

## Parents' Perceptions of Abusive Language in Early Childhood

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### ABSTRACT

Abusive language refers to the use of negative language, such as expressions that demean, insult, or threaten others. This study aimed to explore parents' perceptions of abusive language among early childhood children. A qualitative approach employing a phenomenological research design was adopted. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, involving two parents of children aged 5–6 years residing in Griya Abdi Negara Housing Estate, Purwakarta. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation. Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that children do not fully understand the meaning of the harsh language they use, and parents perceive abusive language as imitative behavior performed without a profound understanding of its meaning. In response, parents employed persuasive approaches by providing explanations and age-appropriate

moral guidance to prevent the recurrence of such behavior.

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### Introduction

The use of language that demeans, threatens, yells at, insults, or labels children with negative words remains prevalent in Indonesia. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as **abusive language** or verbal abuse. Nurmalina (2020) states that verbal abuse manifested through the use of negative language is a form of behavior that is still frequently overlooked, despite its potentially severe psychological consequences for children's development. Abusive language directed at children may include yelling, insults, threats, negative labeling, and utterances that undermine a child's self-esteem.

This phenomenon is further substantiated by empirical evidence from various regions of Indonesia. Elvina (2022) identified a case at TK Islam Permata Alima, Lampung Province, in 2025, in which the majority of children within one classroom group had become accustomed to using offensive language after imitating social media influencers and receiving minimal parental supervision. Furthermore, these children repeatedly used such offensive expressions to mock their peers until the behavior became habitual. A similar phenomenon was also documented in Jatimontong Hamlet, Grobogan Regency, in 2021, where children frequently used impolite regional expressions—such as *cangkemu*, *matamu*, *gendeng*, *raimu*, and *anjir*—when communicating not only with their peers but also with their own parents.

The widespread use of abusive language among young children has prompted numerous previous studies aimed at identifying its underlying causes and consequences. At least five major themes have emerged from the existing literature in examining this phenomenon from different perspectives. First, Sidqi et al. (2025) highlighted external triggering factors, such as gadget use and the surrounding environment, which accelerate children's acquisition of negative language due to inadequate communication ethics within the family. Subsequently, Sulmayanti et al. (2025) specifically identified direct interactions in online games as a primary medium through which children acquire offensive vocabulary. Meanwhile, Sulastry (2024) emphasized the role of parenting practices, arguing that children's speech quality reflects what they hear within their home environment. Armita (2022), on the other hand, identified a unique behavioral pattern in which children tended to use offensive language only while playing outdoors with their peers but suddenly became polite when interacting with their parents at home. Finally, the study conducted by Viridiana et al. (2024) examined children's understanding of abusive language and emphasized the importance of parental guidance in helping children recognize that offensive language is not an appropriate means of communication, even when they are angry.

From a theoretical perspective, the process through which children acquire offensive language, as illustrated by both field observations and previous studies, is consistent with the sociocultural theory proposed

by Lev S. Vygotsky (1978) in *Mind in Society*. Vygotsky argued that speech not only facilitates children's effective manipulation of objects but also regulates their behavior. The most influential and effective language learning occurs through interactions within children's social and cultural environments—including peers, family members, and teachers (Masrura et al., 2024). Through these early interactions, children acquire language, learn patterns of behavior, and develop their cognitive as well as socio-emotional abilities. Furthermore, Vygotsky's concept of the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** explains how sociocultural contexts shape and stimulate children's language development (Etnawati, 2021).

Although numerous studies have investigated abusive language among early childhood children, most previous research has primarily focused on children's behavior, its psychological consequences, and environmental factors in general. In-depth investigations specifically examining how parents themselves perceive and respond to this phenomenon remain very limited. This gap is particularly significant in today's social context, where offensive language is often normalized as humor or casual conversation. Parents, as children's primary educators, play a decisive role in shaping appropriate communication behaviors. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its focus on integrating parents' internal perceptions with the actual responses they employ when their children engage in abusive language. This study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of parents' perspectives while

serving as a foundation for families and teachers in designing communication guidance strategies that promote polite language use in accordance with children's developmental stages.

