

# *Empathy and Gesture: The Role of Parents in Understanding Early Childhood*

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**Abstract**— Every child has the right to express their opinion and be heard. However, not all children have active verbal communication skills. There are also children aged 2-4 years who in their daily lives express their opinions, ideas or desires through messages or non-verbal communication. Gestures are a form of nonverbal communication. Early childhood children use gestures as a way to convey messages so that parents can understand them. Therefore, the role of parents is very important in understanding children's gestures as a form of non-verbal messages. This article aims to illustrate the importance of parents in understanding their children's gestures, so that children feel that their rights are fulfilled. This article is in the form of a literature study from various studies and research which will explain what gestures are, gestures in early childhood and the role of parents in understanding gestures. It is hoped that the results of this article can encourage parents to be more empathetic in listening to children's non-verbal forms of communication, namely gestures. So there will be more effective communication between parents and children.

**Keywords:** *Empathy, Gesture, Education, Role Parents, Early Childhood, Communication.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Building a sense of caring and understanding children in a parenting is one of the important factors that must be owned by parents in supporting every success of child development. However, not all parents are ready to deal with this, there are still many children who feel themselves “neglected” when expressing something both verbally and non-verbally. Rochmah, et al (2022) revealed that parenting is also supported by parents' ability to understand children and vice versa. Between parents and children must understand each other's intentions. On the other hand, a study revealed that a person's understanding of verbal messages is only about 7%, the rest consists of body language 55% and voice expressions 38% (Elfanani, Burhan, 2013).

But in reality, when children express language both verbally and non-verbally, some parents do not fully understand the importance of building a sense of empathy or care, so there are still many children who feel they are worthless and even feel neglected. According to Ehnvall et al. (in (Hibbard & Walton, 2014), the application of neglectful parenting can affect various aspects of children's development and behavior, such as lack of ability to manage emotions, lack of ability to control themselves (self-regulation), and affect children's performance at school. In addition, this uncaring attitude will greatly impact the child's social development in the future. Social development is a process to shape a person's values, skills, behaviors and attitudes (Yudrik Jahya, 2011: 446). This

opinion is reinforced by Hurlock in (Yudrik Jahya, 2011: 47) which states that social development means the acquisition of the ability to behave in accordance with social demands, becoming a person who is able to socialize.

Based on data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia (2023), it is conveyed that there are still many parents who neglect the care of children. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia (2023) also said that in Indonesia, 4 out of 100 early childhood have received inappropriate care, this was conveyed based on the 2021 Early Childhood Profile. The percentage of early childhood who had received inappropriate care in 2018 was around 3.73%, then decreased in 2020 to 3.64%. This percentage figure continues to be pursued by the government to further decrease in 2024 with a target of 3.47%. From this data, researchers feel that the many cases of violence that occur between children today are one of the deviations in social behavior due to a lack of empathy, care and parenting patterns that are still considered very negligent, especially towards children's gestures as well as towards others. Seeing from these problems, we need to re-explore the extent of the role of parents in parenting children, especially in understanding the context of gestures, empathy and the role that parents must play because this will certainly greatly affect the social development of children in other words, all forms of treatment or parental guidance towards will greatly impact on various aspects of social life or norms in society.

According to Dadan Suryana (2016: 216) children's social development is strongly influenced by their social environment, whether parents, siblings, adults or peers. If the social environment facilitates or provides opportunities for positive child development, then mature social development will be achieved. However, if the social environment is less conducive, such as harsh parental treatment, frequent scolding, indifference, and not providing guidance, then children tend to show inferior behavior, selfishness, and lack of tolerance. Seeing the description above, researchers increasingly understand that the role of parents in building children's attitudes is greatly influenced by how we as parents show their treatment. If parents are too ignorant of children's gestures, this attitude can greatly affect their emotional abilities and empathy. As Sari et al. (2020) revealed that parents have a strong influence on children's skills in managing emotions. Children can learn through emotions, responses, and expressions shown by parents when facing a situation or condition.

Then, how does empathy relate to social skills? It was first proposed by Rogers in 1959 which was later followed by Darmiyati Zuchri (2013: 51).

*The state of empathy, or being empathic, is understanding the other person's internal frame of reference accurately and with the emotional components and meanings associated with it as if we were that person, but without losing the "as if" condition. Thus, it means feeling the other person's hurt or pleasure as he or she feels it and feeling its causes as he or she feels them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is as if I am hurt or happy and so on. If this "as if" quality is lost, then the state is one of identification.*

The key word in the definition above is "as if" or "if only" in empathizing we are presupposing ourselves as another person, who must be able to feel the suffering and pleasure experienced by that person without losing our own identity.

