Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan
Vol.18, 1 (March, 2026), pp. 715-728
ISSN: 2087-9490 EISSN: 2597-940X, DOI: 10.35445/alishlah.v18i1.9082

Understanding Abusive Language in Early Childhood Social Interactions: A Phenomenological Analysis of Contexts, Sources, and Implications

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

abusive language;
early childhood;
social interaction;
digital media;
moral development

Article history:

Received 2025-12-05
Revised 2026-01-21
Accepted 2026-03-30

ABSTRACT

The increasing presence of abusive language in early childhood raises concerns due to its potential impact on children's emotional, social, and moral development. Young children often reproduce such language without understanding its ethical implications, shaped by peer interaction, family environment, and digital media exposure. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the manifestation, contributing factors, and moral implications of abusive language among children aged 4–6 years. Data were collected in an early childhood education institution in East Java through in-depth interviews with teachers and parents, structured observations, and document analysis. Abusive language frequently emerged during emotionally intense situations and peer interactions. Key contributing factors included limited emotional regulation, strong peer influence, permissive parenting styles, and exposure to digital media. Children generally lacked moral awareness of the language used, often interpreting abusive expressions as humorous or as a means of social bonding. The findings suggest that the use of abusive language in early childhood reflects a social learning process not yet supported by mature emotional regulation or moral reasoning. This highlights the need for early, coordinated interventions. Collaborative efforts between families and educational institutions are essential to foster positive communication, strengthen moral development, and guide appropriate language use from an early age.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition in early childhood plays a crucial role in shaping children's social, emotional, and moral development. Language functions as a primary medium through which children express intentions, emotions, and social meanings in everyday interactions (Pande, 2023). From a linguistic perspective, language is defined as vocal sounds produced by human speech organs and used to convey specific meanings and intentions (Fakhira et al., 2024). In early childhood, spoken

language becomes the most dominant form of communication, as children actively engage in verbal exchanges with peers and adults in their immediate environment (Syahputra et al., 2022). During this developmental stage, children are highly sensitive to linguistic input and are widely recognized as effective imitators of what they hear and observe (Yani et al., 2023). Through daily social interactions, children unconsciously acquire vocabulary, expressions, and speech patterns that later become part of their habitual communication (Rahmi, n.d.). Concerns arise, however, when the language imitated includes coarse or abusive expressions. The increasing prevalence of abusive language among early childhood learners has raised serious concerns due to its potential negative impact on children's emotional regulation, social relationships, and moral development. Preliminary observations conducted in an early childhood education institution in East Java revealed that several children frequently uttered coarse expressions during daily interactions, particularly during play, competition over toys, or moments of emotional conflict.

Previous studies consistently indicate that children's language use is strongly shaped by their social environment. Social interaction, defined as dynamic relationships involving communication between individuals or groups (Soekanto, 2013), serves as the primary context in which language acquisition occurs. Within these interactions, children tend to imitate both positive and negative linguistic expressions encountered in their surroundings (Akbar, 2020). Huru et al. (2022) emphasize that repeated exposure to inappropriate or deviant language significantly increases the likelihood that children will adopt similar expressions in their own speech. Abusive language is commonly understood as a form of verbal aggression characterized by coarse, harsh, or offensive expressions, often produced in moments of anger, frustration, or emotional arousal (Komnas, 2015). Among young children, such expressions frequently function as a means of emotional release when they encounter undesirable situations (Haaq in Zamzami et al., 2021). Various factors influence children's acquisition of abusive language, including emotional dysregulation, egocentrism, imitation of peers and adults, attention-seeking behavior, permissive parenting patterns, strict rules, environmental adaptation, and exposure to digital media (Widyastuti, 2020). Children often repeat abusive words without fully understanding their meaning, using them instead as part of linguistic exploration or social experimentation (Widyastuti, 2019).

Empirical research further demonstrates that abusive language may negatively affect children's psychological and social development. Exposure to verbal aggression has been associated with feelings of insecurity, reduced self-confidence, decreased learning motivation, and difficulties in peer relationships (Islam et al., 2021; Banurea et al., 2024).

Armita (2022) found that children who frequently use abusive language are more likely to experience social exclusion and difficulties in identifying their strengths or talents. International studies similarly indicate that verbal aggression may impose psychological pressure on listeners and disrupt social harmony (Bowers & Pleydell-Pearce, 2011). At the same time, several studies suggest that abusive language does not always function solely as verbal aggression. Purnama et al. (2022) reported that children aged 4–6 years use swear words to express both positive and negative emotions. Depending on the communicative context, abusive expressions may convey annoyance, humor, closeness, emotional release, or group affiliation (Khusna et al., 2021). These findings suggest that abusive language in childhood carries complex social meanings that extend beyond simple violations of linguistic norms.

