

LOW PHYSICAL AGGRESSION BUT HIGH EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY: A MIXED-METHODS ANALYSIS OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S SELF-REGULATION

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Abstract

Aggressive behavior begins to emerge in early childhood as part of social-emotional development and is closely associated with self-regulation capacity. If not appropriately addressed, aggressive behavior may persist and have negative implications for later academic success. This study aimed to (1) describe the profile of aggressive behavior in preschool children and (2) explore this profile in relation to children's self-regulation abilities based on teachers' observations. This study employed a mixed-methods design using a concurrent embedded model. The research population consisted of 877 children aged 4–6 years, with total population sampling applied. Quantitative data were collected using an aggressiveness scale, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with five teachers selected based on children classified in the moderate and high aggression categories. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that aggressive behavior among children was generally low, with 63.4% of children classified in the low aggression category and only one child in the high aggression category. Emotional aggression—such as anger, crying, and expressions of dislike—was the most dominant form. Children's aggression was predominantly reactive, triggered by frustration, peer conflict, competition over toys, or unmet desires. Verbal and physical aggression emerged in specific contexts, particularly among children with lower self-regulation abilities.

Keywords: early childhood aggression, self-regulation, emotional reactivity, reactive aggression, social–emotional development,

Abstrak

Perilaku agresif mulai muncul pada anak usia dini sebagai bagian dari perkembangan sosial-emosional dan berkaitan erat dengan kemampuan regulasi diri. Apabila tidak ditangani secara tepat, perilaku agresif berpotensi menetap dan berdampak negatif terhadap keberhasilan akademik pada jenjang pendidikan selanjutnya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk (1) mendeskripsikan profil perilaku agresif anak usia prasekolah dan (2) mengeksplorasi profil agresi tersebut dalam kaitannya dengan kemampuan regulasi diri

anak berdasarkan pengamatan guru. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain mixed methods dengan model konkuren terbenam (concurrent embedded). Populasi penelitian berjumlah 877 anak usia 4–6 tahun dengan teknik sampling jenuh. Data kuantitatif diperoleh melalui skala agresivitas, sedangkan data kualitatif dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap lima guru yang dipilih berdasarkan anak dengan kategori agresi sedang dan tinggi. Data kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif, sementara data kualitatif dianalisis melalui analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perilaku agresif pada anak umumnya berada pada kategori rendah, dengan 63,4% anak menunjukkan agresi rendah dan hanya satu anak berada pada kategori agresi tinggi. Bentuk agresi yang paling dominan adalah agresi emosional, seperti kemarahan, tangisan, dan ekspresi ketidaksukaan. Agresi anak sebagian besar bersifat reaktif, dipicu oleh frustrasi, konflik dengan teman sebaya, perebutan mainan, atau keinginan yang tidak terpenuhi. Agresi verbal dan fisik muncul pada konteks tertentu, terutama pada anak dengan kemampuan regulasi diri yang rendah.

Kata kunci: *agresi anak usia dini, regulasi diri, reaktivitas emosional, agresi reaktif, perkembangan sosial emosional*

INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional development serves as a crucial foundation for character formation, adaptability, and early childhood readiness to transition to the next level of education (Herrera & Lorenzo, 2024; Thümmeler et al., 2022). The hope is that young children will already be able to exhibit prosocial behaviors such as sharing, taking turns, cooperating, and expressing an understanding of prevailing norms and values (Campbell & Løkken, 2022; Herrera & Lorenzo, 2024). These abilities indicate the development of self-regulation skills—the ability to recognize, understand, and control emotions and behavior in various social situations (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Gross & John, 2003; Thümmeler et al., 2022). Children with good self-regulation tend to interact more positively, maintain healthy social relationships, and demonstrate optimal readiness for learning (Bywater & Sharples, 2012; Campbell & Løkken, 2022; Carpendale et al., 2025; Gross & John, 2003).

These ideal conditions are not always evident in practice. Not all children are able to control themselves and their emotions; some, in fact, exhibit aggressive behavior when they feel angry, disappointed, or have difficulty communicating (Clark et al., 2021; Ersan, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2013). Aggressive behavior is behavior intentionally directed at harming or injuring others and can manifest in various forms (Asnia, Z., & Muthohar, S., 2024). Common forms of aggression include physical aggression such as hitting, pushing, or damaging objects (Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009; Perry et al., 2021; Swit, 2019). Verbal aggression includes shouting, using derogatory terms, or mocking others, and can escalate to the point of making threats (Meysamie et al., 2013; Saki et al., 2019; Swit, 2019). Emotional aggression (displaying anger, jealousy, resentment, and hostility) (Perry et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Menéndez et al., 2024). Reactive aggression can lead to emotional instability and behavioral problems (Rodríguez-Menéndez et al., 2024).