Whereas at school age, children should have emerged aspects of perspective taking which means being able to take other people's views to apply to themselves, this is the basis for the development of empathy which is a prosocial emotional response (Widiarti, 2013)<sup>6</sup>. Henry Backrack in Junaidin and Rahmi (2022) defines empathy as a person's ability to know what other people are experiencing at a certain moment. Parents as communicators who have empathy are at least able to understand, motivate the experiences of others or children, their feelings and attitudes, as well as their hopes and desires, for the future.

Various studies related to gestures have indeed been carried out quite a lot, especially related to the application of teacher gestures to children's behavior. as Wahyuningsih, et al (2018) who conducted research related to the effect of the application of teacher gestures on children's disciplinary behavior in the school environment, in contrast to Ayu (2019) who also conducted research related to the importance of understanding body language for teachers in early childhood education. the research also focuses on teachers in the school environment. Meanwhile, Rochmah et al (2022) focused more on the importance of understanding gestures in communicating with children. Based on various previous studies, researchers feel that research related to gesture and empathetic behavior has not been done too much, especially in the context of parenting at home.

So that parents as role models for children really need to understand empathy and gesture as a form of attitude and communication that requires a positive response to build a better relationship with children. Therefore, parents need to increase their knowledge in understanding empathy and gesture in early childhood, especially related to the role of parents as educators in caring for children so that they can easily respond to various children's attitudes in a good way to build a variety of positive experiences for children.

## II. METHODS

The method used in this research is descriptive research method, which is a method that will provide an overview of several possible answers in solving problems by collecting various data, compiling or classifying them, analyzing, and interpreting them. Kutha (2010:30) reveals that the descriptive method of analysis is carried out by describing various facts which are then followed by analyzing, not merely describing, but providing sufficient understanding and explanation. The data collection technique in this study uses library research where researchers collect various data by reading, studying, and analyzing various journals, articles, books from previous researchers that have to do with the object of research as well as various other supporting sources. According to Sugiyono (2016: 291), literature study is related to theoretical studies and other references related to values, culture and norms that develop in the social situation under study, besides that literature study is very important in conducting research, this is because research will not be separated from scientific literature. Data is obtained from data that is relevant to the problems to be studied by conducting other literature studies such as books, journals, articles, previous researchers.

Based on the scientific foundation above, this research is supported by various research journals related to empathy and gestures in the Google Scholar database. The keywords used in the search are empathy, gestures, role parents and early childhood. Articles that are collected and become objects are selected, read, studied and analyzed as the basis for writing articles. This study used 35 sources from various research studies, books and other documents relevant to the study of empathy and gestures

The result of this study is the idea that the importance of parents understanding children's gestures and empathizing is very important in interactions with children. Parents need to respond to children using empathic verbal language and gestures as emotional support. This will train children to be sensitive to other people's feelings, empathize and have good self-control skills.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Emphaty Definition

Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others as a form of appreciation for the emotions experienced by others. ND Fesbach (1975) presents a slightly different definition where empathy is defined only in cognitive terms. The view that the process of understanding as a form of cognitive process is followed by understanding how to convey understanding of other people's feelings as an affective response that shows the provision of emotional support. Gallo (1989) provides a view that there are two elements that appear in a process of empathy, namely understanding others as a product of cognitive processes and providing affection in the form of responses based on the process of understanding the feelings of others. Some people assume that empathy is only related to the emotional aspect, but the views mentioned above open up the understanding that the cognitive element precedes the emotional process that comes along with understanding the emotions of others and how to place the emotions of others in personal interactions. Appreciation of other people's emotions is an important part of the process of empathizing. The ability to appreciate, shown by a response that accepts the feelings of others.

Haynes and Avery (1979) provide criteria for empathic attitudes that involve verbal confirmation, showing a supportive attitude, body language and prosocial behavior. The ability to express verbal support is one way to appreciate feelings and provide positive support accompanied by meaningful body language as a form of emotional support or socially preferred behavior. Body language or can be referred to as gestures are an important part of the empathic communication process as described by Rochmah, et al. (2022). that gestures are a form of communication without verbal speech that can provide certain expressions according to purpose. Rochmah, et al. (2022).

