



THE ROLE OF PEERS IN SHAPING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL EMPATHY IN MEDAN SUNGGAL DISTRICT

Malida Putri¹, Mia Aulia Lubis²

^{1,2} Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: malidaputri@usu.ac.id

Article Info

Article history:

Received : 10 Nopember 2025

Revised : 16 December 2025

Accepted : 25 December 2025

Available online

<http://jurnal.uinsu.ac.id/index.php/analytica>

E-ISSN: 2541-5263

P-ISSN: 1411-4380



This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license

ABSTRACT

As the next generation, students require adequate preparation to navigate life. This foundation can be acquired from family, school, and the community. Within the family, children who have a profound need for attention, meaningful relationships, and parental role models rely on their parents to lay the primary groundwork for their abilities and character. Throughout their school years, children are significantly influenced by the school environment; consequently, peer interactions play a pivotal role in shaping a child's character and social empathy. Observing the prevalence of "poor character" in the lives of adults, it is inevitable that children and adolescents may mimic these attitudes and behaviors, adopting them as models. This is deeply concerning, as it leaves young people confused about which values to choose and uphold values essential for their own well-being and the future of the nation. Therefore, the researcher identifies a need to examine the role of peers in shaping children's social empathy..

Keywords: Role, Peers, Social Empathy

1. INTRODUCTION

Every human being is inherently created different; therefore, differences in thoughts, perceptions, and visions are natural. The ability to accept and appreciate differences should be developed from an early age. In other words, children need to learn how to accept and deal with differences in social life. An important resource for children in managing such differences is social life skills, of which empathy is a key component (Goleman, 2007).

Empathy is at the core of moral emotions that help children understand the feelings of others. It makes children sensitive to other people's needs and emotions, encourages them to help those who are experiencing difficulty or pain, and guides them to treat others with compassion. Strong empathy encourages children to act appropriately because they are able to recognize other people's distress, thereby preventing them from

engaging in actions that may hurt others. The ability to empathize refers to the capacity to understand, show consideration, and pay attention to others. Wuryanano (2007, p. 72) states that empathy is the ability to know how other people feel. The deeper a person's empathy, the greater their respect and courtesy toward others. Individuals with strong empathy are generally caring and willing to take action to help those who genuinely need assistance.

At present, children's level of empathy is relatively low, and the causes of declining empathic ability are highly complex. The environments in which children are raised may undermine the development of empathic intelligence. A number of critical social factors that shape empathic character are gradually weakening, including limited parental supervision, a lack of empathic role models, relatively little spiritual education, poor parenting practices, and schools that provide insufficient stimulation for the development of empathy. In addition, children continuously receive external influences that may contradict established norms. The challenge is intensified because such negative influences are easily accessible through television, films, video games, and the internet, which may expose children to harassment, violence, and abuse and thereby negatively affect their personality development (Borba, 2008). Lupi (2008) argues that conflicts arising from differences are increasingly common today. Antisocial behaviors frequently encountered in society include interethnic unrest, fights among school students, and bullying among children (Fauzan et al., 2023).

These phenomena indicate that Indonesia is experiencing a concerning moral crisis. According to Lickona (1991), ten signs of human behavior may indicate the deterioration of a nation: increasing violence among adolescents, widespread dishonesty, growing disrespect toward parents, teachers, and leaders, the influence of peer groups on violent behavior, increasing suspicion and hatred, deteriorating language use, declining work ethic, decreasing individual and civic responsibility, increasing self-destructive behavior, and increasingly blurred moral guidelines. A moral crisis is closely associated with the erosion of national character. Indonesia has traditionally been known for friendliness, mutual cooperation, *tepo sliro* (tolerance), and compassion; however, these values now appear to be fading across various dimensions of national and civic life.

Empathy is an important component of social competence and one of the elements of social intelligence. Empathy is closely related to other components, including primary empathy, attunement, empathic accuracy, and social cognition. Primary empathy refers to sharing another person's feelings or sensing nonverbal emotional cues. Attunement refers to listening with full receptivity and aligning oneself with another person. Empathic accuracy refers to understanding another person's thoughts, feelings, and intentions, while social cognition refers to understanding how the social world works (Goleman, 2007).