A tendency toward aggressive behavior can emerge and be observed as early as 17 months of age, and some children exhibit persistent aggression from 29 to 41 months of age (Morisset & Baillargeon, 2006; Olson & Grabell, 2015). Aggressive behavior in young

children is often not an intentional act intended to harm others. Rather, it results from limited ability to regulate emotions (Ersan, 2020; Olson & Grabell, 2015; Schipper & Petermann, 2013). Children are also learning to imitate behaviors observed in their surroundings, such as from parents, peers, or other social figures (Bandura, 1977; Snyder et al., 2023; Vieira et al., 2010). This phenomenon is normal in the early stages, but if not managed properly, aggression can become a persistent behavioral pattern that persists into school age (Morisset & Baillargeon, 2006; Olson & Grabell, 2015).

Many instances of violence committed by children stem from these factors. Several studies in Indonesia also describe the emergence of aggressive behavior in early childhood education (PAUD) settings (Young & Keenan, 2022). Research findings indicate that while aggression levels among young children tend to be low, forms of physical aggression such as pushing and hitting still frequently occur during classroom interactions (Aisyah et al., 2021; O'Hara, 2003). Meanwhile, other studies observing children's aggressive behavior have shown that aggression can take verbal forms, such as teasing or using harsh language when feeling angry (Aisyah et al., 2021).

These findings indicate that aggressive behavior should not be taken lightly, as even though its intensity is low, its frequency and patterns of occurrence can influence children's social dynamics at school (Morris et al., 2017). Aggressive behavior in children is a serious concern because it is linked to bullying, particularly the widespread issue of bullying in Indonesian schools. A large number of students experience various forms of aggression, including physical, verbal, and psychological (emotional) aggression (Amri Nasiruddin & Solekhah, 2019; Borualogo & Casas, 2021). This phenomenon indicates that the roots of aggressive behavior should be identified and prevented from an early age through appropriate education.

Teachers play a crucial role in preventing and addressing aggressive behavior in early childhood education (PAUD). As the figures who interact most frequently with children, teachers need to understand the forms of aggression, its underlying causes, and management strategies within the learning process. In young children, aggressive behavior generally manifests in three forms: physical aggression, verbal aggression, and reactive aggression. Physical aggression involves actions intended to cause direct harm, such as hitting, kicking, pushing, biting, or scratching. Verbal aggression manifests through hurtful or demeaning words, such as yelling, using coarse language, insulting, or mocking.

Reactive aggression is usually triggered by unmanaged anger, characterized by children who are easily angered, have difficulty controlling themselves, and conflicts among children that lead to physical or verbal aggression. The causes of these issues are varied, such as parenting styles, online gaming addiction, inappropriate television content, peer influence, family dysfunction, etc. (Handini et al., 2022; Kwartie et al., 2024). Children exhibiting aggression are often rejected by their peers. This situation raises concerns because the less accepted a child is in their environment, the more aggressive they become

(Swit & Slater, 2021). Understanding the forms of aggression is crucial so that teachers can observe children's behavior more accurately. Many aggressive behaviors in children are also related to low self-regulation skills, whereas self-regulation is one of the indicators of a child's readiness to adapt to the next school environment. In this study, self-regulation skills were examined in terms of emotional, attentional, and behavioral aspects. However, the assessment was adapted into a questionnaire format rather than conducted under specific conditions as in standard assessments. Thus, this study aims to describe the forms of physical, verbal, and reactive aggression in children and to explain their relationship with children's self-regulation skills.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, which is a research strategy that combines qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach allows researchers to obtain comprehensive and thorough data, as the two methods complement each other in describing the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2012). The research model used is the concurrent embedded model, a mixed-methods design that employs both qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously. In this model, one type of data serves as the primary data, while the other type functions to support and enrich the findings. In this case, quantitative data serves as the primary data, and qualitative data as the supporting data.