#### 3.2 Gesture Definition

Gesture is described by Kendon (2007) as a movement that has boundaries in terms of moving away from a comfortable position and returning to a comfortable position. A comfortable position is defined as a body position that suits the needs of the body's comfort. Conceptually, Rochmah, et al. (2020) provide the term gesture as a form of communication expressed through body language that can be understood as verbal expression or a substitute for spoken language to communicate an opinion that is not conveyed orally. An operational explanation of gesture is defined as a form of body movement, especially those performed by the arms and hands, which are integrated with verbal and non-verbal language, to communicate something (Masita, et al, 2016). The term gesture is very close to language that is produced non-verbally. The use of the body such as hands, feet, eyes or overall body movements is very important to be understood by the speaker's environment, specifically the speaker's environment from an early age. Samovar and Porter argue that non-verbal communication includes all stimuli (except verbal stimuli) in a communication setting, produced by individuals and users of the environment, which have potential message value for the sender or receiver (1991:179). Potential messages that arise can be a need for speakers to be understood or appreciation in the form of empathy. Conclusions Rochmah, et al. (2022) also mentioned that messages that appear in non-verbal language need to be understood so that communication can run well.

#### 3.3 Understanding Early Childhood Gesture

Gestures are almost used by early childhood when speaking, this is in line with Neill and Goldin-Meadow's statement that early childhood routinely uses gestures when speaking (Soo, Demir & Goldin-Meadow, 2010). In everyday life, young children often use gestures as a form of communication with people around them. There are several forms of body language that children often use in everyday life including (1) nodding the head which means agreeing, (2) shaking the head which means disagreeing,

(3) waving to others, which means someone is calling him to come here, and (4) showing fingers to others followed by a red face color, meaning he is angry (Pratama RL. and Priyantoro, ED., 2017).

The use of gestures in children is a commonality related to the ability of speech organs, language development and cognitive development. So that parents or teachers and caregivers should pay attention to non-verbal language or gestures that appear in children. Children's ideas, desires, rejections, explanations or opinions about something are often manifested in various gestures with their own meaning. (Rochmah, et al, 2022). In expressing their knowledge, children spontaneously have visual spatial abilities both verbally and gesturally (Gordon, Chernyak & Cordes, 2019). So parents also need to realize that our attention to early childhood gestures is very important, so that children do not feel ignored or unnoticed. Parents who ignore children's gestures can have a negative impact on children's development, one of which is on their empathy skills.

### **3.4 Empathy in Early Childhood**

Empathy is not just understanding other people's feelings, but being able to express them in verbal and behavioral forms. This is in line with the expression of Budiningsih (2008:48) explaining that empathy is not only done in the form of understanding other people's feelings, but is expressed verbally and behaviorally. Therefore, one cannot be said to empathize without social action, because the ability to empathize is closely related to the process of social interaction. So that empathy can actually be introduced early in children so that it can become a habit in everyday life.

The first teaching of empathy actually begins in infancy. This is evident when a baby cries, then other babies also cry (Nugraha et al., 2017). A person who has the ability to empathize can be seen from his behavior as stated by Borba (2008: 21) that children who have the ability to empathize will show tolerance, compassion, understand the needs of others, want to help others, understanding, care, and be able to control their anger. Seeing the above expression, the researcher feels that caring as a form of empathy ability in children will emerge from parents who are able to show their concern for various gestures shown by children from an early age. so that parents' response to children's gestures becomes very important in building their empathy attitude.

The ability of empathy in children will develop along with the stages of age and development. However, the role of parents in building children's empathy cannot be separated as Denham (in Utami, 2014: 27) reveals one of the common factors that can encourage empathy is empathetic parents, children imitate the behavior of their parents so that empathetic parents will make children more empathetic to others. From this description, researchers also understand that the behavior shown by parents in understanding children's gestures is a form of parental empathy for them, so that our active response as parents to children's gestures will greatly help them in developing their empathy skills.

### **3.5 The Role of Parents in Foresting Empathy in Children**

The relationship between parents and children is natural and natural. Parents are a place of dependence for children, therefore, we as parents can provide the best education for their children. (Hasbullah, 2013: 41). Parents have the responsibility of raising children, so we play an important role and have an influence on children's education. (Rahman, 2010: 78-79). There are approximately five roles of parents in family life including: guardian, teacher, leader, resource person, role holder. (Darmawan and Hardi, 2011: 204-207).