In the context of East Java, the phenomenon of abusive language is closely related to cultural and social environments. The Javanese dialect spoken in the region is often characterized by rough expressions that are culturally normalized among adults and considered part of local identity (Annafi et al., 2024). Misuh, although socially categorized as a cultural expression, is simultaneously regarded as a social taboo and a maladaptive communicative response (S. P. Lestari, 2024). Children living in such environments inevitably observe, internalize, and later reproduce these expressions in their interactions with peers (Arini, 2024). Consequently, abusive language becomes embedded in children's everyday communication practices, including within educational settings.

Although numerous studies have examined abusive language in children, most research has focused on its definition, frequency, or behavioral impact. Limited attention has been given to children's subjective experiences and contextual interpretations of abusive language, particularly among preschool-aged children. Few studies have explored this phenomenon using a phenomenological approach that captures the lived experiences, emotional meanings, and social contexts surrounding children's use of abusive words, especially within early childhood education settings in Indonesia.

To address this gap, the present study aims to explore the phenomenon of abusive language in early childhood social interactions using a qualitative phenomenological approach. This research seeks to examine how abusive language manifests in children's daily interactions, identify the social, emotional, and environmental factors contributing to its emergence, and analyze its implications for children's social and moral development within the context of East Java. By providing a deeper understanding of abusive language as a socially constructed and emotionally driven phenomenon, this study offers valuable insights for educators and parents in guiding children's language use, strengthening emotional regulation, and fostering moral development. Furthermore, the findings are expected to contribute to pedagogical practices and educational policies related to character education, language socialization, and digital media supervision in early childhood education.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in a post-positivist paradigm that views social reality as holistic, complex, dynamic, and rich in meaning (Gunawan, 2022). Qualitative research is used to explore and understand meanings constructed by individuals or groups in relation to social or human problems through inductive processes that move from specific experiences toward broader thematic interpretations (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative inquiry, research is conducted in natural settings, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument of data collection, emphasizing meaning rather than generalization (Sugiyono, 2013). Data are gathered through triangulation techniques, analyzed inductively, and presented in descriptive forms that reflect participants' perspectives and lived experiences (Rusli, 2021).

Within this qualitative framework, the study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore and describe the essence of lived experiences related to the use of abusive language in early childhood social interactions. Phenomenology seeks to understand human experience by focusing on individuals' subjective interpretations and narratives of their engagement with the world (Husserl in Rofiah, 2023; Rukhmana et al., 2022). The narratives emerging from conscious experience are conceptualized as phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of how abusive language is experienced, perceived, and interpreted by key informants within natural educational contexts. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, this study does not rely on numerical data or statistical procedures but instead aims to preserve the form and substance of human behavior and to analyze the qualities inherent in these behaviors (Yusanto, 2020).

The participants in this study consisted of teachers and parents who were directly involved in early childhood education settings where the phenomenon of abusive language was observed. Participants were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus and their direct experiences with children who used abusive words in daily interactions. Observations were conducted in natural classroom and play settings involving early childhood learners, allowing the researcher to capture authentic social interactions without positioning children as direct interview participants.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation in natural settings. Interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding the use of abusive language among young children. Observations focused on children's daily social interactions, particularly situations in which abusive expressions emerged during play or emotionally charged moments. Documentation, including field notes and relevant

educational records, was used to support data triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings. Throughout the data collection process, emphasis was placed on depth, context, and meaning rather than measurement.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary participation was ensured. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all data were used solely for academic purposes, particularly given the sensitive nature of research involving early childhood contexts. Data analysis was conducted inductively by organizing, examining, and interpreting verbal data, observational records, and documentation to identify recurring patterns and themes. The analysis focused on understanding meanings and experiences as expressed by participants rather than producing statistical generalizations (Creswell, 2009). Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentation was applied to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. In accordance with qualitative principles, the analysis sought to preserve the authenticity of participants' experiences and to capture the essence of the phenomenon of abusive language in early childhood social interactions (Yusanto, 2020).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Limited Moral Awareness in Language Use

The first and arguably most profound theme to emerge from the field data is the significant disconnect between the children's cognitive grasp of moral rules and their actual behavioral adherence within social contexts. This phenomenon, which can be conceptually framed as "Cognitive Compliance without Behavioral Internalization," was pervasive across the subject pool. The children demonstrated a clear, often rote-memorized capacity to categorize specific words as "forbidden," "bad," or "sinful" (*dosa*), yet this cognitive labeling failed to translate into inhibitory control during dynamic peer interactions.