The research location is in the Kutai Timur regency. The research period is January–November 2025. The research subjects for the quantitative data consist of 877 children from 30 schools in one of the regencies in Kalimantan. Subject selection used the convenience sampling technique. Meanwhile, the participants in the qualitative data are classroom teachers selected based on the category of children with aggressive behavior falling into the high and moderate categories. Five children were identified: one in the high category and four in the low category. Consequently, five teachers were selected as participants to describe the conditions of aggressive behavior and its relationship to self-regulation. The five participants are AR, FR, BK, FTR, and IF.

Aggressive behavior was measured based on four aspects: physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. The data collection technique used was observation, which involves directly observing the research subjects and systematically recording various symptoms or behaviors that emerge. The instrument used for observation was a scale serving as a scoring guide based on the Guttman scale. The aggression instrument, based on the four aspects, utilized a scale developed by Faradila. This scale has undergone expert validation.

The categorization is divided into three categories: high, moderate, and low. Quantitative data analysis, assisted by Excel, involves descriptive data. Qualitative data collection uses semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data regarding the relationship between children's self-regulation and the aggressive behaviors that emerge. Given the limitations of field conditions and the distance between the researcher and the school, this study

utilized teachers' observation reports relevant to the dimensions of children's self-regulation, particularly within the classroom learning context (Smith-Donald et al., 2007).

The interview guidelines focused on teachers' experiences in observing children's behaviors related to attention, impulse control, and emotion regulation during learning activities. The process of adapting and developing the interview guidelines was consulted with expert lecturers and early childhood education practitioners to ensure the appropriateness of the context, language, and content for the conditions of young children in Indonesia. Qualitative data analysis employed thematic analysis, which involves categorizing themes—specifically children's self-regulation abilities, comprising self-regulation, emotional regulation, and aggressive behavior. Data validation was conducted by reconfirming the interpretation of interview results with participants (Hanurawan, 2019b).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

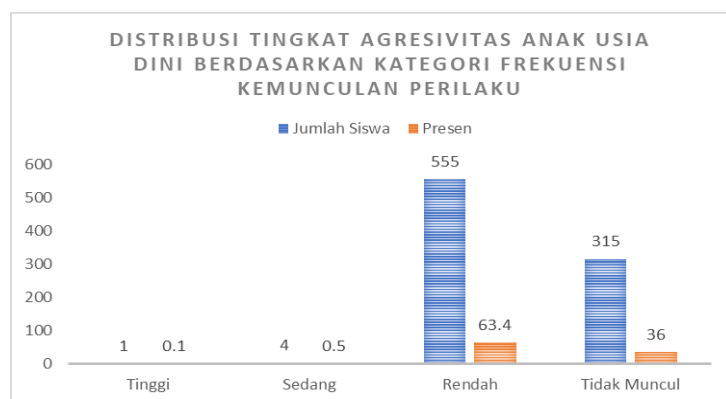
Quantitative data on the characteristics of aggressive behavior in early childhood are presented. Table 1 shows the mean, mode, and maximum and minimum scores for children's aggressive behavior. This indicates that the most frequently occurring score is 0, suggesting that aggressive behavior in children is often not observed or noticed by teachers. Meanwhile, the maximum score is 30, indicating that some children fall into the high category in terms of aggressive behavior.

Table 1. Table Showing Mean, Mode, Maximum, and Minimum Values

MINIMUM SCORE	0
MAXIMUM SCORE	30
STANDARD DEVIATION	3.124698
MEAN	2.075257
MODUS	0

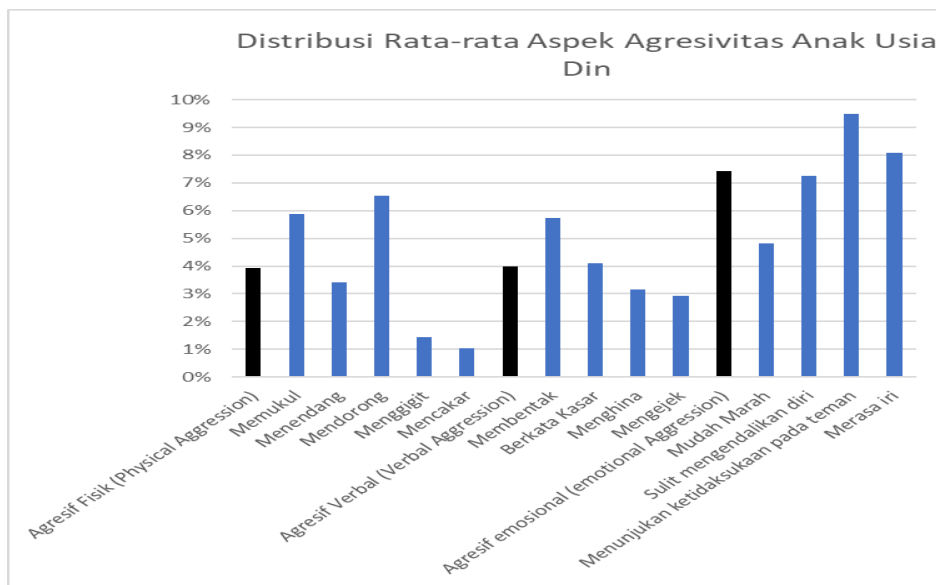
The frequency of aggressive behaviors in children is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Distribution of Aggression Levels in Early Childhood Based on the Frequency of Behavioral Occurrences