Parents as role holders is one thing that is important for us to pay attention to as parents. Why? Children are great imitators. Therefore, parents must be very careful in their behavior and actions, as well as in fostering empathy in children. The patrons in a child's life are parents. If the patron is not good, the child is also not good, otherwise if the parents can be a good example, the child will imitate the example of his parents. (Darmawan and Hardi, 2011: 204-207)



Research on children found that various forms of empathic expression shown by parents to their children can be a model or means for their children to increase their empathy and prosocial behavior. Kremer and Dietzen showed that exemplary behavior from both teachers and parents can be one of the means to increase children's empathy. empathy skills can be obtained through becoming learning that can be taught to children or others. In addition to becoming empathy is also being, because genetic factors from parents play a role in a child's personality. (Taufik, 2012: 90).

Researchers feel as parents need to take on several roles, especially as role models for children in developing empathy in everyday life, including getting used to saying thank you, please and sorry, respecting and appreciating others, fostering cooperation, solidarity and so on. as for developing empathy in children, parents can do the following things including : 1) show your empathy to the child, 2). Provide a lot of direct experience by visiting shelters, shelters and others, 3) often ask questions to children "how do you feel?", 4) pay attention to what children see and hear, 5) provide explanations about the importance of empathy in children. (Borba, 2008: 51-52). On the other hand, Kohlberg revealed that one way to develop children's empathy is by role playing and often watching videos that build a spectrum of emotions in children such as gratitude, gratitude, anger. (Ningsih, 2013:54).

It is very important for parents as role holders to be role models for their children in developing empathy. Then how do we understand children's empathy? The word empathy as first used by Titchener, an American psychologist comes from the Greek word *empathia*, "to feel" Titchener's theory is that empathy comes from a kind of physical imitation of the burden of others, which then causes similar feelings in a person. (Goleman, 2015: 135-136). The ability to empathize is "the ability to know the feelings of others". Empathy is the root of care and compassion in every emotional relationship of a person in his efforts to adjust his emotions to the emotions of others. According to him, the key to understanding other people's feelings is being able to read non-verbal messages such as tone of voice, gestures. facial expressions and so on.(Goleman, 2015: 135-136).

There are three aspects of empathy according to Goleman that we need to understand including: 1) the ability to understand the point of view of others or children, 2) have sensitivity to others, 3) the ability to listen to others. (Goleman, 2015: 159) The indicators of empathy according to T. safaria consist of: 1) feel what other people feel, 2) sensitive to other people's feelings, 3) sensitive to non-verbal language, 4) can take a role, 5) do not dissolve and can control themselves. (Safaria, 2005: 105). In addition to the above, we as parents must also be able to recognize several factors that sometimes hinder children from understanding empathy or other people's feelings, including: 1) the absence of parents emotionally, 2) the lack or absence of father involvement, 3) violence in the media, 4) the taboo of expressing parental feelings towards boys in particular, 5) violence in the toddler age. (Borba, 2008:51-52).

Seeing from the various descriptions above, although there are many factors and there are certainly other factors that can be an obstacle for us, we must understand that the process of developing empathy in children depends on parents, especially related to how we can be a role model, if we show empathy then children will learn and imitate related to this.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Looking at the results of the discussion and analysis of the literature that has been carried out, it is concluded that understanding gestures and building empathy in the context of parenting is very important. The process of parents providing parenting becomes the process of children imitating gestures, emotional expressions, and empathetic responses from parents to children. Looking at the results of the discussion and analysis of the literature that has been carried out, it is concluded that understanding gestures and building empathy in the context of parenting is very important. The process

of parents providing parenting becomes the process of children imitating gestures, emotional expressions, and empathetic responses from parents to children.

An empathetic attitude is very important in life which is a reflection of an individual's ability to understand themselves and others and understand how to appreciate the events experienced by others. Empathy is an attitude that arises when providing support to others who are facing an emotional moment. Empathic attitudes are shown in the form of words, behaviors and gestures that can be understood and interpreted as non-verbal emotional expressions. The ability to empathize is very important in social interaction. This ability is strongly influenced by parents as role models for children. When parents pay attention and empathize with children, children will imitate the way parents empathize with them. The way parents respond to children through gestures or body language, words and empathic social attitudes will automatically become a guideline for children when responding to other people who need emotional support. Some things that parents can do as a form of empathizing with children are: understanding the child's perspective, being sensitive to the child's feelings or emotional needs, and trying to listen when the child needs to be heard. This will be able to train children to be able to understand the feelings of others, be sensitive to non-verbal cues or body language (gestures), be able to play a role as needed and practice self-regulation or self-control well. Many things can affect the process of developing empathy skills, but most importantly, the parenting process is the most important part of providing a role model for children so that children will imitate it.

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