As explained by Sidqi et al. (2025), the use of abusive language has become increasingly prevalent among young children. This phenomenon is influenced by children's use of gadgets without adequate parental or adult supervision, exposure to unfavorable environmental examples, and the lack of ethical communication practices within both the home and the surrounding community.

According to Sulmayanti et al. (2025), online games exert a substantial influence on children's acquisition of offensive vocabulary because children directly hear and participate in interactions that contain such language. Consequently, these experiences may affect the way they communicate in their daily lives.

A previous study conducted by Sulastry (2024) reported that parents play a significant role in determining the quality of children's speech. Children tend to imitate the speaking behaviors they hear from their environment, particularly within the family setting. Parents are not only responsible for providing care but also serve as children's primary educators, especially in shaping their personality and character. When harsh or offensive language is frequently used within the family environment, children hear, imitate, and eventually reproduce the same expressions.

Similarly, Armita (2022) explained that many children frequently

use offensive language while outside the home but refrain from doing so when they are at home with their parents. Four children were identified as regularly using abusive language during outdoor play, even though they never exhibited such behavior at home. This occurred because they frequently played with peers who habitually used offensive expressions. These findings demonstrate that the play environment also influences the quality of children's language development.

These findings are consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) proposition that speech not only facilitates children's effective manipulation of objects but also regulates their behavior. Furthermore, Vygotsky (as cited in Masrura et al., 2024) argued that the most influential and effective language learning occurs through children's social and cultural environments, where language is acquired through interactions with peers, family members, and teachers. It is through these interactions that the language acquisition process is reinforced.

Vygotsky further asserted that, during the early stages of development, children learn through interaction. Such interactions enable children to understand language and behavior while simultaneously developing their cognitive and socio-emotional capacities. Through interaction, children also learn how to solve problems they encounter and develop empathy. Moreover, Vygotsky's concept of the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** (Etnawati, 2021) explains how sociocultural contexts shape and influence children's

developmental processes.

Although numerous studies have investigated abusive language among young children, in-depth research specifically exploring parents' perceptions of abusive language in early childhood remains limited. As society continues to evolve, the use of offensive language has increasingly been normalized in everyday communication and is often regarded merely as humor or casual conversation. In reality, however, the use of abusive language can adversely affect children's development.

Most previous studies have primarily concentrated on children's use of offensive language, its impact on socio-emotional development, and environmental factors in general. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how parents perceive children's use of abusive language. Therefore, examining parents' perceptions is essential, considering their central role within the family, in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on parents as children's primary educators. Unlike previous studies that predominantly emphasized children's behavior and its consequences, this research integrates parents' perceptions with the responses they provide when confronted with abusive language used by their children. Based on this rationale, investigating parents' perceptions of abusive language in early childhood is considered both relevant and necessary.

This study is expected to provide a more comprehensive

understanding of parents' perspectives regarding abusive language in early childhood. The findings are anticipated to serve as a foundation for developing preventive efforts and fostering more positive language development that is appropriate to children's developmental stages. Furthermore, the study is expected to assist parents in identifying effective strategies for supporting children's development, establishing healthy communication patterns, and guiding children toward the use of more respectful and appropriate language. Finally, the findings are expected to serve as a scientific reference for teachers in designing age-appropriate language development programs and as a valuable resource for future research.

### **Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research method using a phenomenological approach. The qualitative phenomenological design was selected because the study sought to explore parents' perceptions and responses toward abusive language among early childhood children. According to Sugiyono (2020), qualitative research is a type of inquiry conducted in natural settings. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary research instrument, data are collected through triangulation techniques (combining multiple data collection methods), data analysis is conducted inductively, and the findings emphasize meaning rather than generalization. The phenomenological research design was adopted because it focuses on participants' lived experiences, which are consistent with the objectives of the present



study.

