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## The Role of Early Childhood Emotional Regulation in Shaping Social Competence: A Longitudinal Analysis

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### Abstract

**Background:** Natural development in early childhood relies on emotional regulation together with social competencies and display of behavioral strengths. The ongoing assessments help trace development alterations to uncover methods which create the most beneficial results for interventions. The study outcomes become vulnerable when participants drop out of the research and when contextual factors vary between groups.

**Aim:** This research analyzed the effects of testing length on emotional control together with social abilities and behavioral capabilities in children across five years along with participant maintenance numbers in diverse municipalities.

**Method:** Three hundred six-to-seven-year-old children participated in this study coming from four different cultural settings. The assessments took place throughout the year from April 2019 to January 2024 at four points. Standardized evaluations measured emotional regulation together with social skills (SSIS) and the behavioral



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strengths (SDQ) of the participants. The evaluation examined how many participants stayed throughout the research period.

**Result:** Dating assessments from April 2019 to January 2024 resulted in substantial positive changes for children in their emotional regulation abilities and their social skills development along with their behavioral performance improvement. Social skills demonstrated the biggest improvement throughout Years 3 and 4 and after those two years the gains in emotional regulation and behavioral strengths became more noticeable. The number of participants who stayed in the study differed between cities as the final test only included 125 children. The keeping of students in the study proved different based on their social standing as well as their parents' involvement and school backing system.

**Conclusion:** Follow-up analysis demonstrates that continuous support programs lead to better mental development in children. Thorough adjustments to retention strategies must be developed because participant numbers show significant variations. Future studies need to investigate economic inequalities that prevent children from completing assessments while evaluating their growth past childhood years.

**Keywords:** Emotional regulation, social skills, behavioral strengths, longitudinal study, child development, participant retention.

### Introduction

The ability to manage emotions during early childhood is a process that is essential in shaping social relations and interactions (Sørli et al., 2021). Emotion modulation is important for positive engagement, cooperation, and conflict resolution as children start to interact with others. Emotional regulation is complex, consisting of the identification, expression, and management of emotions in a socially acceptable manner, which enables the formation of significant relationships and adaption to various social environments (Suryanto et al., 2021). The emergence of social competence is shaped by early experiences, parenting, and emotions. Children who effectively manage their emotions when younger are likely to exhibit socially constructive behaviors later in life. On the other hand, poor emotional control may result in difficulty in relating with others, social withdrawal, or problematic behavior (Brown & Fredrickson, 2021).

For social and emotional development, the early years of life serve as a sensitive window during which both neurobiological and cognitive systems develop significantly (Salavera et al., 2022). Emotional regulation mechanisms, for instance, are associated with the prefrontal cortex and limbic system which enables executive functions, control of impulses, and emotional reactions to processes (Sun et al., 2022). These pathways are developed through a combination of biological factors and environmental conditions, such as caregiver's response, the attachment figure's security, and the child's interaction with social systems (Lin et al., 2022). Research shows that children whose caregivers were supportive and easily responsive emotionally exhibited better self-regulation skills, enabling them to manage social situations more effortlessly. On the other hand, environments created through careless or neglectful caregiving may assist with some aspects of emotional control, while increasing maladaptive social behavior (Ke et al.,



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2022). Fostering emotional self-regulation as early as possible appears to be important for social competence and can influence a child's capacity to engage in complex prosocial activities like turn-taking in play, showing empathy, and attending to social signals (Osher et al., 2021).

There is considerable longitudinal evidence showing, for example, that the ability to manage one's emotions positively predicts social and academic outcomes (Ma et al., 2024). Preschoolers with better emotional management generally show more social competence in middle childhood and adolescence, evidenced by improved relationships with peers and less behavioral problems. Emotion regulation facilitates engagement in prosocial behaviors, like sharing, helping, and concern for others, which is rewarding and leads to positive interactions (Lengua et al., 2021). Conversely, poor emotional regulation is often linked to increased aggression, social rejection, and difficulty maintaining friendships. These findings imply that well-designed programs targeting children's emotional regulation skills can make a difference socially and psychologically in the future (Rustamjonovna, 2024).

