

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)www.ijepe.comPARENTS' PERCEPTION OF HOME ENVIRONMENT AS A
SPACE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEVEL

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Article Info:**Article history:**

Received date: 30.09.2025

Revised date: 15.10.2025

Accepted date: 11.11.2025

Published date: 01.12.2025

To cite this document:

Riffai, A. R. A., Ariff, N., Ab Karim, A. I., Abdul Hasim, S. N., Husin, A., Ismail, N. K., & Nasir, M. K. M. (2025). Parents' Perception of Home Environment as A Space for Early Childhood Level. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 10 (61), 157-167.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1061012

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**Abstract:**

The home environment plays a crucial role in supporting early childhood development. It encompasses physical, social, emotional, and cognitive aspects that interact in shaping children's daily learning experiences. However, parental adaptation strategies in managing the home environment are still not fully understood, especially within the local cultural context. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore parents' perceptions of the home environment as a space that supports early childhood development, focusing on three main aspects: digital media use, physical space, and parenting style. This qualitative study employed an exploratory research design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews involving five parents with children aged between 2 and 6 years, residing in Selangor. Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that children's use of digital media, when controlled and closely monitored by parents, can have a positive impact on learning. A comfortable and organized physical home environment was also found to influence children's emotions positively. Furthermore, the practice of positive parenting styles at home can positively affect children's behavior. This study confirms that the home environment significantly influences children's holistic development.

Keywords:

Home Environment; Digital Media; Physical Space; Parenting Style; Early Childhood Development

Introduction

The home environment serves as a critical foundation in supporting early childhood development, particularly among preschool-aged children. It encompasses physical, social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that collectively shape children's daily learning experiences. A growing body of research highlights that family routines, parenting styles, and the overall home atmosphere significantly influence children's behavioral development, learning motivation, and skill acquisition (Chen et al., 2021; White et al., 2022; Elliott & Bachman, 2024). Within this environment, parental involvement through joint activities such as reading, playing, or engaging in conversations provides essential stimulation that enhances cognitive, language, motor, and socio-emotional growth (Chen et al., 2021; White et al., 2022). A safe and stimulating home setting thus becomes the earliest space for exploration, socialization, and confidence building, complementing the role of preschools (Määttä et al., 2017; Okech & Mackinova, 2020).

Despite its significance, many families particularly those from low-income backgrounds—face barriers in establishing a conducive home environment. Socioeconomic stress, limited time and resources, and inadequate space often challenge parents' capacity to create supportive learning conditions (Määttä et al., 2017; Mendes-Sousa et al., 2023; Lopez Boo et al., 2018). Parents' educational backgrounds and approaches to digital technology further complicate this landscape, as the use of media at home may either enrich or hinder children's developmental progress depending on how it is managed (Bassul, Corish & Kearney, 2021; White et al., 2022). Previous studies, however, have often examined parenting practices or the physical aspects of the home in isolation, overlooking the complex interplay of social, emotional, and spatial factors that children experience simultaneously (Chen et al., 2021; White et al., 2022; Bassul et al., 2021). Moreover, the emotional dimension of parent-child interactions in informal learning activities and the culturally embedded strategies that families employ to adapt to constraints remain underexplored (Mendes-Sousa et al., 2023; Elliott & Bachman, 2024).

This study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which emphasizes how interconnected environmental systems influence children's development. At the microsystem level, the home environment through two-way communication, family structures, and daily routines shapes children's earliest learning and socialization processes. Theoretical perspectives from Islamic educational thought also stress the family as the starting point of education, emphasizing character, manners, and moral development (Al-Ghazali; Santoso, 2023). Together, these perspectives highlight the home as both a practical and moral foundation for lifelong learning.

