Exploring Parenting Styles and its Influence on Young Children's Social-Emotional Development

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Abstract
Family structures play an important role in every child's growth and development. Every family is different and employs unique parenting patterns. Parenting styles which range from authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful, can have different impacts on a child's social and emotional development. Through a qualitative case study design, this study interviewed ten Malaysian parents to understand their parenting styles and how it influenced children's social and emotional development. Data analysis using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis produced three important themes, namely, dominant parenting styles, age-related

differences in parenting styles, and the influence of parenting styles on children's social–emotional development. Findings reveal that on the whole authoritative parenting emerged as the most prevalent style, particularly among parents of children aged four and five, while permissive parenting was more common among parents of younger children and authoritarian parenting among parents of six-year-olds. Findings also found patterns where parents were found to actively adjust their parenting practices in response to children's developmental stages and educational expectations. The study contributes context-specific insights into Malaysian parenting practices and highlights the need for developmentally responsive parental support in early childhood.

Keywords: Parenting Styles, Young Children, Social-Emotional Development

Introduction
In a child's life, parents serve as primary caregivers and role models for young children. Parents play a significant part in influencing their emotional development. The emotional climate within a family, its interaction and responsiveness, and caregiving practices all plays crucial roles in shaping children's emotional competencies. Research in parental influences on social-emotional development has expanded significantly in recent years, driven by parents' pivotal role in shaping children's emotional competence (Yap et al., 2020). Various studies have further pointed that parental warmth, sensitivity, and the ability to communicate emotions effectively contribute to the development of secure attachment relationships, which are foundational for emotional well-being (Denhem et al., 2012; Harlow, 2019; Nordin & Norman, 2021)

The Four Different Types of Parenting
Every family structure is different and employs unique parenting patterns (Baumrind,1971). Different parenting styles have varying effects on children's social emotional development (Figure 1). Baumrind (1971) in an earlier edition on the various parenting styles, clearly categorised the characteristics into four types parenting, namely, authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful.

Authoritative parenting, as suggested by Baumrind (1966, 1971), extended by Maccoby and Martin (1983) is characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and clear communication which fosters higher levels of emotional intelligence in children. In contrast, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful parenting styles may impede the development of emotional intelligence by either imposing rigid rules and restrictions or lacking consistent guidance and support.
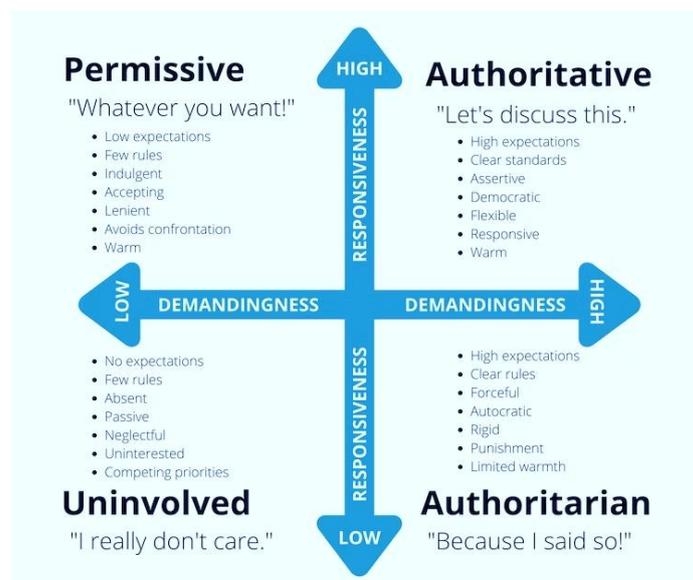
Figure 1 Four Parenting Styles
(Source: https://www.lovediscovery.org/post/discover-the-4-types-of-parenting-styles)

Attachment Theory and its Influence on Social-Emotional Development
Attachment Theory (John Bowlby, 1958, 2018), deliberates the importance of parental influence on emotional development. It stresses the magnitude of secure parent-child relationships in fostering emotional security and resilience. According to Waters & Cummings (2021), secure attachment bonds provide children with a haven to explore and regulate their emotions, laying the groundwork for the development of emotional intelligence.

Although the realisation on child's social-emotional is still new at the Malaysian platform, unlike its counterparts like Australia and New Zealand, Malaysia has made some strides in early childhood education and research addressing emotional intelligence in young children even though it is still sparse (Denham et al., 2012; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017; Nordin & Norman, 2021).