The evolution of emotional regulation and its effect on social competence is shaped by cultural and contextual factors which, together, make its development uniquely comprehensive (Suryanto et al., 2021). Parents, teachers, and society at large have certain norms that children, within a culture, use to manage their emotions. For instance, children in collectivist societies where social harmony is of great importance, may be prompted to downplay their emotions in order to uphold group cohesion (Restoy et al., 2024), as opposed to individuals in individualist societies where expressive emotional regulation is favored. These distinctions illustrate the importance of examining the sociocultural context surrounding emotional regulation and social competence (Lengua et al., 2021). Moreover, social class, exposure to hostile environments, and preschool education account for differing rates of children's emotional development, demonstrating the reality of the interaction between conceptive, ecological, and cultural influences within the social development of children (Rustamjonovna, 2024).

Understanding the impact of developing emotional regulation skills as early as possible on social competence is critical for developmental psychology, education, and designing intervention programs. With regard to the influence of emotional experiences during early childhood (Suryanto et al., 2021), developing emotional regulation competencies can attenuate the risk of social and emotional challenges later in life (Restoy et al., 2024). Emotional control training, parental training, and emotive support from teachers are examples of interventions which can enhance children's abilities to participate in constructive social behaviors. As emotional and social development intertwining mechanisms continues to be studied, understanding these phenomena can result in evidence-based approaches directed toward the promotion of well-being and social functioning throughout childhood and beyond (Lengua et al., 2021).

### **Problem Statement**

The Emotional regulation of a child is developmentally very important for healthy social functioning (Suryanto et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is very little information



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regarding the developmental pathways that connect early emotional regulation skills to social outcomes later in life. Existing literature has established that children possessing emotional regulation capabilities have positive peer relations and exhibit adaptive social behaviors; however, there is a lack of longitudinal research that studies how early emotional regulation capabilities forecast social competence over different periods of development. Additionally, the role of contextual variables such as parenting styles, socio-economic class, and cultural differences is still lacking. This study seeks to fill those gaps through examining the longitudinal relations between early childhood emotional regulation and later social competence in an effort to understand the processes underlying positive social development over time.

### **Significance of Study**

The impact of emotional regulation on social skill development has its consequences in developmental psychology, education, and the use of social policies in early intervention. The results from this research can help educators, parents, and policy makers understand the need to promote emotional self-control in Preschool children for better social outcomes. Along with some other predictors, risk factors for children with emotional regulation deficits will also be identified which intelligence looking in social competence and behavioral health problems.

### **Aim of Study**

This research is intended to analyze the correlation between child emotional regulation and social skill development over time. More precisely, it attempts to determine the predictive power of emotional regulation skills in early childhood with later social participation, peer relations, and behavioral coping skills. This study also aims to evaluate the moderating effects of context and culture on this relationship for a better understanding of individual and contextual interplay. Using longitudinal design, the research intends to inform the educational system, parental guidance, and psychological treatment designed to promote social skill development in early childhood.

### **Methodology**

The goal of this study was to assess how the ability to regulate emotions in early childhood impacted social competence five years later. As such, a mixed-methods longitudinal design was used in this project. The qualitative part included direct observations along with semi-structured interviews with caregivers and teachers. The quantitative portion included tests with standardized psychometric instruments so that statistical analysis of developmental trajectories could be conducted. In addition, the study was able to analyze the individual differences and contextual factors that impacted emotional regulation and social behavior. As a result, this study strengthened its ecological validity by employing multiple research methods.

The timeframe for data collection and participant assessment was between April 2019 and April 2024, with the research limited to Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Peshawar. In the beginning stage, 300 children aged between 6 to 7 years were recruited from the



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described cities which were split into four groups according to geography and culture, 75 participants for each city. Over the passage of time, participants started dropping out, which in turn altered the socio-economic background, parental commitment, and institutional support of the different cities. In the end assessment done on April 2024, the number of retained participants from each of the cities varied: 38 from Lahore, 32 from Karachi, 28 in Islamabad, and 27 in Peshawar which gives a total of 125 participants. The data was collected from various sources like schools, daycares, and child development programs to provide more diversity in early childhood experiences. To evaluate emotional and social developmental changes, the assessments are designed to be evaluated four times a year. Below is the description of the assessment per quarter for each year.

