

Understanding Low Empathy and Reluctance to Share

Among Young Children: A Qualitative Analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: December 26, 2025

Accepted: Januari 11, 2026

Available online on:

January 20, 2026

Keywords:

Empathy, Sharing, Social Character, Early Childhood

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Published by Universitas

Muhammadiyah Tangerang

ABSTRACT

Empathy and sharing are essential foundations in shaping the social character of early childhood, as they play a crucial role in fostering compassion, cooperation, and the ability to build positive relationships with others. However, in practice, many behaviors among young children still reflect a low level of empathy, such as reluctance to share toys, competing for play materials, and being insensitive to peers' feelings. This study aims to analyze the symptoms of low empathy and sharing attitudes among early childhood learners through observational approaches in preschool settings. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method using non-participant observation and informal interviews with classroom teachers. The findings revealed that egocentric behavior in children tends to arise from a lack of habituation, limited social simulation, and insufficient positive reinforcement within the learning environment. This study emphasizes the importance of implementing consistent and collaborative social-emotional learning strategies between teachers and parents to nurture empathy and sharing attitudes in

young children.

Introduction

Empathy and sharing behavior are essential components of early childhood social development. During the golden age, children require appropriate stimulation to regulate emotions and build healthy social relationships. However, many children still display egocentric tendencies, reluctance to share, and difficulty waiting for their turn—behaviors that indicate a low level of empathy (Raudah et al., 2025). Empathy, in fact, plays a critical role in fostering tolerance, compassion, and the reduction of social conflicts (Kumari et al., 2023). When early childhood education (ECE) environments emphasize individual achievement over collaboration, children have fewer opportunities to practice cooperation or to recognize their peers' emotions (Yanita Sari & Kosasih, 2019; Rositi, 2022). This condition underscores the urgency of strengthening social character through appropriate educational strategies, particularly in response to concerns over the erosion of moral values within formal education (Kuswandi, 2020).

These observations suggest that the internalization of social values among young children remains suboptimal. Many children have yet to demonstrate prosocial behaviors that reflect empathy and generosity—behaviors that emerge from sustained socio-emotional learning processes. Prior studies indicate that the development of empathy in children is significantly shaped by their immediate environment, including interactions with parents, teachers, and peers. A supportive

and positively stimulating family environment has been shown to play a pivotal role in nurturing children's moral development (Hanafiah, 2024). Conversely, authoritarian or overly permissive parenting styles that lack emotional warmth can inhibit the development of empathy and sharing behaviors (Novitawati et al., 2024).

The success of social character formation in early childhood is thus closely linked to the quality of social stimulation children receive from an early age. Empirical findings show that group play experiences, such as traditional games, enhance empathy and cooperation as children learn directly through social interactions with their peers (Susilawati et al., 2022). Similarly, visual-based learning models, such as the picture-and-picture approach, have been found to strengthen children's understanding of emotions and social experiences (Astuti et al., 2020). On the other hand, excessive screen time has been associated with a decline in social competence and empathic ability (Sulaiman et al., 2024).

From a character education perspective, empathy also embodies spiritual and moral values that can be nurtured from an early age. Children exposed to balanced spiritual and social learning tend to exhibit greater awareness of others' needs and are more inclined to help and empathize (Bachri et al., 2025). Inclusive education models that integrate tolerance and empathy within classroom instruction have likewise been found to strengthen social attitudes, reduce discrimination, and promote mutual respect (Hamzah et al., 2025).

Teachers play a central role in shaping empathy and other forms of social behavior. For instance, the “natural materials center” approach, which encourages collaborative play, role-sharing, and joint problem-solving, provides tangible opportunities for empathy and cooperation to develop in daily classroom routines (Fitra et al., 2025). Activities such as simulations and role-playing are also effective tools for helping children understand others’ perspectives (Farantika & Hafni, 2025; Ahyia et al., 2024). Through engaging in empathetic storytelling and interactive play, children begin to imitate and internalize social values that promote positive interpersonal interactions.

