

Emotional Regulation Across Home and School Contexts: A Qualitative Case Study of a 7-Year-Old Child in a Conflictual Indonesian Family

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Abstract— This study aims to analyze the emotional regulation of a 7-year-old child growing up in a conflictual family environment in Indonesia. The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a single case design. The subject was a 7-year-old child living with his mother as a single parent in an extended family environment characterized by recurring interpersonal conflict. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with the mother, aunt, and class teacher, non-participatory observation of the child's emotional behavior, and supporting documentation. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis involving data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification, with validity ensured through triangulation of techniques and sources. The findings indicate that exposure to family conflict influenced the child's emotional responses, which tended to be reactive within the home context. However, the child also demonstrated emotional regulation through diversion strategies by distancing himself from the source of conflict. In the school environment, the child exhibited more adaptive and stable emotional regulation, highlighting the role of environmental support as a protective factor. While this study is limited to a single case and does not aim for generalization, it contributes to a contextual understanding of emotional regulation within Indonesian family dynamics and underscores the importance of supportive school environments and adaptive parental modeling.

Keywords: Emotional regulation, 7-year-old children, conflictual families, single parents, qualitative, Indonesia

I. INTRODUCTION

Emotional regulation is a fundamental skill that plays a vital role in a child's social, behavioral, and mental health development. Self-regulation provides the capacity for a person to maintain composure and manage impulsive responses under stressful situations (Herlambang et al., 2026). At the age of 7, children are in a developmental transition phase from early childhood to elementary school age. Social aspects and independence during this period are concerns that must be observed (Nursajidah et al., 2026). This period also demands children's ability to manage emotions more adaptively in facing the demands of an increasingly complex social environment. At this stage, children begin to be required to control negative emotions, delay impulsive responses, and adjust their emotional expressions to prevailing social norms. As Katonongsih et al. (2025) stated, at the age of two to seven, children begin to be able to think about objects, people, or events that occur concretely (real) and are experienced and viewed from their own perspective. A child's inability to regulate emotions optimally at this age can potentially lead to various problems, such as aggressive behavior, difficulty interacting socially, and adjustment disorders, both within the family and school environment (Zeman et al., 2022).

The family environment is the primary context that plays a role in the development of a child's emotional regulation. Within the family environment, parents who demonstrate acceptance, empathy, and guide their children in recognizing and managing their emotions constructively play a significant role in fostering healthy emotional regulation in children (Hasanah et al., 2025). The quality of emotional interactions between family members, communication patterns, and the emotional climate created within the home significantly influence how children recognize, express, and manage their emotions. Families characterized by repeated interpersonal conflict, whether in the form of verbal arguments or prolonged emotional tension, tend to create an unstable emotional climate. This environment can hinder a child's emotional development and lead to behavioral problems. Therefore, it is crucial to create a warm, safe family environment that fosters ideal emotional development in children (Dwistia et al., 2025). If a warm family environment is not created, it can increase the risk of emotional dysregulation in children because they are continuously exposed to negative emotional experiences (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2021).

Theoretically, emotion regulation is understood as an individual's process of monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional responses to align with situational demands and adaptive goals (Gross, 2021). From a developmental ecology perspective, the family, as a microsystem, has a direct influence on children's emotional development through daily emotional experiences and the quality of relationships with primary caregivers (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2021). Exposure to intense family conflict positions children not only as passive observers but also as emotionally involved individuals, potentially leading them to develop less adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as emotional outbursts, difficulty calming down, or excessive emotional suppression. Various empirical findings support the link between family conflict and children's emotion regulation. Morris et al. (2021) showed that children growing up in high-conflict families tend to have difficulty managing negative emotions and exhibit higher emotional reactivity. Research by Roubinov and Boyce (2022) also confirms that family conflict contributes to a decline in the quality of emotional support children receive, which ultimately impacts their ability to regulate emotions. A recent longitudinal study further demonstrated that exposure to chronic family conflict is associated with a trajectory of emotional dysregulation that persists into elementary school age (Martin et al., 2023).

However, most previous research has been dominated by quantitative approaches that focus on statistically significant relationships between variables. While valuable, this approach tends to be limited in fully describing the dynamics of children's emotion regulation in everyday contexts, particularly how 7-year-old children experience, interpret, and respond to conflict situations within the family environment. Furthermore, studies addressing the family context within the Indonesian socio-cultural setting remain relatively limited, despite the unique characteristics of Indonesian family dynamics, such as the involvement of extended family members, hierarchical communication patterns, and domestic conflicts that may be directly witnessed by children.

Based on these considerations, there is a need for research that examines 7-year-old children's emotion regulation in greater depth and context through a qualitative approach. Such research is essential to provide a comprehensive understanding of how children regulate their emotions in conflictual family environments and the environmental factors influencing this process. Therefore, this study aims to analyze emotional regulation in 7-year-old children in a conflictual family environment through a qualitative descriptive approach.

II. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. Qualitative research methods generate descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words, as well as observable behavior (Surya et al., 2021). Descriptive methods aim to provide systematic descriptions and explanations of a phenomenon (Ramdhan, 2021) and to obtain a factual and accurate overview of the characteristics and relationships among the phenomena being studied (Syahrul & Nurhafizah, 2022). A qualitative descriptive design was chosen to gain an in-depth contextual understanding of emotional regulation in a 7-year-old child living in a conflictual family environment under naturally occurring conditions. This study focused on a single case to explore the complexity of emotional experiences and regulatory processes within a specific family context. The study does not aim to generalize findings to all children in conflictual families but rather to provide an in-depth contextual understanding of one particular case.

The subject was a 7-year-old child living with his mother in a maternal extended family environment characterized by recurring interpersonal conflict. The participant was selected purposively based on the relevance of the family conflict dynamics to the research focus. The research was conducted in the child's natural environments, including both home and school contexts. Field engagement with the family began in 2024 as part of prior exploratory data collection related to child development. These early interactions provided contextual familiarity with the family dynamics. However, for the present study, data were selectively re-examined and further collected with a specific focus on emotional regulation within a conflictual family environment. The primary data analyzed in this article were obtained between November 2024 and January 2026.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, non-participatory observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the child's mother and aunt as primary caregivers, as well as with the class teacher to obtain cross-contextual perspectives. Based on documented records, interviews were conducted on November 25, 2024 (class teacher), December 30, 2025 (mother and aunt), and January 4, 2026 (aunt). Interview data were recorded in detailed field notes and organized systematically for analysis. Non-participatory observations were carried out repeatedly in the child's residential environment to capture naturally occurring emotional behaviors, particularly during conflict-related situations. Observational records were documented immediately after each session to preserve contextual accuracy. Additional documentation included field notes and contextual records of family interaction patterns.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The analytical process involved repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes, identification of meaningful units related to emotional responses and regulation strategies, generation of initial codes, grouping codes into broader themes, and interpretation of contextual influences across home and school settings. Data reduction and thematic categorization were conducted iteratively to ensure consistency. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytical process, including documentation of coding decisions and theme development. To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation of techniques and sources was applied by comparing interview data, observational findings, and documentation across caregivers and teachers. Member checking was conducted with primary caregivers to confirm the credibility of interpretations. The researcher also maintained reflexive notes throughout the study to acknowledge positionality and minimize subjective bias.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed. Written informed consent was obtained from the child's mother as the legal guardian prior to the focused data collection for this study. The research objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation were clearly explained. Verbal assent was also sought from the child using age-appropriate language before observational sessions were conducted.

Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms, and all research data were stored securely to ensure confidentiality. During data collection, particular attention was given to the child's emotional comfort, and interactions were paused or discontinued if signs of distress were observed.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research results were obtained through continuous non-participatory observation conducted by the researcher in the subject's residential environment since 2024, semi-structured interviews with the mother and aunt as primary caregivers, and supporting documentation from the school environment. Data analysis yielded several key themes representing the emotional regulation of a 7-year-old child in a conflictual family environment.

III.1 Exposure to Family Conflict and Children's Emotional Responses

Based on observations, the child has lived with his mother in the maternal extended family since infancy. This family environment is characterized by recurring conflict, both verbal and physical, particularly involving the child's uncle. The child directly witnesses these events in daily life. This situation impacts the child's emotional responses when conflict occurs. The child demonstrates courage to engage verbally in conflict situations. This is reinforced by an interview with the aunt on January 4, 2026, who stated that "whenever there's a commotion, this child joins in and complains to the person who often causes the commotion (his uncle)."

III.2 Modeling Emotional Behavior in the Family Environment

The results of interviews and observations indicate that the child's emotional expression patterns are closely related to the mother's emotional behavior. Mothers are described as having a firm and courageous character in dealing with family conflict and are not hesitant to respond verbally or directly. Children are accustomed to witnessing this pattern in their daily lives. Researchers observed that mothers' involvement in conflict serves as a model for emotional behavior that children imitate. Children tend to express emotions openly and boldly, mimicking the emotional expression patterns often displayed by their mothers.

III.3 Children's Emotion Regulation Strategies

Despite exhibiting reactive emotional responses, children do not maintain negative emotions for long periods. Based on the researchers' observations, when emotions peak due to conflict, children tend to distance themselves from the source of the conflict and return to interacting with their cousins as if nothing had happened. In these situations, mothers provide simple instructions to their children to avoid conflict, such as, "Never mind, let's just walk away." This strategy suggests that children's emotional regulation develops through disengagement coping, although it is not accompanied by reflective emotional guidance.

III.4 Children's Emotion Regulation in the School Context

Research findings indicate differences in children's emotional behavior based on environmental context. In the school environment, children exhibit more adaptive and stable behavior. Based on an interview with the class teacher on November 25, 2024, the teacher stated that "this child is the most active child in the class. He has a good responsive attitude during the learning process, always asking questions and responding."