Each person has a different capacity for empathy. Empathic responses to others are often based on past experiences. A person will generally respond more empathically to another person's experience when they have had a similar experience (Staub, 1978). Empathic ability is also influenced by social-cognitive competence, namely the skill of processing information within social interactions. A person's empathic disposition influences how they respond to particular situations. Research by Eisenberg and Strayer (as cited in Pandiangan, 2005) demonstrates that empathy plays a major role in encouraging positive behavior toward others. Empathy is fundamentally present in



children, but this capacity may diminish if it is not nurtured (Faridah, 2005). Therefore, empathy should be cultivated from an early age so that children can understand what others feel and learn that not all of their desires can always be fulfilled. For these reasons, the authors considered it important and interesting to examine the "Role of Peers in Shaping Children's Social Empathy." The study was conducted in Medan City, specifically in Sunggal District, with first-year junior high school students at NAMIRA School selected as informants.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive research design. In qualitative research, descriptive research seeks to describe phenomena, events, or situations occurring at the present time. Descriptive research focuses on actual problems as they exist during the research process. Through descriptive research, the researcher attempts to describe events and situations that are the focus of attention without providing any special treatment to those events. The variables studied may consist of a single variable or more than one variable (Juliansyah, 2011, p. 35). This study used a qualitative descriptive approach with the expectation of obtaining more in-depth information regarding the role of working mothers in fulfilling children's rights and needs in Medan City, Helvetia District. Data and information in this study were obtained through observation, interviews, and document review.

Medan City, Sunggal District, was selected as the research location because Sunggal is strategically situated, neither in the city center nor on the outskirts of Medan. This study focused on children enrolled at NAMIRA Junior High School in Sunggal, Medan. The research data were obtained through the following methods:

1. In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain more comprehensive information and data from parties related to the study, including working mothers, children, and members of the children's immediate families.

2. Document Review

Documents used as research data were collected from journals, books, internet sources, news reports, and documents from parties related to this study.

The data in this study were analyzed using qualitative data analysis. The collected data were grouped and organized before being presented as research findings in narrative form, charts, or tables. The data presented by the authors were then analyzed in accordance with the theoretical framework and research methods that had been planned, after which conclusions were drawn.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Application of Empathy-Based Values

Children's capacity for empathy develops as their life experiences and interactions with other individuals increase. Interaction with peers plays an important role in children's socialization process, particularly in the application of values that are accepted within the social environment during play (Hetherington & Parke, 1999).

The findings indicate that peer interaction plays a role in the application of values that can be accepted among friends. Informants explained that, initially, they tended to bring into their friendships and play the habits and values they had learned at their previous schools and at home. Through interaction with peers, however, children gradually began to understand which values were accepted and appreciated by their friends, as well as which behaviors made it more difficult for them to be accepted by their peer group. According to the informants, interaction and socialization helped them understand and accept one another through a process of adapting and applying shared values, although this required time and a learning process before they could fully understand and follow the values operating within the group.

These findings are consistent with the theoretical view that peers play an important role in children's socialization, particularly in introducing values that are accepted within the social environment during play. In general, children strongly desire to be accepted and regarded positively by their peers and social environment. The transmission of values through peer socialization and interaction therefore provides children with a set of values that contributes to the development of social empathy.

Modeling and Reinforcement

Peers serve as a source of information through which children learn values and appropriate ways of behaving in play through modeling and reinforcement. Other children function as social models whom children imitate and as sources of reinforcement for their behavior. Children acquire a broad range of knowledge and responses by observing and imitating their peers, while reinforcement enables them to evaluate which responses are accepted by their friends (Hetherington & Parke, 1999).

Based on the findings, the informants stated that several of their peers became role models for attitudes and behavior. They observed how certain children had a positive image in their environment and were generally accepted by others. This led the informants to agree that they also engaged in imitation as part of the process of developing social empathy, particularly by following the examples of peers who had a positive image. One informant stated that they also served as a role model or social model for other children because they possessed positive values and were able to encourage others to engage in positive behavior. This was attributed to the child's strong character, which enabled the child to become a model whose positive behaviors, especially those related to social empathy, were imitated by others.

Some informants also reported that they were initially not confident in expressing social empathy. Through positive imitation of peer role models, however, they gradually became better able to express their feelings and demonstrate social empathy through behavior.

These findings are consistent with the theoretical view that peers provide children with information about the values that operate within their peer environment. Through this process, children learn how to behave in ways that facilitate acceptance and how to display appropriate behavior consistent with positively regarded social models. This involves a process of imitation through which children adopt the values, knowledge, and attitudes displayed by those social models. In socialization and interaction, children can then express social empathy in ways that help them gain acceptance and perform their social roles within peer groups and the wider community.



Sharing Feelings

According to Goleman (1998), sharing feelings refers to the ability to know how other people feel; in other words, individuals are able to experience an emotion and identify the feelings of others.