Based on the analysis results presented in the figure above, it is evident that the level of aggression among young children generally falls into the low category. A total of 555 children (63.4%) exhibited a low frequency of aggressive behavior, while 315 children (36%) were classified as showing no aggressive behavior. Only a small proportion of children exhibited aggression in the moderate category (4 children, 0.5%) and the high category (0.1%). These findings indicate that the majority of young children possess good self-regulation and emotional control skills. They also rarely display aggressive behavior. This suggests that the learning environments at school and at home are sufficiently effective in mitigating the emergence of aggressive behavior.

Figure 2. Distribution of Average Aggression Scores Among Early Childhood Children



The figure above shows the average distribution of aggression in early childhood, which encompasses three aspects: physical aggression, verbal aggression, and emotional aggression. The results indicate that emotional aggression has the highest prevalence compared to the other two aspects. Behaviors such as being easily angered, showing dislike toward peers, and feeling jealous had the highest averages, each around 8–9%. This indicates that aggression most frequently manifests toward others. Regarding verbal aggression, behaviors such as pushing and using harsh language occurred at an average of about 5–6%, while teasing and insulting were lower, at around 3–4%. This suggests that although children sometimes express dissatisfaction verbally, the intensity is relatively moderate. Meanwhile, physical aggression—such as hitting, kicking, and biting—shows a lower frequency, ranging from 1–6%, with pushing being the most common behavior. Overall, this data indicates that aggression in young children is more dominant in its emotional form than in physical or verbal forms. This indicates that children express aggression predominantly in emotional forms rather than physical or verbal ones. This suggests that children are still learning to manage their emotions and social feelings, so expressions of aggression more frequently manifest in non-verbal emotional forms—not through physical actions or harsh words.

Interview results with five early childhood education (PAUD) teachers—AR, FR, BK, FTR, and IF—revealed that young children’s self-regulation is closely linked to the emergence of aggressive behavior in the classroom. Teachers described differences in children’s abilities to follow rules, wait their turn, and control impulses; children who struggle to control their impulses more frequently exhibit aggression. Impulsive behaviors include knocking things over, and reactive aggression—such as getting angry and shouting—when a child’s desires are not met. Teacher IF provided an example of impulsive behavior: “There’s a child who suddenly knocks over a friend’s Lego structure and actually enjoys seeing his friend cry.” Teacher FTR uses positive reinforcement: “Every time a child successfully waits or controls themselves, I give specific praise... ‘Thank you for patiently waiting for your turn’” (FTR)

Training focus is part of how teachers develop children’s self-regulation skills. Children with a tendency toward low focus are easily frustrated, which can lead to aggressive behaviors such as hitting, spitting, getting angry, knocking over toys, and appearing pleased when seeing a friend cry. Teachers also foster self-control by providing specific praise. Generally, children are able to follow basic rules; however, when their mood is disrupted or a conflict arises, some children defy instructions. Teacher IF described the behavior of some children as follows: “Generally, the children are quite cooperative, although there are one or two who refuse to follow the rules” (IF). Teacher FR observed a similar pattern: “When there are rules, the children usually follow them, but sometimes resistance and a bit of backtalk emerge” (FR). For the BK teacher, resistance is very clearly evident: “he often refuses or avoids participation, sometimes shouting or using harsh language when asked to join in” (BK).