Nevertheless, many young children still lack sufficient social stimulation, both at home and in school. The absence of consistent routines that foster prosocial habits—such as helping peers or sharing toys—presents a significant challenge. Consequently, empathy may not develop optimally, and sharing behavior remains irregular. Children’s tendency to act solely out of self-interest without considering others’ needs can be understood through Kohlberg’s early stages of moral development, in which moral reasoning is based primarily on avoiding punishment (Suparno, 2020). Moreover, excessive exposure to digital technology at an early age has been found to further diminish children’s ability to exhibit empathy and social concern (Apsari et al., 2023). Inconsistent parenting and the absence of role models who demonstrate caring and sharing behaviors also contribute to children’s individualistic tendencies (Malik et al., 2020).

This issue highlights the need for further investigation using observational approaches that capture authentic manifestations of children's social behavior in everyday school contexts. Conducting descriptive analyses of children's daily interactions in early childhood classrooms can provide deeper insights into the social dynamics underlying empathy and sharing behaviors. Therefore, the present study aims to analyze forms of low-empathy and low-sharing behavior among young children through naturalistic observation within school environments. Although numerous studies have discussed the importance of empathy and prosocial behavior in early childhood, few have employed direct observational methods within natural play settings in early childhood education institutions. Most prior research has focused on intervention programs or curriculum-based learning rather than on naturally occurring behaviors in daily classroom interactions. This gap underscores the need for more contextual and field-based studies that explicitly explore children's reluctance to share and empathize.

This study offers a new perspective by employing naturalistic observation to examine young children's behaviors within authentic school contexts. It provides an original contribution by capturing the dynamics of empathy and sharing as they emerge spontaneously through peer interactions during play. Such an approach offers a more accurate representation of how empathy and prosocial tendencies develop—or fail to develop—in real-world early childhood

environments. Based on this background, the present study addresses three key questions: (1) What forms of low-empathy behavior are exhibited by young children during play activities at school? (2) What factors contribute to low empathy and reluctance to share among these children? and (3) How do teaching strategies and school environments influence the development of empathy and sharing behavior in early childhood? Through direct classroom observation, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive and contextual understanding of the social dynamics shaping young children's empathic and prosocial development.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of naturally occurring social phenomena within early childhood education settings. The participants were children from Group B at an early childhood education school located in Banjarmasin. Participants were selected purposively, taking into account accessibility and active engagement in group play activities. Data were collected through non-participant observation and interviews with classroom teachers to capture authentic social behaviors and instructional practices related to empathy and sharing.

Observations were conducted over a two-week period, focusing on group play interactions, the distribution of play materials, and children's responses toward peers experiencing difficulties. The researcher maintained a passive role during these sessions to avoid

influencing the natural flow of activities. In addition to observation, teacher interviews were carried out to explore the children's social habits and the strategies employed by educators to promote empathy and cooperation. Supplementary documentation, including daily field notes and activity photographs, was gathered to support the primary data and enable triangulation for ensuring the validity and credibility of the findings.

The data were analyzed qualitatively through a three-phase process consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Jauhari et al., 2023). During the reduction phase, observed behaviors were categorized into thematic clusters such as egocentric actions, reluctance to share, and lack of sensitivity toward peers. The subsequent phase involved presenting the data in descriptive narrative form to illustrate the factual conditions observed in the classroom. Through this process, a comprehensive picture emerged of the limited empathy and sharing tendencies among children within their everyday social interactions at school.

Result and Discussions

In order to contextualize the findings, Table 1 presents an overview of previous studies cited in the discussion and illustrates how each contributes to the interpretation of the results.

Table 1.