Attachment Theory which was first introduced by Bowlby in 1969 which revisions done in 1973 and later in 1980 clearly points out how early relationships between children and their primary caregivers shape their social and emotional development (Salcuni, 2015). Baumrd emphasises that a child who is always provided a secured attachment, feel a sense of safety and emotional security which empowers them to explore their environment confidently and develop positive social interactions. Through consistent and responsive caregiving, children learn to regulate emotions, develop empathy, and build trust in relationships. Unlike some parents practicing distance as measure of discipline in child upbringing, attachment theory highlights the foundational role of early caregiver–child relationships in supporting healthy social–emotional development (Harlow, 2019). Distance upbringings, although maybe benefit certain desired behaviours, it creates more insecure attachment and are main contributors to difficulties in emotional regulation, peer relationships, and social adjustment among young learners.

Past Studies on Parents and Children's Social-Emotional Behaviour
Past studies have directly associated parents' role in shaping children's social–emotional development during early childhood. As primary caregivers and emotional role models and hence their behaviours, responsiveness, and communication patterns significantly influences children's emotional regulation, empathy, and social competence (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Research has shown that supportive and emotionally responsive parenting environments contribute positively to children's emotional wellbeing and adaptive social behaviours (Brown & Wilson, 2022).

Empirically, data has further proven that parental involvement and the quality of parent–child relationships are crucial mechanisms underlying children's emotional intelligence development. A secure parent–child attachment mediates the relationship between parental involvement and children's emotional competence, highlighting attachment as a key pathway through which parental support influences emotional outcomes (Garcia & Martinez, 2021).

Parents who practice authoritative parenting which is normally characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and appropriate control, according to studies, have been found to promote higher levels of emotional intelligence among children, as compared to less responsive or inconsistent parenting styles that produces negative child growth (Brown & Wilson, 2022). Studies further stress that family communication patterns and parental modelling of emotional regulation are also important contributors to children's emotional development (Rodriguez & Gomez, 2019).

Although international studies provide strong evidence of the influence of parental roles on children's social–emotional development, research in the Malaysian context remains limited. Existing studies are largely concentrated in Western settings, and cross-cultural findings indicate that parental influences may differ according to cultural norms and parenting beliefs (Chen & Liu, 2020). To date, relatively few empirical studies have explored how Malaysian parents parenting style support young children's social–emotional development within home environments. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining Malaysian parents' styles of parenting and how it influences children's social–emotional development, thereby contributing contextually relevant insights to early childhood education research.

Objective of the Study
The primary objective of this study was to investigate the various parenting styles and their influence in the cultivation of emotional intelligence in young children. Specifically, this study aims to:
1. To explore the type of parenting style used by Malaysian parents.
2. To understand how each parenting style influence social-emotional development of young children.

Methodology
A qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews was applied to delve deeply into the type of styles parents use and how each style had influenced the development of social and emotional well-being of young children.

Sampling

In terms of sampling, since this study was a part of a larger study on parental involvement in children's growth and development, researcher used convenient sampling approach to select participants as the participants were readily accessible and met the inclusion criteria required for data collection. This sampling method, as put forward by Creswell & Poth (2018), was particularly suitable for exploratory and perception-based studies, where the primary aim is to gain initial insights rather than to generalise findings to a larger population (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

In addition, convenience sampling allowed the researcher to collect data efficiently within the shortest time possible and reduce logistical constraints, making it appropriate for an inquiry-based research setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Overall, a total of ten parents were conveniently selected for the interview process. As put forward by Krueger and Casey (2000), qualitative data collection methods should involve at least six to twelve participants to ensure robust results. Therefore, selecting ten participants aligned well with the research objectives and methodological considerations.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2012) Thematic Analysis approach was used for this study's data analysis. The entire process of thematic analysis involved a systematic process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting textual data to identify recurring themes and patterns (Figure 2).
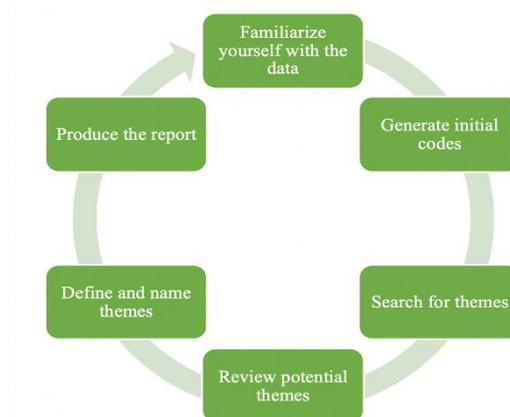

Figure 2 Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) Thematic Analysis Approach

Researcher gathered the verbatim transcripts and began first with data familiarization, where researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and member-checking transcripts to gain a holistic understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Member checking, a crucial step in qualitative data, ensured the accuracy and credibility of the qualitative data by allowing participants to verify the authenticity of their responses and confirm that the interpretations reflected their intended meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcribed statements and provide clarification, corrections, or additional insights where necessary. This enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings and reduced the risk of researcher bias, thereby strengthening the overall credibility of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following this, researcher of this study engaged in coding, wherein data was systematically labelled and organized into segments based on meaningful concepts or ideas. These codes were then grouped into broader categories or themes, which captured key patterns or ideas within the data.