Considering these insights and gaps, the present study aims to explore parents' perceptions of the home as a space that supports early childhood development, with a focus on three interrelated aspects: digital media usage, the layout and features of physical space, and parenting styles. This integrated focus is essential for understanding how families navigate real-life challenges while shaping environments that meet their children's developmental needs. By investigating these interrelated aspects, the study not only fills critical gaps in the literature but also provides insights into the lived realities of families in Malaysia. This in turn informs the development of early childhood education policies and practices that are more holistic, culturally responsive, and sensitive to socioeconomic diversity.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question: How do parents perceive and shape the home environment as a space that supports early childhood development? To address this overarching question, three sub-questions are proposed:

1. Digital Media Usage: How do parents regulate and guide children's engagement with digital media at home?
2. Physical Space: In what ways do families adapt the layout and features of the home to support play, exploration, and learning?
3. Parenting Styles: How do parents' approaches to interaction, routines, and emotional support influence their children's developmental outcomes?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with an exploratory study design. A qualitative approach was chosen because it is particularly suitable for capturing the lived experiences, perspectives, and meanings that individuals attribute to a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the context of this research, it allowed for an in-depth understanding of how parents perceive and shape the home environment as a space for early childhood development. The exploratory design provided flexibility in investigating a phenomenon that has received limited attention in Malaysia, enabling the researcher to identify emerging themes and meanings beyond pre-determined categories (Stebbins, 2001). This design thus offered opportunities to uncover nuanced insights that might otherwise remain invisible in quantitative approaches.

Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study consisted of five parents, four mothers and one father, all residing in Selangor, Malaysia. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed characteristics directly relevant to the study. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative inquiry to ensure the selection of information-rich cases that can shed light on the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria required that parents had at least one child between the ages of two and six years, resided in Selangor, and were actively involved in their children's daily care and learning at home. These criteria were intended to ensure that participants could provide meaningful insights based on their firsthand involvement in shaping the home environment. Although the sample size was modest, it was deemed sufficient for qualitative research, where the focus is on the depth and richness of individual narratives rather than the generalizability of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant contributed valuable perspectives shaped by their unique family circumstances, thereby enriching the dataset with diverse experiences.

Data Collection Instrument

The primary instrument for data collection was a semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they balance the need for comparability across participants with the openness required to capture individual experiences in depth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The protocol was designed to guide participants in discussing three main thematic areas: the use of digital media in the home, the physical layout and characteristics of the household environment, and parenting styles in supporting early development. The flexibility of the semi-structured format also allowed the researcher to probe further when

participants raised new or unexpected issues, ensuring that rich and detailed data were collected. To enhance content validity, the draft protocol was reviewed by an expert in early childhood education who provided feedback on the clarity, appropriateness, and relevance of the questions.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out through face-to-face interviews lasting between twenty and thirty minutes with each participant. Interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient to the participants to ensure comfort and minimize disruption to their daily routines. Prior to each interview, participants were briefed about the objectives of the study and informed consent was obtained, including explicit permission to record the sessions. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data, while field notes were taken to document non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by removing any identifying information from transcripts and securely storing all data for research purposes only. Ethical considerations were prioritized to ensure participants' rights and welfare were protected throughout the research process (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by the six-phase model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen because of its systematic yet flexible nature, which is particularly suitable for identifying both explicit and latent meanings in qualitative data. The process began with familiarization, during which the researcher transcribed the interviews, read the transcripts multiple times, and immersed herself in the data. Initial codes were then generated systematically across the dataset to highlight features of interest. These codes were collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined in relation to the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole. Once the themes had been clearly identified, they were defined and named to capture their essence, after which the final narrative was produced by integrating the themes with supporting quotations from participants. Manual coding was carried out, accompanied by detailed memo writing, to maintain closeness to the data and ensure transparency in the analytic process.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed to strengthen the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through expert review of the interview protocol and member checking, whereby transcripts were returned to participants for verification of accuracy. Dependability was addressed by maintaining an audit trail of decisions made during data collection and analysis, including field notes, memos, and coding records. Confirmability was ensured through peer review, where emerging themes and coding decisions were discussed with academic colleagues to reduce potential researcher bias and enhance consistency in interpretation. Finally, transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the context, participants, and analytic process, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings. By employing these strategies, the study ensured that the findings accurately represented participants' perspectives and were grounded in a rigorous qualitative research process.