No	Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Key Findings	Relevance to Current Study
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1	Raudah et al., 2025	Social skills through game-based activities	Social games enhance children's social interaction	Supports finding that limited social stimulation leads to low empathy
2	Nurfazrina et al., 2020	Empathy development in early childhood	Empathy requires affective stimulation	Reinforces that insufficient emotional stimulation reduces empathy
3	Amelia et al., 2021	Local-wisdom-based learning (Kalimantan folklore)	Folklore fosters empathy and cooperation	Relevant to the need for culturally grounded media
4	Mubarok et al., 2024	Tolerance and collaboration in ECE	Teacher modeling promotes positive social behavior	Supports importance of role-modeling in schools
5	Farantika & Hafni, 2025	Teacher strategies for empathy	Consistent habituation strengthens empathy	Aligns with need for consistent social habituation
6	Ahyia et al., 2024	Symbolic modeling & empathy	Visual modeling improves emotional responsiveness	Relevant due to lack of visual-empathy media in the classroom
7	Bifadlilah et al., 2023	Puzzle media for social-emotional growth	Media games support socio-emotional development	Highlights importance of stimulating materials
8	Susilawati et al., 2022	Traditional games &	Collaborative play enhances	Relevant to limited

		empathy	empathy & regulation	collaborative play in school
9	Nisa et al., 2020	Role-play & socio-emotional skills	Role play builds social competence	Supports recommendation for guided role-play
10	Made, 2022	Social-skills training	Consistent strategies improve cooperation	Aligns with findings of weak prosocial habituation
11	Fitra et al., 2025	Empathy & cooperation strategies	Small-group discussions foster empathy	Shows effective methods not yet used in the context observed
12	Apriliasiwi et al., 2021	STAD cooperative model	Promotes responsibility and social awareness	Relevant to overcoming children's individualism
13	Diken & Melekoglu, 2022	SWPBIS in early childhood	Enhances empathy, reduces negative behaviors	Reinforces the role of structured environments
14	Trivedi-Bateman & Crook, 2022	Roots of Empathy program	Emotional reflection improves empathy	Relevant to minimal emotional-reflection activities
15	Rambe et al., 2023	Role-play & educational tools	Increase empathy through simulation	Supports need for more guided social scenarios
16	Sukemi & Amin, 2024	Religious & moral development	Strengthens children's moral values	Connects moral foundations with prosocial behavior
17	Ardianto	Moral values	Moral growth	Reinforces link

	et al., 2022	in early childhood	influenced by environment	between morality and empathy
18	Savitri & Harahap, 2022	Teachers' professional roles	Teachers shape children's moral behavior	Highlights teacher responsibility as role models
19	Darmiyati, 2020	Moral learning & performance tasks	Visual and interactive tasks support moral growth	Relevant to multimodal approaches in empathy-building
20	Zulfida & Aslamiah, 2023	DIRAUT model for moral-spiritual values	Games enhance moral-religious development	Supports game-based empathy learning
21	Haryono et al., 2020	Character education values	Moral values are foundational from early age	Reinforces moral-affective integration
22	Ariani, 2022	Moral development & behavior	Moral education regulates social behavior	Aligns with emotional-social regulation themes
23	Irvin et al., 2021	SEL programs in ECE	SEL improves empathy and emotional responses	Supports recommendation for SEL integration
24	Sulaiman et al., 2024	Screen time & socio-emotional skills	Excessive screen time lowers empathy	Relevant contextual risk factor
25	Malik et al., 2020	Parenting patterns	Warm parenting improves prosocial	Reinforces role of family environment

			behavior	
26	Pasiska, 2024	Bandura's social learning theory	Children imitate environmental behavior	Supports role-modeling explanation
27	Suparno, 2020	Kohlberg's moral development	Early moral stages driven by external motivation	Relevant to observed egocentrism
28	Rositi, 2022	Sharing behavior in ECE	Sharing develops through habituation	Matches findings of inconsistent sharing
29	Astuti et al., 2020	Picture and Picture model	Visual media supports emotional understanding	Supports visual strategies for empathy
30	Bachri et al., 2025	Religious learning & character	Religious learning fosters social awareness	Relevant to moral-empathy integration
31	Hamzah et al., 2025	Empathy in inclusive ECE	Empathy reduces discriminatory behavior	Strengthens broader value of empathy
32	Yanita Sari & Kosasih, 2019	Parental involvement	Collaboration with parents supports character education	Reinforces need for home-school synergy

The findings of the observation revealed that most young children participating in this study tended to exhibit low levels of empathy during group play activities. Behaviors such as taking play materials without permission, reluctance to share, and failing to respond to peers

in distress indicated limited socio-emotional competence in their everyday school interactions. These findings are consistent with those of Raudah et al. (2025) and Nurfazrina et al. (2020), who found that the low empathic ability among young children often stems from insufficient affective stimulation necessary for optimal emotional development.