Findings and Discussion
Based on the data analysis, three major themes emerged, which will be discussed in detail below. Figure 3 briefly summarizes all three themes that emerged followed by detailed discussion.
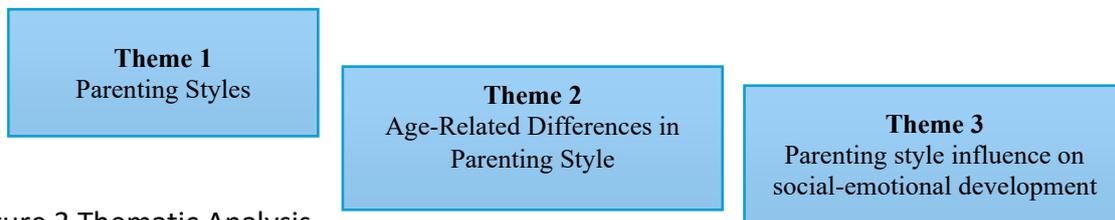
Theme 1 Parenting Styles	Theme 2 Age-Related Differences in Parenting Style	Theme 3 Parenting style influence on social-emotional development

Figure 3 Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Parenting Styles
Data from analysis found that of the ten parents, five parents (50%) adopted the authoritative parenting style, two (20%) adopted the permissive style while another 3 (30%) adopted he authoritarian style (Table 1).

Table 1
Parenting Styles

Parent	Age of child	Style	Percentage (%)
P1	3	permissive	20
P2	3	permissive	
P3	4	authoritative	50
P4	4	authoritative	
P5	4	authoritative	
P6	5	authoritative	
P7	5	authoritative	
P8	6	authoritarian	30
P9	6	authoritarian	
P10	6	authoritarian	

Further probing from parents indicated that although they do want to be more authoritative, some (3 authoritarian parents) still see the urgency of having strict order so that they can instil a high achievement mentality among their children.

As for the permissive parents (2 parents), they felt being strict and rigid will not be encouraging children to enjoy their childhood openly.
Findings for the authoritative parents (50%) however parallels past research that indicates authoritative parenting stands out as one of the most widely practiced approaches (Steinberg et al., 1991; Jones and Prinz, 2019). Authoritative parenting is characterized by high levels of warmth, responsiveness, and support combined with reasonable levels of control and expectations for maturity. An authoritative parent explains things to their kids and spends time listening to them. Though they might not always agree with their kids, authoritative parents use reason to communicate with their kids. In addition to being the ones who establish significant regulations, authoritative parents serve as their kids' leaders and mentors. They don't impose too many restrictions, yet they are precise and unified.

Theme 2: Age-Related Differences in Parenting Style
One observation which was note-worthy was the age-related differences of parenting styles as shown in Figure 4.
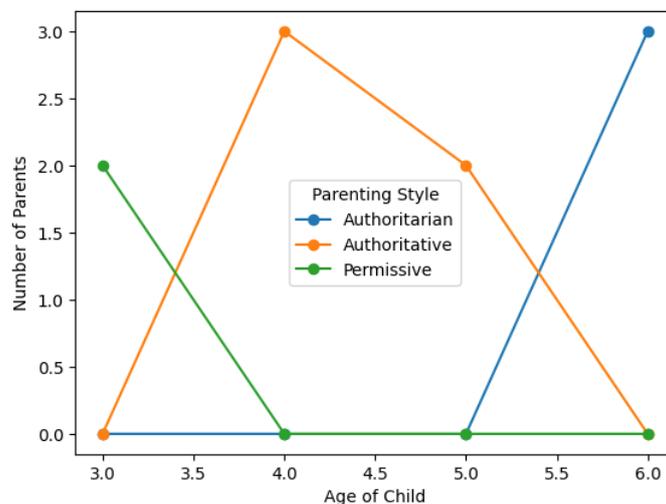

Figure 4 Parenting Style Distribution Across Children's Age

Findings from this study found an interesting developmental pattern in parenting styles across children's ages (Figure 4). Permissive parenting was observed primarily among parents of younger children (age 3), while authoritative parenting became more prominent between ages 4 and 5. In contrast, authoritarian parenting emerged more strongly among parents of older children (age 6), indicating a shift toward stricter control as children grow older.