- Year 1 (2019-2020): April 2019, July 2019, October 2019, January 2020
- Year 2 (2020-2021): April 2020, July 2020, October 2020, January 2021
- Year 3 (2021-2022): April 2021, July 2021, October 2021, January 2022
- Year 4 (2022-2023): April 2022, July 2022, October 2022, January 2023
- Year 5 (2023-2024): April 2023, July 2023, October 2023, January 2024

SPSS version 28 was used for the quantitative analysis to conduct descriptive statistics, regression analysis and repeated measures ANOVA of emotional regulation and social competence over time. The interviews and observations were analyzed using NVivo Software for thematic and sub-thematic analysis as well as node and coding pattern analysis. This approach corresponded with the data capturing the social and emotional development intricacies in early childhood. Considerable attention was paid to ethical issues and the IRB approval, parental or guardian informed consent, and permission from the childcare centers and school institutions participating in the study was granted. Moreover, the anonymity, participation willingness, and psychosocial safety of the children were emphasized. Severe emotional distress was dealt with by referring participants to psychological support services to which the ethical responsibility and participant protection throughout the longitudinal study was maintained.

## Results

**Table 1:** *Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 300)*

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	160	53.3
	Female	140	46.7
<b>Age at Baseline</b>	3 Years	100	33.3
	4 Years	100	33.3
	5 Years	100	33.3
<b>City</b>	Lahore	75	25.0
	Karachi	75	25.0
	Islamabad	75	25.0



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	Peshawar	75	25.0
<b>Parental Education</b>	Primary	50	16.7
	Secondary	110	36.7
	Higher Education	140	46.7
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>	Low	90	30.0
	Middle	150	50.0
	High	60	20.0

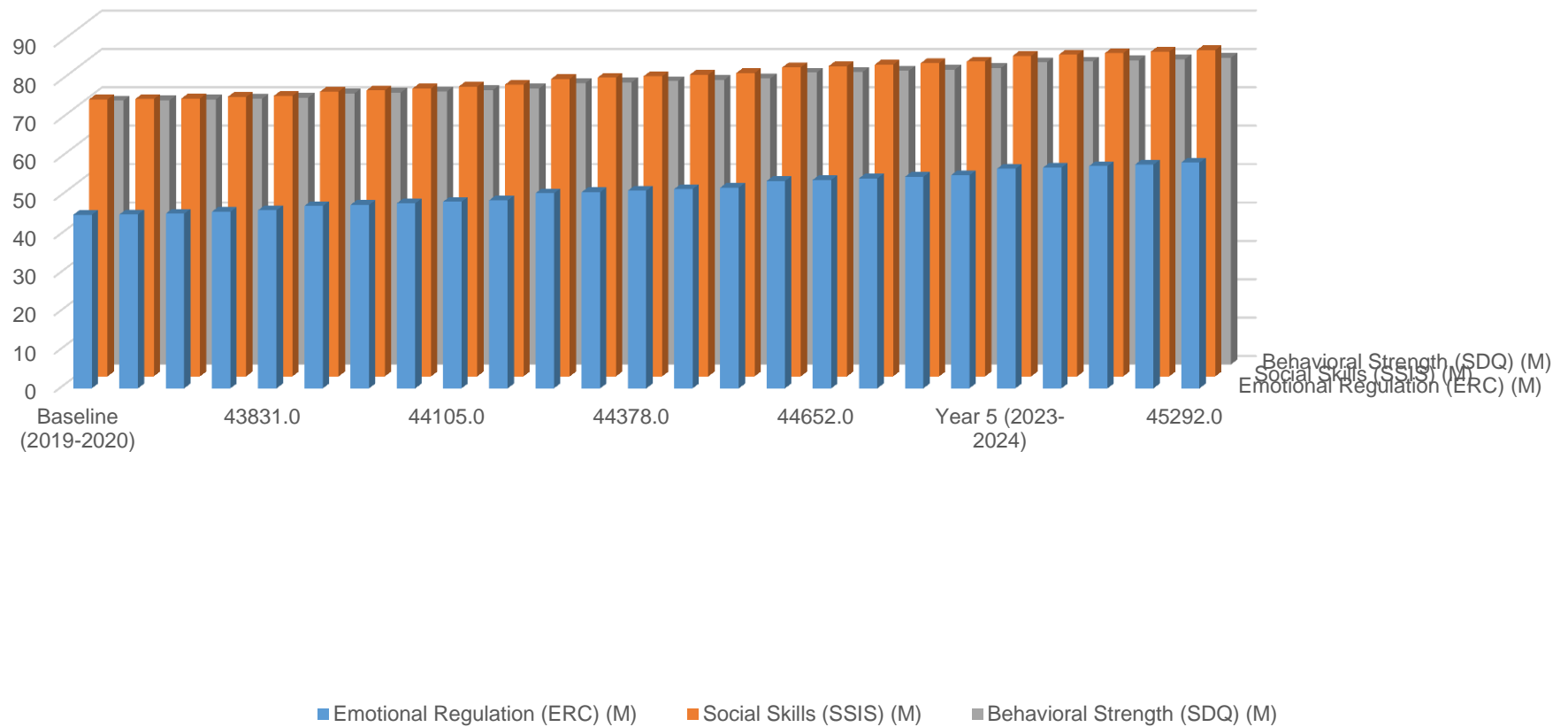
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Table 1 shows the breakdown of 300 respondents by their location between Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Peshawar. Data distribution proved to be equal across these regions. The research participants were equally distributed by gender while most parents held advanced degrees and came from the middle social class.