Some teachers noted that children capable of cooperating tend to be less aggressive, but certain conditions can still trigger emotional outbursts even in cooperative children. AR mentioned, “Those who can cooperate can also become aggressive if they’re feeling uncomfortable” (AR). Children’s expressions when angry or disappointed vary: crying loudly, shouting, hitting, or throwing objects. Teacher AR described, “some scream, cry, hit, or slam objects” (AR). Teacher FR mentioned forms of emotion that are more verbal and physical. “some get angry by speaking loudly and hitting” (FR). Teacher BK added extreme behavior: “he screams, even spits and throws objects around him” (BK).

The research findings indicate that aggression among young children is generally at a low level, with emotional aggression being the most dominant form quantitatively. Emotional aggression is often referred to as reactive aggression—aggressive behavior that arises due to external stimuli or specific conditions. This aligns with teachers’ interviews regarding toy-grabbing incidents (Vieira et al., 2010). This study reinforces findings from a previous study conducted in Banten indicating that while children’s aggressive behavior tends to be low, it is high in terms of anger (Faradila). This pattern indicates that children’s aggression primarily reflects reactive aggression, triggered by immature emotional regulation and impulse control, consistent with developmental literature (Morisset & Baillargeon, 2006); (Song et al., 2024; Soto et al., 2024; Supriatna et al., 2024). The lower

intensity of physical aggression compared to previous studies (Vieira et al., 2010) is attributed to teachers implementing structured classrooms, teacher supervision, and the use of social-emotional strategies such as modeling, visual rules, and self-calming techniques (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Faradilla et al., 2025; Kwartie et al., 2024; Payton et al., 2000).

Qualitative findings also confirm the strong influence of the family environment, particularly the patterns of emotional expression that children imitate. Parents who tend to have good self-regulation and can serve as models in expressing emotions significantly influence children's tendencies toward aggressive behavior. This aligns with Bandura's social learning theory, which focuses on children's imitation of the models they observe (Bandura, 1977; Clark et al., 2021; Snyder et al., 2023). Thus, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings confirms that aggression in young children primarily stems from limitations in emotional regulation—a component of self-regulation (Smith-Donald et al., 2007)—rather than from instrumental intent. Self-regulation-based interventions consistently implemented in schools and reinforced by family support are key to reducing aggressive behavior (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Hanurawan, 2019a; Vieira et al., 2010; White et al., 2013).

In efforts to support children's self-regulation, teachers employ various strategies such as breathing techniques, picture stories, visual rules, quiet corners, role-playing, and positive reinforcement. These methods also reinforce previous findings, particularly in Indonesia, where the most commonly used techniques are habit formation and modeling (Aisyah, Harun, Rohman, & Hardika, 2023; Aisyah, Harun, Rohman, Hardika, et al., 2023; Amri Nasiruddin & Solekhah, 2019; Borualogo & Casas, 2021). A consistent approach has been proven to help children recognize and manage their emotions more adaptively. Additionally, teacher-parent collaboration is a key factor in accelerating the development of children's social-emotional skills and helping to gradually reduce aggressive behavior (Faradilla et al., 2025; Kwartie et al., 2024). The findings of this study have important implications for early childhood education practices regarding collaboration with parents, as the family environment is a key factor influencing children's behavior—including both aggressive behavior and self-regulation. Therefore, the strategies selected and implemented by teachers require parental support at home (Bili & Sugito, 2020; Solichah et al., 2022; Zainuddin & Sulaiman W., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the level of aggression among young children in the study context falls into the low category, with emotional aggression being the most common form based on quantitative findings. Meanwhile, qualitative findings indicate a variety of forms of aggression, with verbal and physical aggression still occurring under certain conditions, particularly among children with more limited emotional regulation and impulse control. A synthesis of these two types of data indicates that aggression in early childhood is dominated by reactive aggression stemming from immature emotional regulation, rather than from proactive intent or instrumental behavior. A structured

learning environment, consistent social-emotional management practices, and intensive teacher supervision contribute significantly to reducing the occurrence of both physical and verbal aggression. Furthermore, qualitative findings reveal that patterns of emotional modeling within the family influence the form of children's aggressive expressions, underscoring the need for alignment between school strategies and parenting practices at home. Overall, the results of this study emphasize the urgency of strengthening self-regulation competencies within the early childhood education curriculum and the importance of sustained collaboration between teachers and parents to support children's social-emotional development and mitigate aggressive behavior. Further studies with longitudinal and cross-context designs are recommended to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of aggression and self-regulation in early childhood.

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