According to Riyanto (2009), phenomenology is a philosophy concerned with phenomena, in which phenomena refer to events, experiences, and the feelings of joy or anxiety experienced by individuals. Phenomenology places particular emphasis on reflecting upon meaningful experiences encountered in everyday life. In other words, phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that seeks to investigate meaning in depth. Hasan et al. (2025) further explained that a phenomenological research design focuses on phenomena as experienced from the participants' perspectives while considering the surrounding social context. Consequently, this approach provides broader insights into the social phenomena under investigation.

The participants in this study were parents residing in Griya Abdi Negara Housing Estate, Sukatani District, Purwakarta Regency. The study involved two parents who had children aged 5–6 years. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on the research objectives.

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to directly examine interactions and spontaneous behaviors occurring between parents and their children in natural settings. Meanwhile, qualitative interviews were employed as the primary data collection method, enabling direct interaction between the researcher and participants to obtain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions. Documentation was used as

a complementary source of information to support and strengthen the research findings.

The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to obtain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, experiences, values, and interpretations of the phenomenon being investigated. Because qualitative interviews are flexible and open-ended, researchers were able to modify interview questions according to participants' responses, thereby allowing a more comprehensive exploration of issues that could not be adequately examined through other data collection methods. Documentation, meanwhile, functioned as an additional data source to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), consisting of three stages. The first stage involved data coding, which was conducted in two cycles. During the first cycle, codes were generated directly from the raw data. In the second cycle, these codes were organized and consolidated into four major themes. The second stage involved data display, in which the findings were presented in the form of descriptive narratives. Finally, the third stage consisted of drawing and verifying conclusions based on the patterns identified throughout the analysis process.

### **Result and Discussions**

Based on the findings obtained from interviews with the two parent participants, the researcher identified **two major categories** related to

abusive language among early childhood children. The first category concerns **parents' responses and actions**. In responding to such behavior, parents generally adopted a **persuasive approach** by providing explanations and moral guidance. Nevertheless, they also acknowledged the importance of implementing firm measures, including warnings of stricter consequences, if the behavior was repeatedly exhibited by the child.

The second category concerns the **forms of abusive language** used by children. The interview findings indicate that abusive language refers to the use of words, expressions, verbal symbols, or tones of speech that are impolite, disrespectful, or aggressive. Such language may appear in the form of swear words, ridicule, insults, or other aggressive expressions. Abusive language is not limited to the words themselves but also encompasses the manner in which they are delivered. Many expressions are not inherently offensive; however, when conveyed in a harsh or raised tone of voice, they may be perceived as abusive. Thus, whether language is considered abusive depends largely on the context of the interaction and the interpersonal relationship between the speakers.

The participants explained that the abusive language used by children did not always consist of severe swear words but more frequently involved teasing expressions or terms derived from the local Sundanese language. Words such as *jelek* ("ugly") or Sundanese expressions referring to defecation were reported as the most commonly heard

examples.

Both Parent 1 and Parent 2 explained that the abusive language used by children in their environment remained relatively mild. The expressions most frequently used consisted of teasing remarks and the use of animal names as nicknames to mock peers. In addition, the participants reported hearing children use Sundanese expressions referring to defecation.

These findings are reflected in the participants' statements below:

**"First, I try to approach my child and explain that what they did was wrong. Second, I help them understand what behaviors are acceptable and what should not be said using those kinds of words. Third, I let my child know that there will be a much stricter warning if the same behavior happens again."**

*(Interview with Parent 1).*

**"Of course, I explain it to them, give them guidance, and let them know that the words they use are not appropriate."**

*(Interview with Parent 2).*

**"Yes, I have, but it was still relatively mild, such as using the word 'ugly'."**

*(Interview with Parent 1).*

**"I've heard other children using abusive language by calling others with animal names. Since we live in a Sundanese cultural environment, there are also several Sundanese expressions that are considered offensive."**

*(Interview with Parent 1).*

**"The offensive expression I often hear is when children talk about 'defecation,' but they use the Sundanese term for it."**

*(Interview with Parent 2).*

These findings confirm that parents play the primary role in children's growth and development. Therefore, parents need to possess appropriate parenting strategies and careful planning to ensure that children's growth and development proceed optimally and with high quality. The findings of this study reinforce those reported by Marsahip (2025), who argued that children receive their earliest education from their parents; consequently, parents are children's first and foremost educators.