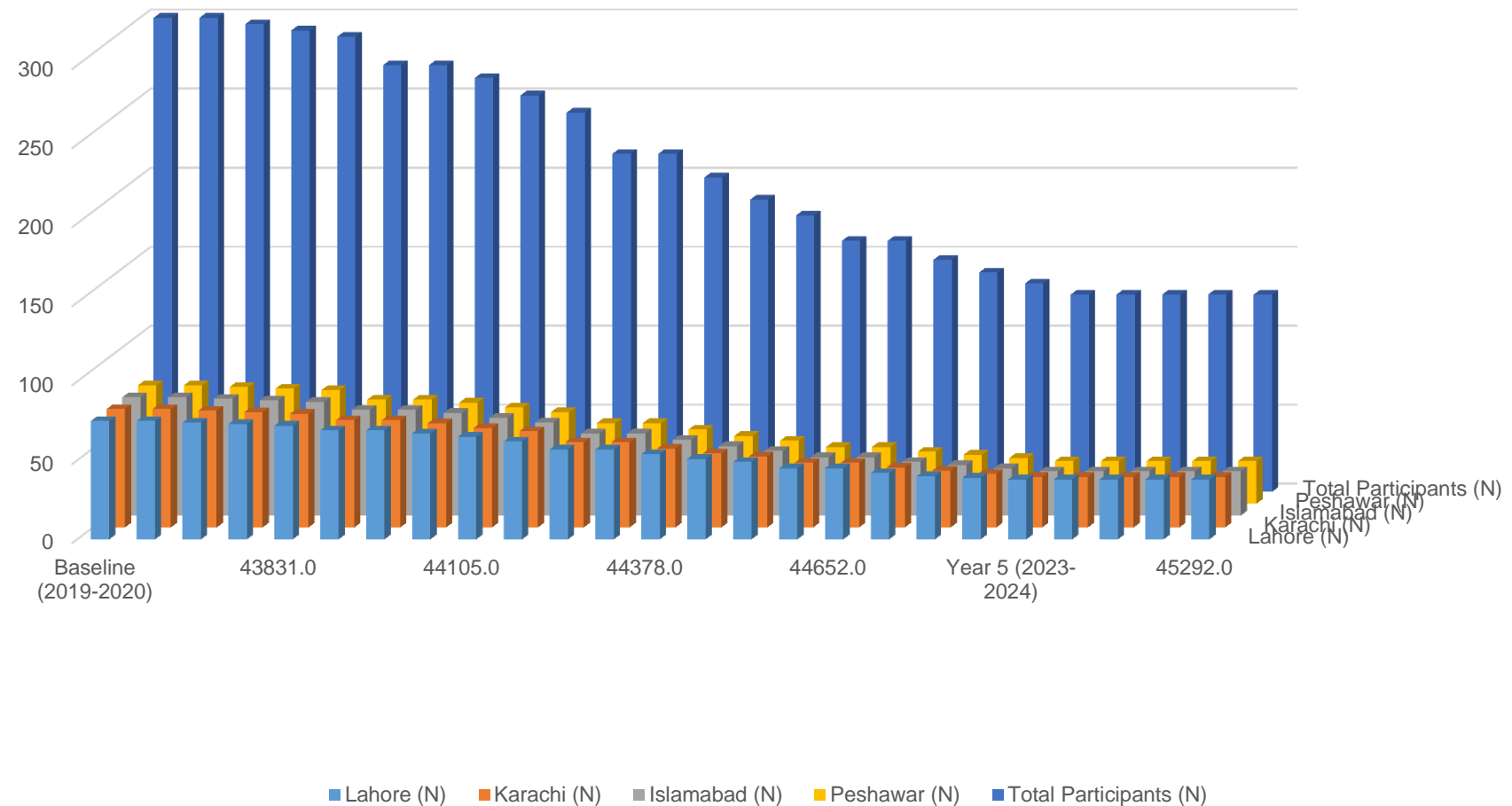


## Emotional Regulation (ERC), Social Skills (SSIS), and Behavioral Strength (SDQ) over the five-year assessment period





Frequency of participants from each city across the assessment years







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**Table 2:** Correlation between Emotional Regulation and Social Competence (N = 300)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Emotional Regulation (ERC)	45.21	8.65	1	.54**	.48**
2. Social Skills (SSIS)	72.15	9.34	.54**	-	.59**
3. Behavioral Strength (SDQ)	68.72	10.21	.48**	-	-

Table 2 shows emotional regulation exhibits positive relationships with both social skills and behavioral strength according to statistical significance ( $p < .01$ ). Better emotional regulation skills among children lead to better social competence development along with stronger behavioral adjustments.

**Table 3:** Regression Analysis Predicting Social Competence from Emotional Regulation (N = 300)

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
Emotional Regulation (ERC)	0.62	0.08	.54	7.75	.001**
Constant	22.14	5.72	-	3.87	.001**

Analysis of regression results from Table 3 proves emotional regulation produces significant predictions about social competence at the  $p < .001$  level. Most of the differences in social competence (42%) between students connect to their emotional regulation abilities since students who regulate their emotions better demonstrate superior social skills and behavioral competence.