The findings show that peers provide informants with many experiences of sharing what their friends are feeling. Because they interact within the same environment, peers develop a sense of closeness that makes it easier to understand and share one another's experiences. Informants stated that they could often recognize what a friend was feeling simply from facial expressions. Others explained that this emotional sensitivity was strengthened by closeness, frequent meetings, and communication. As a result, informants were able to understand their friends' moods and participate emotionally in what their peers were experiencing. They learned this through intensive socialization, familiarity with each other's character, and the exchange of values within the peer group.

These findings are consistent with Goleman's view that knowing how others feel involves the ability to experience another person's emotions and recognize what peers are feeling. In this way, children's socialization through sharing feelings becomes a form of strengthening social empathy as a behavior that enables them to participate in the feelings of others. This process was experienced reciprocally by the informants and their peer environment, with empathy enabling children and their peers to exchange emotions and empathic feelings.

Self-Awareness

Goleman (1998) states that empathy is built on self-awareness. The more individuals understand their own emotions, the more skilled they become at reading the emotions of others. This means being able to distinguish between what another person says or does and one's own reactions and judgments. By improving cognitive abilities, particularly the capacity to adopt another person's perspective and role, individuals can gain a more complete understanding of other people's feelings and emotions, become more compassionate, and provide appropriate assistance to others.

Based on the findings, several informants stated that peers helped them better understand what they should do and say because they were aware of peer evaluation and wanted to be accepted by their friends and social environment. Some informants, however, reported difficulty distinguishing between behaviors that arose from genuine self-awareness and those driven by fear of rejection by peers. This reflects differences in the process of peer socialization related to social empathy, depending on children's character and their understanding of the values associated with social empathy (Ritonga et al., 2025; Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

These findings are consistent with the theory that empathy is built on self-awareness: the better individuals understand their own emotions, the more skilled they become at reading the emotions of others by recognizing what others say and do and by evaluating their own responses. The findings indicate that some informants demonstrated self-awareness in their actions and statements, as reflected in the reactions and evaluations of their peers. Other informants found it difficult to determine whether the social empathy they experienced arose from genuine self-awareness or from fear of being judged by

people around them. Informants who remained uncertain about self-awareness in social empathy therefore required further socialization and understanding. They needed stronger reinforcement and comprehension that social empathy is not merely a means of gaining acceptance from peers and the surrounding environment, but also a way of helping themselves and others understand and care for one another, so that assistance is provided from an inner sense of concern rather than from a desire for recognition.

Sensitivity to Nonverbal Cues

Sensitivity to nonverbal cues is important because emotions are often expressed nonverbally. This means that individuals are able to read other people's feelings through facial expressions, body language, and gestures (Goleman, 1998). The findings show that informants agreed that changes in facial expressions, tone of voice, and body movements were easy to recognize in their peers. They also stated that these nonverbal cues were recognized reciprocally among friends. Informants added that not everything needs to be expressed verbally; some feelings can be directly sensed without a peer having to explain them. Because they knew one another well, informants found it relatively easy to interpret body movements, facial expressions, and tone of voice as indications of what their friends were feeling.

This finding is consistent with the theoretical view that emotions do not always need to be expressed through words; some emotions are communicated through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and gestures. The findings also show that peers play a role in helping children recognize and interpret other people's feelings through such cues. Reaching this level of understanding clearly requires active socialization and communication between children and their peers so that they become able to understand and interpret the nonverbal expressions of others.

Role Taking

Role taking produces concrete empathic behavior. When individuals are aware of what they are feeling at any given moment, empathy can emerge naturally. They may then respond to other people's cues not only through cognitive recognition of their feelings but also through their own physical sensations. Empathy can also open an individual's awareness to the suffering of others; when someone feels another person's suffering, that individual is likely to care and want to act (Goleman, 1998).

The findings indicate that informants were able to feel and understand what their friends experienced. At times, this understanding created a desire to help and take an active role. However, some informants became overly involved in their peers' problems. Several informants acknowledged that excessive involvement and role taking reflected limited self-control; although empathy was important, they also needed to maintain appropriate boundaries and avoid becoming excessively carried away by another person's emotions, which could potentially create additional problems. Other informants reported being able to control their involvement and avoid becoming too deeply involved in their peers' problems and emotions. They gave their friends space to make choices and respond according to their own values and knowledge. Although the desire to become more involved was present, these informants chose to set boundaries regarding how they expressed care and took action (Purba et al., 2025; Rambe et al., 2023).