Research Findings

Demography of Study Participants

Based on the profiles of the study participants, it was found that most of them were women (80%), aged between 31 and 38 years and had 1 to 3 children. In this study, participants were given nicknames. Determining the nickname is done by associating the real name with the name to be given to facilitate the process of identifying the original name. Furthermore, this pseudonymization technique allows the identity of the study participants to be kept secret from public knowledge. According to Itzik and Walsh (2023), the use of nicknames is not only intended to protect the confidentiality of participants but also to reflect the social identity and personal narrative of the individuals involved. The names suggested were Mr. Hakim for study participant 1, Ibu Aina for study participant 2, Ibu Liana for study participant 3, Teacher Mira for study participant 4 and Ibu Yani for study participant 5. Table 1 shows a summary of their background.

Table 1: Participant Profile of the Study.

Pseudonym	Participant Code	Gender	Age	Occupation	No. of Children
Encik Hakim	PK1	Male	38	Consultant	2
Ibu Aina	PK2	Female	34	Teacher Assistant	3
Ibu Liana	PK3	Female	31	Lawyer	2
Teacher Mira	PK4	Female	36	Kindergarten Teacher	1
Ibu Yani	PK5	Female	33	Executive Officer	3

Based on verbatim transcripts and significant statements that have been extracted, the findings show that home environment factors that affect early childhood development identified are: 1) digital media, 2) physical space, and 3) parenting styles. The analysis of the interviews revealed that parents perceived the home environment as an essential factor influencing early childhood development. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: digital media, physical space, and parenting styles. Each theme consisted of several subthemes supported by participants' narratives that highlight the significance of the home environment in shaping children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth.

Digital Media

The first theme, digital media, demonstrated that parents regarded technology as both a learning tool and a source of potential risk. Within this theme, two subthemes were identified: digital media monitoring and early digital literacy. Parents were highly aware of the need to regulate their children's screen time and the type of content accessed. For example, Ibu Aina (PK2) reported:

"I gave my son the phone for 30 minutes on his own... but he can only watch YouTube Kids. If he wants to download, he needs permission first. I set a password."

Similarly, Teacher Mira (PK4) highlighted her strict regulation by stating:

"...my son can only use the phone on weekends, only for an hour and I will monitor... TikTok and Instagram, I don't even let him use."

Despite these restrictions, parents also acknowledged the positive role of digital media in supporting children's learning. For instance, Ibu Liana (PK3) explained:

"...I don't teach using cell phones, but I teach using TV... educational content like 1 2 3 or ABC... sometimes it is easier to absorb in the child's brain."

Likewise, Mr. Hakim (PK1) observed the benefits of digital games for creativity and language acquisition:

"...Games can help my son think creatively... and since he plays games, he is good at speaking English."

These accounts suggest that parents balance the risks and benefits of digital media through close monitoring while leveraging its educational potential.

Physical Space

The second theme, physical space, emphasized the role of the home's layout and organization in children's development. Three subthemes were identified: provision of dedicated space, comfortable and organized space, and child's personal space. Parents reported that designating specific areas for play and learning was important for fostering discipline and structure. For example, Ibu Liana (PK3) shared:

"...I bought a playmat and a cage for him... I gave a space for toys so that the toys would not fall apart. I also made room for him to watch TV."

In addition, participants stressed the importance of comfort and organization in creating a conducive environment. Mr. Hakim (PK1) explained:

"...The house is now bigger and organized... they also feel more comfortable and fun to study or play."

Some parents also provided their children with individual rooms, thereby promoting autonomy and independence. As Ibu Aina (PK2) stated:

"...The children are separated by rooms. My son has a room, and my daughter has a room. In each room, there is a study table."

These reflections indicate that the physical arrangement of the home contributes not only to children's emotional stability but also to their learning motivation and self-regulation.