This developmental shift aligns with existing literature suggesting that parents often adjust their parenting strategies as children grow older and demonstrate increasing autonomy and behavioural complexity (Bornstein et al., 2015; Smetana, 2017). Baumrind (1991) and Darling and Steinberg (1993) noted that parents frequently adjust levels of warmth and control as children mature.

Parallel to the finding shown in Figure 4 above, previous research has also consistently shown that parents of very young children tend to adopt more permissive approaches, characterised by warmth and low behavioural demands, particularly during early toddlerhood when emotional security and attachment are prioritised (Baumrind, 1991; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). At this stage, parents may be more tolerant of behavioural inconsistency, viewing such behaviours as developmentally appropriate rather than requiring firm discipline. This perspective may explain the presence of permissive parenting among parents of younger children in the current findings.

As children enter the preschool years, authoritative parenting becomes more prominent, reflecting parents' increasing emphasis on structure combined with emotional responsiveness. This pattern is consistent with extensive research identifying authoritative parenting as the most adaptive approach during early childhood, supporting self-regulation, social competence, and cognitive development (Steinberg, 2001; Pinquart, 2017). The dominance of authoritative parenting among parents of four- and five-year-old children in this study parallels previous findings suggesting that parents are more likely to balance

autonomy support with clear expectations as children begin formal or semi-formal schooling (Jin & Chen, 2024; Vasiou et al., 2023).

The emergence of authoritarian parenting among parents of six-year-old children may reflect heightened academic expectations and behavioural regulation demands associated with school entry. Prior studies have noted that as children approach primary schooling, parents often increase control and discipline in response to concerns about academic readiness, compliance, and classroom behaviour (Cheah et al., 2009; Lansford et al., 2018). Within Asian and Malaysian cultural contexts, such tendencies may be further reinforced by collectivist values emphasising respect for authority, obedience, and academic responsibility (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Consequently, the increase in authoritarian practices among parents of older children may represent adaptive parental responses to perceived educational pressures rather than deliberate harshness.

Taken together, these findings support the view that parenting styles are developmentally responsive and contextually situated rather than fixed traits. The shifting pattern observed across age groups reinforces theoretical perspectives that parenting practices emerge through ongoing negotiation between child characteristics, developmental demands, and sociocultural expectations (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). This dynamic understanding of parenting has important implications for parental guidance programmes, suggesting that support should be developmentally differentiated rather than based on uniform parenting prescriptions.

Theme 3: Parenting style Influence on Social-Emotional Development
Data from the interview with parents found that children raised by authoritative parents exhibit higher levels of self-esteem, better communication, and fewer behavioural problems compared to those raised under other parenting styles.

> *"I often negotiate with my son on various matters. From his homework, to playing online games, or even watching you tube. And I don't face any problems when it comes to performing at preschool.'*   *PT 4*

> *"Because I am quite understanding on my child's ability and weakness and I accept her opinions, I can see she knows how to respect others' opinion and behave well socially.'*   *PT 6*

Studies have also consistently highlighted its positive impact on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. For instance, a study by Jones and Prinz (2019) found that children raised by authoritative parents exhibit better overall cognitive and emotional levels as compared to those raised under other parenting styles. As put forward by Pinquart and Kauser (2018) the democratic nature of authoritative parenting fosters opens communication and independence in children while providing necessary guidance and boundaries.
On the other hand, findings saw that authoritarian parenting, which is characterized by high control and low warmth, often emphasized obedience and discipline over nurturing, which had little room for social-emotional exploration.

> *"I don't see the need for me to accommodate tantrums and childish emotions. Especially at 6 years old. They must already be in discipline mode.'*   *PT 9*

> *'My child needs to focus on her academic. I am not keen on social and emotional behaviour. Once they know how to read, count and write better, they will soon learn how to handle their emotions.'*　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　*PT 8*

This finding is parallel to past literature that authoritarian parent enforces rigorous rules and regulations and provide no room for emotional descending (Baumrind, 1966, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Recent research however has suggested that authoritarian parenting, if used frequently on young children, may lead to short-term compliance but can result in long-term negative outcomes such as low self-esteem and behavioural issues (Pinquart, 2018).