When linked to the theoretical framework, the findings indicate that peer influence on role taking in the development of social empathy was already evident. However, differences existed among informants in the extent to which they became involved in empathic situations. Children's understanding, character, and the values instilled by parents strengthened the basis on which they made their choices. Nevertheless, the findings show that peers play an important role in encouraging concrete empathic behavior.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that peers play an important role in shaping children's social empathy through everyday interaction and socialization. Peer relationships provide children with opportunities to learn and negotiate socially accepted values, observe and imitate positive behavior, share emotional experiences, develop self-awareness, recognize nonverbal emotional cues, and engage in role taking. Through these processes, children gradually become more capable of understanding the feelings of others and responding through caring, supportive, and prosocial behavior. The development of social empathy through peer interaction is not always straightforward. The desire to be accepted by peers may sometimes make children uncertain whether their empathic responses arise from genuine self-awareness or from social pressure. In addition, excessive emotional involvement in peers' problems may occur when empathy is not accompanied by sufficient self-control and appropriate interpersonal boundaries. Therefore, peer influence should be understood as a social context that can both strengthen and shape children's empathy, while its outcomes remain influenced by children's personal characteristics, family values, prior experiences, and capacity for emotional regulation. Overall, positive and supportive peer relationships can provide an important foundation for the development of social empathy and children's ability to function effectively within their social environment

References

- Andrianie, Santy. 2015. *Pengembangan Paket Bimbingan Berbasis Experiential learning untuk Meningkatkan Empati Siswa Sekolah Dasar. Tesis Pascasarjana Jurusan Bimbingan dan Konseling Universitas Negeri Malang*: Tidak diterbitkan.
- Borba, M. 2008. *Building Moral Intelligence*. San Fransisco: Josey-Bass.
- Coroloso, Barbara. 2007. *Stop Bullying (Memutus Abadi*
- Dalimunthe, M. A., Ritonga, A. R., & Ananda, S. (2025). The Role of Opinion Leaders in Bullying Prevention: Evaluating the Roots Program in SMA Negeri 19 Medan Through the Lens of Two-Step Flow Communication Theory. *Komunika*, 21(01), 33-40.
- Davis, M.H. 1983. *Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy*. *Journal of Personality*
- Fauzan, I., Arifin, A., Dalimunthe, M. A., & Rahmadani, S. (2023). The configuration of ethnic and religious relations towards the 2024 general election: A case study in Medan, Indonesia. *Multidisciplinary Science Journal*, 6(2), 2024006. <https://doi.org/10.31893/multiscience.2024006>
- Goleman, D.1996. *Kecerdasan Emosional*. Jakarta: PT. Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1996),
- Goleman, D. 2007. *Social Intelligence* (terjemahan oleh Hariono S. Imam). Jakarta: PT. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

- Hurlock E. B. 1978. *Perkembangan Anak Jilid1*. Edisi keenam. Jakarta : Erlangga.
- Hoffman, M.L. 2000. *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Purba, A. M., Dirbawanto, N. D., & Dalimunthe, M. A. (2025). Urban digitalization through clean energy: policies and communication of Medan City government towards "Medan Smart City". In *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* (Vol. 1445, No. 1, p. 012067). IOP Publishing.
- Rambe,R.F. AL. K., Ritonga, A.R., Dalimunthe,M.A. (2023). Komunikasi Publik Pemerintah Kota Medan Dalam Pengalihan Kewenangan Kebijakan Terkait UU No. 23 tahun 2014. *Komunika*. 19(01), 39-44.
<https://doi.org/10.32734/komunika.v19i01.11411>
- Ritonga, A. R., Thamrin, M. H., & Dalimunthe, M. A. (2025). Developing a Sexual Harassment Prevention Model through the 'Courageous Campus' Campaign: A Counseling-Based Approach in Higher Education in Medan City. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 14, e2025076.
- Shapiro,L.E. 1997. *Mengajarkan Emosional Intelegensi Pada Anak*, Terj. Alex .T. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Saripah, I. 2010. *Model Kognitif Perilaku untuk Menanggulangi Perilaku Bullying (Model Konseling untuk Korban Bullying pada Siswa Sekolah Dasar)*. Disertasi Pasca Sarjana Jurusan Psikologi Pendidikan dan Bimbingan Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia Bandung: Tidak Diterbitkan.
- Supeni, M.G. 2014. *Empati Perkembangan dan Pentingnya dalam Kehidupan Bermasyarakat* (Jurnal edisi Vol.40 No.1, 15 Februari 2014.). FKIP Universitas Tidar Magelang