However, when compared with previous studies, the present research fills a theoretical gap by explaining **how** parental responses are implemented progressively in the digital era. While Marsahip (2025) emphasized the general role of parents as educators, the findings of this study go a step further by identifying a **hybrid response pattern** adopted by parents according to the situation. Parents in the present study did not immediately apply a rigid parenting style, nor did they simply ignore the behavior by adopting a permissive approach. Instead, they combined a **persuasive–educative approach** during the child's first offense with an agreement regarding firmer consequences as a preventive measure should the behavior be repeated.

The novelty of this finding indicates that parents' awareness of the

negative consequences of abusive language has gradually shifted from merely prohibiting such behavior to facilitating an interactive process of cognitive understanding. Parents position themselves as **social-emotional filters** who protect their children from the growing exposure to negative vocabulary originating from the surrounding environment and digital media. This constitutes a distinctive contribution of the present study, as such a perspective has received only limited attention in previous research on early childhood parenting.

In addition, parents are responsible for providing protection while ensuring that children feel safe and emotionally secure. As stated by Muqodas et al. (2025), emotional closeness and attachment between parents and children are fundamental to early childhood development. Through this close relationship, children develop emotional security, a sense of safety, and feelings of comfort that support their overall development.

According to Zulaeha and Setiasih (2025), parents play an indispensable role in children's language development because they are responsible for providing appropriate stimulation to ensure that language develops optimally according to the child's developmental stage. Therefore, parents need to understand and apply appropriate parenting styles, including **authoritarian, permissive, democratic (authoritative), and neglectful parenting**. The effectiveness of these parenting approaches depends on parents' understanding of children's developmental needs. Parenting practices influence children's social competence in interacting

with both family members and peers. Children are more likely to grow up in a loving environment and develop healthy communication patterns when such parenting practices are consistently implemented in everyday family life.

Nabila and Sit (2024) also emphasized that parents play a crucial role in educating and nurturing children. Effective parental guidance contributes to the development of children's moral values, which are fundamental in shaping their character, particularly within the context of social interaction. Likewise, Virdiana et al. (2024) argued that parents are responsible for guiding children, helping them understand that abusive language is inappropriate and impolite for everyday communication, including when expressing anger. These perspectives are further supported by Fitria and Syarif (2022), who stated that the family is a child's first educational environment. Consequently, parents occupy the central role in children's lives because they provide children's earliest and most fundamental education.

Armita (2023) explained that abusive language consists of expressions that violate the norms accepted within a particular social environment. Common forms of abusive language include **profanity** (the misuse or desecration of sacred expressions), **cursing** (uttering expressions such as *damned*, *bastard*, or similar offensive terms), and **obscenity** (insulting words such as *crazy*, *idiot*, or other derogatory labels). Such language is generally used to express hatred, anger, or other negative emotions. Abusive language may also take the form of verbal expressions

intended to ridicule, insult, or demean others through indirect or direct verbal attacks. This interpretation is consistent with Vygotsky's theory (as cited in Etnawati, 2021), which emphasizes that children acquire language through interactions within their social environment.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results of the data analysis concerning parents' perceptions of abusive language among early childhood children, it can be concluded that the use of abusive language is primarily the result of imitative behavior, whereby children hear and subsequently imitate the language they are exposed to. Parents generally respond through persuasive and educative approaches by providing guidance, explanations, and moral direction to children who engage in abusive language. Such behavior may occur either intentionally or unintentionally, depending on the situation. The findings also indicate that the social environment exerts a dominant influence on children's use of abusive language. In addition, digital media and social media play a significant role in exposing children to offensive language, thereby contributing to the emergence and repetition of such language use in everyday communication.

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