This condition was further clarified through interviews with classroom teachers, who reported that prosocial behavior had not yet become an ingrained habit among the children. Without explicit guidance, children often reverted to individualistic tendencies, suggesting that empathy and sharing values had not been deeply internalized. The teachers emphasized the significance of modeling and consistent reinforcement, both at home and in school, in cultivating moral and social character from an early age—a finding supported by Amelia et al. (2021). Similarly, Mubarok et al., (2024) asserted that children's involvement in collaborative activities, when accompanied by teacher role modeling, fosters mutual respect and cooperation. Farantika & Hafni (2025) further strengthened this argument, highlighting that consistent habituation of social values serves as a fundamental basis for the development of empathy in early childhood.

The dominance of egocentric behavior observed among the children can be explained through Piaget's cognitive development theory, which posits that young children are not yet capable of understanding perspectives different from their own. This view aligns

with Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes that children acquire behaviors through imitation of their surrounding environment (Pasiska, 2024). Consequently, when the environment lacks empathic figures to serve as role models, children may face barriers in developing prosocial tendencies. These findings imply that the teaching strategies employed by educators have not been fully optimized as explicit instruments for internalizing social values.

Most classroom activities were still primarily instructional and offered limited opportunities for children's emotional exploration. Such conditions risk weakening the process of internalizing social values such as empathy and sharing. As noted by Ahyia et al. (2024), the use of visual media, including storytelling or animated films, can help children better understand social experiences and respond to emotions more adaptively. Bifadlilah et al. (2023) similarly emphasized that educational media play a crucial role in stimulating social-emotional development during early childhood. Furthermore, learning models grounded in local wisdom, such as Kalimantan folktales, have been shown to effectively instill empathy and cooperation by evoking emotional engagement within a familiar cultural context (Amelia et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the observations indicated that such media and culturally relevant approaches were still rarely utilized, leaving children's emotional sensitivity underdeveloped and their potential for social growth insufficiently supported.

In the context of play, the children observed were not yet

accustomed to establishing shared rules or resolving conflicts through reflection. They often prioritized personal interests without considering the needs or feelings of others. This phenomenon aligns with findings by Nisa et al. (2020), who noted that egocentrism is a common characteristic of early childhood, as children at this stage tend to focus on personal enjoyment and possess only a limited understanding of social norms. Similarly, Susilawati et al. (2022) emphasized that traditional games such as *gobak sodor* have significant potential to foster empathy and cooperation, as they require direct interaction and emotional regulation within social contexts. Unfortunately, the limited use of collaborative play activities in schools contributes to the persistence of individualistic behavior among children.

This condition underscores the crucial role of the school environment as a medium for nurturing empathic values. Made (2022) argued that consistency in character-strengthening strategies is a key prerequisite for cultivating healthy social behavior. In this regard, Fitra et al. (2025) found that activities such as role-playing and small-group discussions enhance children's empathy by actively engaging them in understanding others' emotions. Cooperative learning models, including the Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD), have also been shown to significantly promote responsibility and social awareness among young learners (Apriliasiwi et al., 2021). The integration of these strategies into classroom instruction offers a promising approach to addressing the persistent weakness of children's

prosocial behavior.