Parenting Style

The third theme, parenting styles, highlighted the importance of parents' practices in guiding children's behavior and socioemotional development. Four subthemes were identified: encouragement of good behavior, emotional support, daily routines, and parents as role models. Parents consistently emphasized the value of positive reinforcement through praise and affection. For instance, Teacher Mira (PK4) remarked:

"...I always praise him when he helps... like 'you're so helpful, darling, helping mama', and then I hug him."

Similarly, Ibu Aina (PK2) noted:

"...I always praise him. He often seeks attention... I must respond to his emotions too."

Emotional support also played a vital role in parenting practices. Mr. Hakim (PK1) stated:

"...I also provide emotional support. For example, I give compliments. Sometimes I listen to his stories."

Meanwhile, Ibu Liana (PK3) described her approach to conflict resolution:

“...If I say I’m angry, I’ll come back and apologize, kiss him, and tell him why I did it.”

Parents further reinforced stability through the establishment of daily routines. As explained by Ibu Liana (PK3):

“...after eating, he must put away his toys first before he can watch TV... before going to bed, we will recite a prayer together.”

Similarly, Ibu Aina (PK2) emphasized:

“Recreation time at 6 pm, bath and prayer at 7 pm, eat at 8 pm... preschoolers must go to bed at 9.”

Finally, participants highlighted their role as models for their children’s behavior. Ibu Yani (PK5) stressed:

“...If we speak nicely to people, our children will follow us. If we are patient, our children will also be patient.”

Likewise, Ibu Liana (PK3) reflected:

“...How to discipline a child is first to set an example for them.”

These findings reveal that parents recognize their central role in shaping children’s character, emotional resilience, and social competence.

Discussion of the Study

The home environment serves as a foundational microsystem in shaping early childhood development, consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory (1979). Daily interactions within this setting—such as parenting decisions, home organization, and technology use—exert direct influence on children’s emotional, social, and cognitive trajectories (Crawford, 2020; Nóirín Hayes et al., 2022). The findings suggest that when screen exposure, physical activity, and social interaction are not balanced, holistic development is at risk. This reinforces Bronfenbrenner’s assertion that inconsistent or negative experiences within the microsystem can hinder optimal child growth.

In modern households, digital media has become deeply embedded in family routines and parenting practices. While parents are aware of its potential to enrich learning, they also implement preventive measures to mitigate associated risks such as media addiction and exposure to inappropriate content. Media monitoring strategies like limiting screen time and activating child-safety features illustrate the practice of parental mediation, which encompasses both guidance and control in shaping children’s media behaviours (Clark, 2011). These practices align with Jiménez et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of the home’s media literacy environment in reducing overexposure and promoting healthy digital habits. Similarly, Attai et al. (2020) found that structured regulation through time restrictions and curated content contributes to more balanced and constructive digital use among young children. Beyond regulation, parents also leverage digital media as a tool to support cognitive and early literacy development. They intentionally select age-appropriate content—such as animated letters, numbers, and interactive games that can hold children’s attention and scaffold foundational knowledge. Simulation-based learning apps, in particular, were found to enhance creativity and English language fluency. This is consistent with Zhang et al. (2025), who underscore that

parental involvement in children's digital experiences significantly amplifies the developmental benefits of technology. Their study confirms that active guidance not only improves cognitive outcomes but also reduces the risk of problematic media behaviors. The role of parents as digital facilitators extends into nurturing digital literacy in early childhood. Febriandani et al. (2025) highlighted that children's literacy whether scientific, linguistic, or technological is most effectively developed when media engagement is paired with adult support. The findings affirm that the presence of adults during media use ensures that children are not only technologically competent but also develop ethical and mindful digital habits. In addition to digital exposure, the physical environment of the home emerged as a significant contributor to emotional and behavioral outcomes. Parents who designated specific zones for activities such as learning corners, play areas, or television spaces demonstrated an understanding of how spatial boundaries support structure and discipline. These observations are in line with Lopez Boo et al. (2018), who reported that designated spaces reinforce behavioral routines and promote self-regulation. Conversely, disorganized and cramped living conditions were linked to reduced socioemotional stability, echoing the findings of Tandon et al. (2012). Comfortable and organized home spaces were also found to support children's psychosocial well-being and learning readiness. A well-maintained environment fosters emotional calmness and focused attention, facilitating both formal and informal learning. This finding is supported by Mendes Sousa et al. (2023), who emphasized that conducive household settings characterized by order and comfort contribute positively to children's emotional security and cognitive engagement. The alignment with Bronfenbrenner's theory reinforces that the home, as a core microsystem, plays a central role in shaping developmental outcomes. Children's access to private or personalized spaces, such as their own bedrooms or study tables, further contributed to their self-concept and emotional autonomy. Veldhuis et al. (2014) found that children with personal spaces exhibit greater self-reliance and confidence in expressing emotions. The findings suggest that personal space not only facilitates emotional self-regulation but also serves as a foundation for identity formation, particularly in multi-child households with limited space.