The teacher also added that "this child is easy to manage in class and doesn't need his parents to wait on him." The child's academic performance supports this finding. According to an aunt's statement on December 30, 2025, "this child won second place in his class." The mother also reported on the same date that "when he was in kindergarten, this child sometimes walked home to my office by himself even though it was quite far away," indicating independence and courage.

The findings indicate that 7-year-old children's emotional regulation develops contextually and is influenced by interactions between the individual and their environment. Based on the emotional regulation model framework, the strategy demonstrated by the child, such as diverting attention away from the source of conflict, reflects a form of attentional deployment commonly used by early school-age children to manage negative emotions (Compas et al., 2022). From a social learning theory perspective, the child's emotional behavior can be understood as the result of modeling processes. Children imitate patterns of emotional expression displayed by significant figures, particularly mothers who are actively involved in family conflicts. Recent research suggests that exposure to parents' intense emotional expressions can influence how children express and regulate their emotions (Morris et al., 2021). This reinforces the finding that the family plays a primary role in emotional socialization during the early school years.

Furthermore, based on developmental ecological theory, differences in children's behavior at home and school reflect the strong influence of environmental context. A conflictual family environment functions as a microsystem characterized by emotional stress, while the school environment provides structure, social support, and successful experiences that act as protective factors. Studies confirm that a supportive school environment can foster adaptive emotion regulation, even among children from at-risk families (Obradović & Tirado-Strayer, 2022). These findings align with research showing that children exposed to repeated family conflict tend to develop situational and reactive emotion regulation patterns, especially when emotional support from adults is inconsistent (Rothenberg et al., 2022). This explains why the child in this study demonstrated more adaptive regulation at school while maintaining reactive responses within the family context.

Emotional diversion strategies, such as distancing from the source of conflict, represent common regulation mechanisms among children aged 6–8 years (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2021). Although this strategy serves as a protective mechanism against emotional distress, it does not yet reflect mature, reflective emotional regulation. The role of schools as supportive alternative environments contributes significantly to strengthening children's emotional adaptive capacity. School settings that provide clear rules, positive teacher–student relationships, and academic success experiences contribute to emotional control and social competence development (Domitrovich et al., 2021). Thus, emotional regulation in this case is shaped through dynamic interactions between risk factors within the family and protective factors within the school context.

Importantly, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering a contextualized understanding of emotional regulation within Indonesian family dynamics, particularly in extended family structures involving single-parent arrangements. While previous research has predominantly emphasized statistical relationships between family conflict and emotional dysregulation, this study provides an in-depth qualitative account of how emotional regulation is experienced and expressed across ecological settings. The findings demonstrate that emotional regulation is not solely an individual psychological process but is embedded within culturally situated family interactions and institutional supports. By situating the analysis within the Indonesian socio-cultural context—where extended family involvement and hierarchical communication patterns are common—this study extends existing theoretical frameworks through contextual application and highlights the importance of examining emotion regulation within culturally specific family systems.

Overall, the findings indicate that children's emotional regulation does not develop linearly toward maladaptive outcomes, even within conflictual family environments. The presence of alternative supportive contexts and adaptive diversion strategies enables the formation of emotional adaptation skills in early school-age children.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that the emotional regulation of 7-year-old children in conflictual family environments develops contextually and does not proceed linearly toward maladaptation. Repeated exposure to family conflict shapes children's reactive emotional responses, particularly verbal engagement during conflict. However, children also demonstrate emotional regulation skills through diversion strategies, such as moving away from the source of conflict and returning to neutral social activities, indicating a basic capacity for emotional adaptation. The contrasting differences between children's emotional behavior in the family and school environments underscore the role of environmental context in developing emotional regulation. A structured, supportive school environment that provides experiences of academic success serves as a protective factor, enabling children to demonstrate more adaptive emotional regulation. Thus, these findings suggest that children growing up in conflictual families still have the potential for emotional resilience if they receive positive alternative environmental support.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that parents, particularly those in single-parent families living in conflictual family environments, be provided with guidance and education regarding parenting strategies that support the development of children's emotional regulation. Parents need to be equipped with an understanding of the importance of modeling adaptive emotional regulation, considering that early school-age children are still heavily influenced by the emotional expression patterns of the adults around them. Furthermore, schools are expected to strengthen their role as protective environments by providing an emotionally supportive learning climate and integrating social-emotional reinforcement programs into learning activities. Teachers also need to be actively involved in the process of identifying and monitoring the development of children's emotional regulation, especially for children from at-risk family backgrounds. For future researchers, it is recommended to expand the research by involving a more diverse group of subjects and using a longitudinal design to more comprehensively describe the dynamics of children's emotional regulation. The use of standardized emotional regulation assessment instruments is also recommended to strengthen the validity of the research findings.

V. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank all parties who contributed to this research, especially the parents, family members, and teachers who willingly served as data sources and provided the necessary information openly and cooperatively. Thanks are also extended to the schools for their permission and support during the data collection process.

Furthermore, the author expresses his appreciation to colleagues who provided constructive input and discussions during the preparation of this article. This research was made possible thanks to the support and cooperation of various parties.

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