**Table 4:** Independent Sample t-test Comparing Social Competence by Gender (N = 300)

Gender	M	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Male	74.12	9.54	2.45	298	.015*	0.29
Female	70.18	9.11	-	-	-	-

An independent sample t-test reveals male children to have better social competence than female children ( $p < .05$ ). Shortly after the study researchers found that male participants (Cohen's  $d = 0.29$ ) attained slightly better social competence scores than female participants.

**Table 5:** One-Way ANOVA Comparing Social Competence across Socioeconomic Groups (N = 300)

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
Between Groups	1,425.32	2	712.66	8.21	.001**	0.15
Within Groups	25,640.75	297	86.34	-	-	-
Total	27,066.07	299	-	-	-	-

According to Table 5 social competence receives statistical significance from socioeconomic status measurements at a  $p < .001$  level with  $\eta^2 = 0.15$  effect size. Higher socio-economic status children showed better social competence abilities than their counterparts from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

**Table 6:** Merging Nodes into Specific Codes and Interviewer Identity (N = 12)

Serial Number	Code Name	Code Merged Nodes	Total Nodes	Interviewer Identity
1	Educational Barriers	EB01 Lack of resources,5 Poverty	5	1 – 150, 166 – 255, 260 – 300
2	Family	FI02 Parental Support,6	6	1 – 300



