In the context of adaptive behavior, children's abilities should not be understood simply as compliance with rules. Adaptive behavior includes the ability to use skills appropriate to situational demands, such as self-care, communication, following routines, completing tasks, controlling impulsive responses, and building positive relationships. Self-regulation is an important foundation because it enables children to direct attention, emotions, and actions toward particular goals [2].

ECE environments provide many opportunities to develop these abilities through direct experience. Play, classroom routines, group activities, transitions, and everyday interactions with teachers and peers are natural contexts for practicing adaptive behavior. Research on social-emotional learning in early childhood settings indicates positive effects on social competence, emotional competence, behavioral regulation, and early learning outcomes, although the quality of evidence and intervention designs varies [3].

Teachers play an important role because the quality of teacher-child interaction can provide a context that supports self-regulation and social skills. Close and supportive teacher-child relationships are associated with children's self-

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regulation and social-emotional skills [4]. In addition, practices such as emotion coaching and co-regulation can help children learn to recognize, label, and manage emotions more independently [5].

Play is also relevant to adaptive behavior development because it gives children opportunities to practice rules, take roles, delay gratification, negotiate, and solve problems in meaningful situations. Quasi-experimental evidence suggests that play- and relaxation-based interventions can improve aspects of social-emotional competence among preschool children [6]. Thus, learning activities in ECE can serve as a strategic context for developing adaptive behavior naturally and continuously.

Based on this background, this article aims to analyze how children's adaptive behavior can be developed through learning activities in ECE, the types of activities that are relevant, the roles of teachers and families, and the factors that support successful development. This review is expected to provide practical guidance for educators in designing learning that is not only oriented toward early academic outcomes but also toward children's independence and ability to adapt.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Adaptive Behavior and Self-Regulation in Early Childhood

Adaptive behavior in early childhood can be understood as a set of abilities that enables children to function effectively in everyday contexts. During the preschool years, it may be reflected in the ability to follow routines, care for oneself, communicate needs, interact with peers, adjust behavior to rules, and cope with simple demands. The concept overlaps with self-regulation, executive function, social-emotional competence, and independence.

Self-regulation involves the ability to control attention, thoughts, emotions, and behavior in ways that are consistent with goals or situational demands [2]. This ability develops gradually and is strongly influenced by children's experiences. Therefore, teachers should not expect self-regulated behavior to emerge only through verbal instructions. Children need opportunities to practice through repeated, meaningful, developmentally appropriate activities.

Empirical evidence indicates that preschool self-regulation is associated with later social development. Cognitive flexibility, delay of gratification, and effortful control support prosocial behavior, particularly during the transition from preschool to primary school [1]. These findings reinforce the importance of incorporating self-regulation practice into everyday learning experiences.

2.2. Social-Emotional Learning as a Foundation for Adaptive Behavior

Social-emotional learning emphasizes the development of skills for recognizing and managing emotions, building relationships, making appropriate decisions, and behaving responsibly. In ECE, these skills do not always need to be taught in separate sessions. They can be integrated into play, group activities, storytelling, conversations, art activities, and classroom routines.

A systematic map of systematic reviews on social and emotional learning in preschool settings found indications of benefits for social competence, emotional competence, behavioral regulation, and early learning outcomes, while also noting heterogeneity and methodological limitations in the preschool evidence base [3]. This means that teachers need to select strategies contextually, observe children's responses, and adjust the level of support.

In classroom practice, adaptive behavior development should emphasize concrete experiences. For example, turn-taking can be practiced through games, emotion regulation can be practiced when children experience conflict during play, and responsibility can be practiced through routines for cleaning up learning materials.

2.3. Play and Structured Activities

Play is an appropriate context for early childhood learning because children learn through action, interaction, and problem solving. However, play activities that support adaptive behavior need to be designed with clear developmental purposes. Teachers can use rule-based games, role play, construction activities, movement games, and open-ended materials.

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Research on play-based interventions emphasizes that the use of play in education requires appropriate design, implementation, and evaluation [7]. Research on loose-parts play and relaxation has also reported improvements in positive emotional expression and aspects of social-emotional competence among preschool children [6].

Games and activities that require children to inhibit an immediate response can also provide practice in self-control. Recent research on kindergarten activities indicates that games designed to strengthen inhibitory control can be incorporated into learning to support self-regulation [8].