Parenting styles were another crucial determinant in shaping children's socioemotional development. The findings indicate a prevalent use of authoritative parenting marked by warmth, consistent discipline, and open communication. Positive reinforcement through verbal praise and affectionate gestures proved effective in promoting pro-social behavior and emotional competence. These practices are aligned with studies by Khatchadourian (2010) and Chairilisyah (2020), which highlight the power of emotional encouragement in enhancing children's self-esteem and cooperative behavior. Emotional support emerged as a cornerstone of nurturing environments. Parents demonstrated sensitivity to children's feelings, offering empathetic responses and comfort during emotional distress. This aligns with Despriliani et al. (2024), who emphasized the significance of emotional scaffolding in fostering psychological resilience and social maturity. Such support strengthens a child's capacity to navigate interpersonal challenges and develop emotional intelligence.

Furthermore, the establishment of consistent daily routines such as structured meal times, bedtime rituals, and play schedules proved vital in fostering predictability and behavioral discipline. These routines aid in the development of executive functioning skills like decision-making and self-regulation, echoing the findings of Bassul et al. (2021) and Spagnola & Fiese (2025). Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, these routines serve as consistent experiential anchors that support holistic growth. Role modeling was observed as a subtle yet powerful

influence in shaping children's behavior. Parents' demonstration of empathy, respect, and cooperative social behaviors provided tangible examples for children to emulate. Drawing on Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1986), these findings highlight that children internalize observed behaviors from significant adults. Research by Rinaldi and Howe (2012) and Mileva Seitz & Schmidt (2025) further supports the idea that responsive, democratic parenting fosters empathy, conflict resolution skills, and social adaptability. Taken together, the findings underscore the interconnectedness of digital practices, spatial arrangements, and parenting behaviors in promoting holistic development during early childhood. The evidence reinforces the critical role of the home as both a physical and relational ecosystem that nurtures children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights that the home environment is a critical foundation for early childhood development, functioning as more than just a physical space but as a dynamic ecosystem that shapes children's emotional, social, behavioral, and personality growth. Seven key elements digital media monitoring, early digital literacy, provision of dedicated physical space, encouragement, emotional support, daily routines, and parental modeling emerged as central to fostering positive developmental experiences. A structured, safe, and supportive home provides opportunities for exploration, stability, and learning, while consistent routines enhance self-regulation and emotional well-being. Positive parent-child interactions and responsible media use further strengthen children's social and cognitive skills, and parents who serve as responsive role models shape healthy values and behaviors. Overall, the study affirms the home as a vital arena for building identity, resilience, and holistic well-being in early childhood.

Acknowledgement

The highest appreciation and gratitude are extended to my lecturer, Dr. Nurul Khairani Ismail and Ts. Dr. Mohd Khalid Mohamad Nasir, for the guidance, encouragement, and continuous support throughout the process of this research and the writing of this manuscript. Sincere thanks are also conveyed to the Centre for Educational and Community Wellbeing, Faculty of Education, for funding the Article Processing Charge (APC), which made the publication of this article possible. All the support, guidance, and contributions are deeply appreciated.

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