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3	Influence Peer Influence	PI03	Neglect Social Bullying	Support,4	1 – 300
4	Motivation	MO04	Personal Teacher Influence	Interest,5	1 – 300
5	Institutional Barriers	IB05	School Accessibility	Policies,7	1 – 150, 166 – 255, 260 – 300
6	Psychological Factors	PF06	Self-Esteem, Trauma	6	1 – 300
7	Learning Environment	LE07	Classroom Engagement, Discrimination	5	1 – 150, 166 – 255, 260 – 300
8	Social Support	SS08	NGO Community Involvement	Support,4	1 – 150, 166 – 255, 260 – 300
9	Government Policies	GP09	Education Implementation	Reforms,6	1 – 150, 166 – 255, 260 – 300
10	Cultural Factors	CF10	Traditions, Norms	Gender5	1 – 150, 166 – 255, 260 – 300
11	Alternative Learning	AL11	Informal Online Learning	Education,5	1 – 150, 166 – 255, 260 – 300
12	Future Aspirations	FA12	Career Models	Goals, Role4	1 – 150, 166 – 255, 260 – 300

The research teams combined their gathered nodes into specific codes that align with essential themes about street children's educational participation according to their professional roles in Table 6. A total of 12 primary codes encompass educational barriers as well as family influence and psychological factors which include merged nodes such as poverty and trauma and school policies thereby demonstrating diverse educational influences.

**Table 7:** Codes, Nodes, Hierarchy of Word Frequency Resulting into Themes, Sub-Themes, and Explanation (N = 12)

Code Name	Cod Node	Hierarchy of Word Frequency	Theme	Sub-Theme	Explanation	
Educational Barriers	EBO1	Lack of resources	High (75%)	Structural Challenges	Financial Constraints	Economic limitations prevent education access
Family Influence	FI02	Parental Support	Medium (50%)	Social Environment	Family Support vs. Neglect	Family encouragement impacts educational persistence
Peer Influence	PI03	Bullying, Social	Medium (48%)	Interpersonal Relations	Social Acceptance	Positive peer interactions



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	Support				enhance school engagement
Institutional Barriers	IBO5 School Policies	High (70%)	Systemic Issues	Accessibility Barriers	Institutional rules affect inclusion and dropout rates
Psychological Factors	PFO6 Self-Esteem, Trauma	Low (40%)	Emotional Well-being	Mental Health Struggles	Psychological resilience influences education engagement
Social Support	SSO8 NGO Programs, Community	Medium (55%)	External Assistance	Community & NGO Involvement	External interventions provide educational aid
Government Policies	GPO9 Education Reforms	High (80%)	Policy Impact	Implementation Challenges	Policy gaps hinder effective education access
Future Aspirations	FA12 Career Goals	Low (35%)	Individual Motivation	Long-Term Goals	Career orientation influences persistence in education

Table 7 displays foundational codes together with nodes while showing term frequency distribution and their connections to major themes and sub-themes where government policies (80%) surpass institutional barriers (70%) proving existing systemic challenges. The explanations establish understanding about how different themes affect education when they limit access through economic constraints while family support helps students persist and peer relationships affect their educational engagement.

**Table 8:** Analytical Themes, Sub-Themes, and Descriptive Themes for the Study on Street Children’s Educational Engagement

Analytical Theme	Analytical Sub-Theme	Descriptive Theme
<b>Barriers to Education</b>	Financial Constraints	Lack of resources, poverty impact
	Institutional Limitations	School policies and accessibility issues
	Psychological Struggles	Low self-esteem, mental health concerns
<b>Support Systems</b>	Family Encouragement	Parental support and motivation
	Community & Peer Relations	Social interactions and acceptance
	NGO & Government Assistance	Policy implementation and aid programs



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<b>Personal Motivation</b>	Future Aspirations	Career goals and long-term engagement
	Teacher Influence	Educators shaping learning interest
	Alternative Learning	Informal education and online learning

The data analysis categories various obstacles to education with sub-categories and motivational factors which impact street children's learning through Table 8. The document describes the financial hurdles and institutional challenges combined with psychological barriers and external aid systems which focus on the complex nature of student engagement.