3. Methodology

This study used a literature review approach. The method was selected because the purpose of the article was to synthesize scientific findings on the development of children's adaptive behavior through learning activities in ECE, rather than to measure behavioral change in a specific group of children. The main sources were published international journal articles and academic literature that are accessible to readers.

The review process consisted of four stages. First, the focus was defined to include adaptive behavior, self-regulation, social-emotional competence, play activities, teacher-child interaction, and family support. Second, relevant literature was identified using keywords related to early childhood, preschool, adaptive behavior, self-regulation, social-emotional learning, play-based learning, and teacher-child interaction. Third, relevant sources were grouped by theme. Fourth, findings were compared and synthesized descriptively to formulate implications for ECE practice.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) the article addressed young children or preschool contexts; (2) it discussed self-regulation, social-emotional competence, behavior, independence, or learning approaches relevant to adaptive behavior; (3) it was published in an academic journal or scholarly source; and (4) it provided sufficient methodological information and findings for analysis. Sources that were not directly related to early childhood or did not provide an adequate academic basis were not used as primary evidence.

The analysis was thematic. Findings were grouped into: (a) characteristics of adaptive behavior; (b) routines and habituation; (c) play and structured activities; (d) teacher-child interaction; (e) family involvement; and (f) supporting and inhibiting factors. Because this is a literature review, the Results section does not present new pretest-posttest or field data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Routines and Habituation as Practice for Adaptive Behavior

Classroom routines provide structure that helps children predict what will happen and what is expected of them. Arrival routines, storing belongings, handwashing, choosing activities, cleaning up materials, eating, and preparing to go home can all be used as opportunities to practice adaptive behavior. Repetition in a consistent context helps children internalize behavioral patterns without always waiting for adult instructions.

Routine-based learning is also relevant to executive function and self-regulation. Professional learning that supports educators in fostering self-regulation and executive functioning has been associated with improvements in children's self-regulation and executive-function outcomes [10]. This suggests that the quality of implementation is as important as the type of activity.

4.2. Routines and Habituation as Practice for Adaptive Behavior

Simple rule-based games can be used to practice waiting, following instructions, remembering rules, and controlling spontaneous responses. Teachers can begin with a small number of rules, model them, and gradually increase complexity. As children become more capable, teachers can reduce assistance so that children become increasingly independent.

Group games also provide social experiences that may not occur in individual activities. Children learn that their own wishes need to be considered alongside the needs of peers. In these situations, teachers can help children use social language such as asking, refusing politely, offering help, and resolving disagreements. Such activities connect self-regulation and social competence in a single learning experience.

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Evidence on games and activities designed to improve inhibitory control supports the idea that play can be used to practice self-control [8]. However, activities should remain enjoyable and developmentally appropriate; the goal of adaptive behavior development should not eliminate the playful character of early childhood learning.

4.3. Emotion Regulation through Coaching and Co-Regulation

The ability to recognize and manage emotions is an important component of adaptive behavior. Children who can identify their feelings may find it easier to choose appropriate responses. Teachers can support this process by labeling emotions, validating children's experiences, offering calming strategies, and inviting children to think about possible solutions.

Observational research in early childhood education and care indicates that emotion coaching and co-regulation, including questions that encourage children to think about ways to regulate their emotions, are associated with more independent self-regulation [5]. This suggests that teachers do not always need to solve children's emotional problems directly; instead, they can act as guides who help children build their own regulatory capacity.

For example, when a child becomes angry because a peer takes a toy, the teacher can identify the child's feeling, help the child pause, and then ask what could be done to solve the problem. In this way, the teacher develops adaptive behavior through an authentic social situation.

4.4. Teacher-Child Interaction and Opportunities for Independence

Adaptive behavior develops more effectively when children experience an environment that provides support while also giving them opportunities to do things independently. Teachers need to distinguish between helping and replacing the child's effort. Assistance that is provided too quickly may reduce opportunities for practice, whereas gradual support allows children to maintain a sense of competence.

Research on early childhood teachers highlights the importance of behaviors that promote children's progressive autonomy, including interpersonal emotional regulation and supportive interaction [4]. This is consistent with the need for ECE to provide opportunities for children to choose, try, make simple decisions, and take responsibility for activities.

Positive interaction also includes specific feedback. Saying 'You waited for your turn' is more informative than general praise because it helps children understand which behavior was appropriate. Such feedback can strengthen the connection between actions and positive social consequences.