Further support for this finding is offered by Diken & Melekoglu (2022) , who demonstrated that the School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) framework effectively enhances empathy while reducing problematic behaviors in early childhood education settings. This approach highlights the importance of synergy among teachers, parents, and the wider school environment to establish consistency in reinforcing positive behavior. Similarly, Trivedi-bateman & Crook (2022) found that the *Roots of Empathy* program improved children’s social awareness through structured emotional reflection. These studies collectively suggest that effective empathy-based learning strategies must involve direct experiences, authentic emotional engagement, and coherent social support across educational contexts.

During the observation period, children who actively participated in positive group play experiences demonstrated higher levels of empathy and a greater willingness to share with peers. This indicates that consistent social habituation plays a critical role in shaping prosocial behavior. Corroborating these findings, Rambe et al. (2023), Sukemi, R. S., & Amin (2024), Ardianto et al., (2022), and Savitri & Harahap (2022) all emphasized the importance of role-playing and empathetic simulation activities that encourage children to understand others’ perspectives actively. Such activities not only nurture empathy and compassion but also strengthen children’s sense of social responsibility. A combination of various instructional models—such as

Explicit Instruction, Picture and Picture, and Talking Stick—has also proven effective in enhancing children’s moral and religious values. According to Darmiyati (2020), these strategies provide enjoyable learning experiences through direct, visual, and interactive approaches. Complementary social skills training further contributes to children’s cooperative abilities by integrating discussions, role-plays, feedback sessions, and consistent reinforcement (Made, 2022). Collectively, these processes demonstrate that the successful cultivation of empathy depends greatly on the design of an educational and participatory learning environment that meaningfully engages children in social experiences.

Moreover, learning models that integrate somatic, auditory, visual, and intellectual approaches simultaneously have been shown to foster comprehensive affective development in children. Zulfida & Aslamiah (2023) found that implementing the DIRAUT model through educational games such as *snakes and ladders* significantly enhances children’s religious and moral values. This approach not only strengthens spiritual understanding but also encourages socially appropriate behavior consistent with moral norms. These findings suggest that learning experiences that combine hands-on activities and social reflection effectively promote the internalization of moral values in enjoyable and meaningful ways. Haryono et al. (2020) asserted that instilling moral values from an early age is fundamental to holistic character formation. Ariani (2022) similarly emphasized that early

moral education helps children regulate behavior and respect others in social interactions. This aligns with findings by Irvin et al. (2021), who demonstrated that implementing structured social-emotional learning programs in early childhood education significantly improves children's empathy and their ability to respond appropriately to others' emotions. Likewise, Diken & Melekoglu (2022) reported that systematic empathy training—particularly through activities such as role-playing, storytelling, emotional discussions, and social reflection—significantly enhances both affective and cognitive aspects of empathy in young children.

Taken together, these findings affirm that the development of empathy and sharing behavior in early childhood requires structured, consistent, and contextually grounded pedagogical approaches. The lack of empathetic role models and meaningful social activities limits children's opportunities to cultivate prosocial dispositions. Therefore, strengthening social-emotional learning strategies that are experiential, collaborative, and embedded within everyday school practices is essential for fostering empathy and social awareness in early childhood education environments.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that early childhood learners still frequently exhibit low levels of empathy and reluctance to share during play activities in school settings. This phenomenon appears to be influenced by the limited habituation of prosocial behaviors,

insufficient modeling of empathy by adults, and the suboptimal implementation of instructional strategies that foster emotional exploration. Moreover, inconsistencies in the design of learning environments aimed at nurturing social values further contribute to the underdevelopment of children's empathic capacities. These findings underscore the critical importance of integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the daily routines of early childhood education. Structured strategies such as role-playing, small-group discussions, and the use of visual media should be actively and continuously implemented to facilitate emotional engagement and perspective-taking. Teachers and parents serve as key agents in this process, functioning not only as models of empathetic behavior but also as facilitators of supportive social environments that encourage affective interaction among children. A collaborative, structured, and contextually grounded approach is therefore essential for cultivating empathy and sharing behaviors from an early age. Such an approach lays the foundation for the development of enduring social character and contributes to the broader goal of fostering emotionally intelligent and socially responsible individuals.

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