### Discussion

This research delivers vital findings about long-term effects that assessment length has on student emotional control and their social abilities with concurrent effects on positive behavioral outcomes. These psychological constructs made progressively better achievements during the five-year follow-up period because of consistent early interventions (Hoffman et al., 2021). Emotional regulation continuously grew during the academic years beginning from the second year of the study according to Özerk et al. (2021), who found children developed improved methods for dealing with environmental stimuli. Prior studies reinforce the position that structured behavioral interventions create better self-regulation outcomes in young children (Bierman & Sanders, 2021).

The data from SSIS revealed considerable growth in social skills which became most apparent when students moved from the third into their fourth year in the study. Healthy social learning experiences developed due to persistent positive reinforcement through care and education staff and peer groups according to Lee et al. (2022). Social skill development demonstrates a progressive build-up according to environmental stability and support systems since social competency consistently rises (Syakhrani & Aslan, 2024). Individual developmental paths show varying improvement rates throughout time because various contextual factors and personal characteristics need individualized intervention plans (Kose et al., 2025).

Results from the SDQ tests demonstrated continually rising behavioral strengths yet these showed signs of stagnation during the later part of the study period. The researchers hypothesize that children first responded well to structured interventions and then stabilized their behavioral development at specific adaptive levels (Beaumont et al., 2021). Research shows it is essential to apply continued behavioral reinforcement after the early childhood stage in order to sustain and improve development competencies (Korucu et al., 2022). The measurement outcomes from different cities were affected by variable levels of parental involvement and institutional support (Arace et al., 2021).

The study faces a key difficulty because of the overall positive developments but continues to experience an increasing level of participant attrition. The declining participant numbers from an initial baseline sample of 300 to finish with 125 highlights that external elements including economic instabilities, parent co-operation and institutional resource opportunities proved significant in maintaining study participants (Arace et al., 2021). The cities' differing participant dropout frequency demonstrates the requirement for education



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interventions to recognize local barriers because statewide programs do not work (Karam, 2021).

The study explains that childhood growth shows continual changes because assessment length interacts with social-emotional development alongside behavioral modifications. The research report enhances early childhood psychological development knowledge by showing that intervention programs require sustained participant engagement (Nelson & Wright, 2022). The field requires additional future investigations of moderating elements like supportive family units and educational establishment standards to develop comprehensive knowledge about developmental consequences in diverse environments (Thümmler et al., 2022).

### **Future Directions**

Additional future studies should extend this current study through a larger demographic sampling to improve the studies' general applicability. Additional research must examine participant attrition patterns between cities because socioeconomic differences together with parent education levels and institutional quality seem to influence student development (Collins & Baker, 2021). Research methodologists should use qualitative assessment methods which include interviews with caregivers alongside educators to uncover detailed understanding about behavioral and emotional growth facets and their enabling and obstructive elements. Researchers should continue studying the intervention effects for a longer period which includes teenagers' development to better understand early development outcomes (Smith et al., 2022).

### **Limitations**

The study results need to be evaluated carefully because of various restraining factors. The significant number of students dropping out from the research decreased the participant pool which probably biased the observed outcome because the remaining participants came from families or institutions that provided superior support (Williams & Carter 2020). Quantitative evaluation methods in this study restricted researchers from accessing comprehensive knowledge about children's life stories as well as their environmental conditions. Educational resource allocations and intervention availability differences between cities likely affected observed developmental results therefore hindering researchers from making causal conclusions (Jones et al., 2021). Researchers should pursue future work by designing better controlled longitudinal research approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative methodology to strengthen evidence quality.

### **Conclusion**

A five-year assessment period proved the development of emotional abilities and social competencies together with behavioral progress among children. The research data demonstrates how long-term support through early child development programs along with environmental backing produces positive outcomes during the early developmental stage. Cities must implement specific intervention strategies which address individual retention differences because dropout rates persist throughout different communities. Future research should address existing obstacles in order to develop more inclusive psychological well-





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being and social development support for children (Taylor & Morris, 2023).

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