4.5. Group Activities and Experiential Learning

Group activities such as collaborative art, block construction, role play, simple experiments, or small projects can become opportunities to practice adaptive behavior. Children need to share materials, negotiate, wait, listen, and complete tasks together. Teachers can provide initial structure and then allow children to find ways to cooperate.

Experiential activities also allow teachers to observe children's behavior naturally. Observation indicators may include initiating an activity, sustaining attention, asking for help appropriately, following rules, interacting with peers, and completing tasks. Such observations help teachers design support without labeling children negatively.

Self-regulation does not need to be separated from early academic learning. Children can practice attention and control during story activities, flexibility when changing game rules, and planning when organizing steps to create a product. Thus, adaptive behavior can develop alongside language, cognitive, motor, and artistic abilities.

4.6. Group Activities and Experiential Learning

Consistency between school and home is important because children learn from multiple environments. Families can reinforce the same routines, such as putting away toys, maintaining personal hygiene, completing simple responsibilities, and expressing feelings with words. Family support can also help children transfer self-regulation skills between home and school.

Research in the Indonesian context indicates that parental involvement and teacher-child interaction are related to young children's self-regulation and social-emotional behavior [11]. This supports the need for communication between

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teachers and parents. Communication does not always have to take the form of formal reports; it can include brief information about children's successes, difficulties, and strategies that can be applied consistently.

In different cultural contexts, self-regulation strategies also need to be adapted. Research in Malaysian ECE highlights the importance of culturally responsive approaches that consider families and children's environments when supporting self-regulation and resilience [12]. This principle is relevant to Indonesian ECE because learning activities should consider children's habits, values, and social conditions.

4.7. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Key supporting factors include a safe classroom environment, consistent routines, warm teacher-child interactions, opportunities for play, clear instructions, positive reinforcement, and family involvement. Teacher professional development is also important because educators' ability to select and implement self-regulation strategies influences the quality of children's experiences [10].

Barriers may arise when children are helped too often, rules change inconsistently, activities become overly focused on outcomes, or opportunities for social interaction are limited. Difficulties may also occur when teachers use the same strategy for all children without considering age, temperament, ability, and context. Research on the implementation of self-regulation programs suggests that teacher factors, program design, and parent partnerships can influence implementation success [13].

Therefore, adaptive behavior development should follow an individualized principle. A child who is beginning to follow rules may need visual examples and direct support, while a more capable child can be given greater responsibility. Teachers should conduct ongoing observation so that support can be adjusted to individual needs.

4.8. Implications for ECE Learning Practice

Based on the literature synthesis, adaptive behavior development can be integrated into the daily learning cycle. At the beginning of activities, teachers can use routines and simple rules. During core activities, teachers can incorporate games, group work, problem solving, and opportunities for choice. At the end, children can reflect on their experiences, clean up materials, and express their feelings.

Teachers can use simple indicators to monitor development: the child can follow two- or three-step instructions, wait for a turn, complete a simple activity, ask for help appropriately, calm down with support, share and cooperate, and adjust behavior to classroom rules. These indicators should be used to understand children's needs rather than to rigidly compare children.

Overall, learning activities that best support adaptive behavior provide a balance between structure and freedom. Children need clear boundaries but also need space to make decisions. They need teacher assistance but that assistance should gradually decrease. This approach allows children to move from externally supported regulation toward increasingly independent regulation.

5. Conclusion

The development of adaptive behavior is an integral part of ECE learning. Adaptive behavior includes independence in everyday activities, following rules, regulating emotions and behavior, communicating, cooperating, and adjusting to environmental demands. The literature indicates that these abilities can be developed through repeated, meaningful experiences that are appropriate to children's developmental levels.

Daily routines, rule-based games, role play, group activities, emotion-regulation practices, and opportunities to take simple responsibilities can serve as effective strategies. Warm teacher-child interaction, emotion coaching, co-regulation, and opportunities for independence strengthen the process. Family involvement is also necessary so that habits developed at school can be reinforced at home.

The main implication of this review is that adaptive behavior should not be taught as an isolated topic but integrated throughout learning activities. Future studies may test specific strategies through classroom action research or experimental designs using measurable adaptive-behavior indicators.

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6. Declarations

6.1. Author Contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, literature analysis, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing: M.Y. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

6.2. Data Availability Statement

No primary dataset was generated in this literature review. The sources analyzed are publicly accessible through the publishers or journal platforms listed in the references.

6.3. Funding

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6.4. Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable because this study used published literature and did not involve human participants or collection of primary personal data.

6.5. Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

6.6. Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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