Data also observed the presence of permissive parenting among parents of younger children. This clearly reflect an emphasis on emotional warmth and responsiveness during early developmental stages. Previous research indicates that parents of toddlers and young preschoolers often adopt more lenient approaches, viewing emotional expression and behavioural inconsistency as developmentally appropriate rather than as behaviours requiring firm regulation (Baumrind, 1991; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). At this stage, parental priorities tend to centre on nurturing attachment and emotional security.

> *"My child is very young. Only 3. I allow for her to grow naturally. She will net even understand if I negotiate. I just want her to feel loved and cared. When I am free with her, she feels happy and she socialises well. If I become strict, she goes silent and very traumatic'*　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　*PT 2*

However, literature also cautions that prolonged permissiveness, if not gradually adjusted, may limit opportunities for children to develop self-regulation and behavioural boundaries as they grow older (Baumrind, 1991; Johari & Mamat, 2011).

Similar to discussion on Theme 2 above, parents also repeatedly mentioned that as children progress into the preschool years, there is shift from permissive parenting to authoritative parenting and then to authoritarian parenting. Authoritarian parenting becomes increasingly prominent, reflecting parents' efforts to ensure success in formal school structures.

> *"When he was much younger, I was very okay with everything. No rules. But now he is 6 and must prepare for school, I have changed my style. I am more firm, more strict. No playing around. I want him to show me results."*　　　　　　　　　　*PT10*

Overall, such findings clearly directs that parents actively recalibrate their parenting practices in response to perceived developmental and educational demands. As was found, authoritarian parenting becomes increasingly prominent as children transition into the formal school years, reflecting parents' efforts to ensure stricter behavioural structure. This shift is clearly illustrated in the account provided by PT10, who described a deliberate change from a permissive approach during early childhood to a firmer, more structured parenting style as the child approached school age (Baumrind, 1991).

This study parallels previous studies that discusses parenting style transition from preschool to formal schooling. As children near formal schooling, parents often become more concerned with responsibility, rule-following, and academic preparedness, prompting greater

emphasis on behavioural regulation rather than emphasizing social and emotional development. Prior research similarly indicates that parents tend to adopt more structured parenting practices as children approach school entry, viewing firmness and a reduction of warmth, as a necessary component of preparing children for formal learning environments, leaving little room to delve social and emotional growth (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Steinberg, 2001).

Within Asian and Malaysian contexts, educational achievement is frequently perceived as a key indicator of successful parenting, leading parents to increase guidance, monitoring, and performance-oriented expectations as children grow older (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Ng et al., 2020). Such expectations may explain why authoritarian parenting becomes more dominant during the end of preschool years, as parents seek to instil discipline and not fully concerned on maintaining emotional or social involvement.

Significance of Study
This study holds significant theoretical, practical, and educational value. Theoretically, it contributes to the existing literature on parenting styles and social–emotional development by integrating parenting style theory and attachment theory within a Malaysian early childhood context. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for policy makers, parents and schools on how different parenting influences social-emotional development and the importance of understanding the transitions between parenting styles based on age. This identification of age-related shifts in parenting practices further underscores the importance of developmentally appropriate parenting guidance rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. As for the educational value, the study encourages national efforts to strengthen social–emotional learning within early childhood education. The findings can inform school leaders and policymakers in designing family engagement initiatives and partnerships that recognise parents as key partners in children's emotional development. By providing observed insights from the Malaysian perspective, this study contributes to the development of more culturally responsive and inclusive early childhood education practices.

Conclusion
This study was designed to explore Malaysian parents' parenting styles and examine how these styles influence young children's social–emotional development. One of the most interesting findings was that that parenting styles are not static. Instead, it transforms based on children's age, developmental needs, and perceived educational demands. While permissive parenting was more evident among parents of younger children, authoritative parenting became increasingly dominant during the preschool years, reflecting parents' efforts to balance emotional warmth with behavioural structure. Among parents of older children, particularly those approaching formal schooling, a shift towards more authoritarian practices was observed, often driven by heightened academic expectations.

Overall, the study highlights that authoritative parenting is key in supporting children's social–emotional development. Children raised in authoritative environments were perceived by parents to exhibit better emotional regulation, social interaction skills, and self-confidence. Both permissive and authoritarian approaches were also observed but with highlights of potential risks if not developmentally adjusted.

Overall, the study stresses the importance of understanding parenting as a vigorous and contextually situated process shaped by developmental transitions and sociocultural expectations. This research has thus contributed meaningful local insight to the broader discourse on parenting and early childhood development by foregrounding Malaysian parents' voices. Future research should investigate gathering data from much larger and diverse samples and using mixed-method approaches to further strengthen parenting practices and their long-term implications for children's social–emotional wellbeing.

Acknowledgement

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