1) The Case of Subject Ha: The Fragility of Rote Norms

Subject Ha, a five-year-old male participant known for his high energy levels, served as a primary exemplar of this dissonance. During a one-on-one interview session conducted in a secluded corner of the classroom deliberately separated from the cacophony of the play area Ha exhibited a demeanor of marked compliance. The physical setting, quiet and removed from his peers, seemed to trigger a "student mode" in him. When the researcher transitioned the inquiry to the specific lexicon of abuse (referencing words such as goblok or tolol that had been captured in observation logs), Ha's body language shifted perceptibly; he straightened his posture, clasped his hands, and lowered his vocal volume, signaling an acute awareness of the gravity of the topic. When explicitly interrogated regarding the social permissibility of utilizing such lexicon, Ha responded with an immediate and firm negation, leaving no room for ambiguity.

> *"No, it is not allowed [Enggak boleh]. My mom says it is bad." (Subject Ha, Personal Interview, January 2025).*

The intonation of this response was particularly instructive. It was delivered with the rhythmic cadence of a recited lesson, suggesting that Ha was reproducing a verbal rule he had frequently absorbed from authority figures (parents or teachers) rather than expressing a deeply held personal moral conviction. However, this verbal assertion stood in stark contradiction to the observational data collected during the unstructured "free play" sessions. Field notes from observations on multiple dates recorded Ha utilizing the very words he had denounced minutes earlier. For instance, during a block-building activity on June 12th, when a peer accidentally destabilized his tower, Ha instinctively shouted the forbidden term. This immediate reversion to abusive language under stress suggests that

his moral knowledge is fragile it exists effectively in the abstract safety of an interview but evaporates instantaneously under the emotional pressure of real-world social interaction.

2) The Case of Subject Rm: Defensive Denial and Social Desirability

Subject Rm presented a more complex variation of this theme: the utilization of denial as a psychological shield. In his interview session, Rm appeared visibly uncomfortable when the topic of "bad words" was broached. He avoided direct eye contact, directing his gaze towards the floor or the window, and fidgeted continuously with the hem of his shirt classic non-verbal markers of anxiety or deception. When confronted with the researcher's observation that he frequently uses harsh language during recess, Rm engaged in a defensive denial mechanism.

> *"No... no... I don't say that. It is not allowed [Mboten, nggak boleh]." (Subject Rm, Personal Interview, January 2025).*

It is crucial to note the linguistic nuance here. Rm switched to the polite Javanese register (*Krama Inggil*) by using the word *"Mboten"* instead of the more casual Indonesian *"Enggak"*. This code-switching is significant. In Javanese culture, using *Krama* indicates respect, politeness, and deference to hierarchy. By employing a polite lexicon to deny a rude behavior, Rm was subconsciously attempting to construct an identity of a "good, polite child" in the presence of the researcher. He was performing morality linguistically to obfuscate his behavioral transgressions on the playground, highlighting a sophisticated understanding of social desirability bias even at such a young age.

3) The Case of Subject Rf: Moral Desensitization and Amusement

The most concerning data point emerged from the interactions with Subject Rf. Unlike Ha and Rm, who exhibited signs of guilt, hesitation, or denial, Rf displayed a complete absence of moral anxiety. During his interview, the atmosphere was strikingly lighthearted. Rf treated the inquiry not as a disciplinary conversation but as a playful exchange. When asked to identify the words he knew, he listed them with a beaming smile, almost boasting about the extent of his vocabulary.

> *"Like 'jancuk' [severe Javanese profanity], like 'tolol' [stupid]... things like that. It's funny." (Subject Rf, Personal Interview, January 2025).*

He laughed audibly while reciting these expletives. When the researcher pressed further to gauge his level of semantic comprehension asking, *"Do you know what those words actually mean?"* Rf shook his head vigorously. He did not possess the semantic definition of the words; to him, they were devoid of their literal offensive meaning. Yet, when asked if it was permissible to say them, his response was nonchalant and dismissive:

> *"It is okay [Nggak papa]. It doesn't matter. My friends say it too." (Subject Rf, Personal Interview, January 2025).*

This response indicates a state of Moral Desensitization. The words have lost their taboo status for Rf. Through repeated exposure and lack of negative reinforcement, they have been normalized to the point where they are perceived as neutral or even entertaining sound bites. The disconnect here is not just between knowing and doing, but a fundamental failure in the transmission of the moral value itself. For Rf, the prohibition is effectively non-existent.

3.1.2 Emotional Dysregulation as a Trigger

The second major theme necessitates a reframing of the usage of abusive words. Rather than viewing them solely as calculated acts of bullying or dominance, the data strongly suggests that these verbal outbursts are predominantly instances of "Reactive Aggression" maladaptive, impulsive responses to perceived threats, frustrations, or resource deprivations.

1) The Anatomy of a Tantrum: Instrumental Frustration

Interviews with parents provided rich, narrative descriptions of the domestic context in which these words erupt. The parent of Subject Ha offered a detailed, step-by-step account of the sequence of events leading to verbal aggression, providing a window into the child's emotional state.

> *"It usually happens when he is tired or hungry. Sometimes, when he is throwing a tantrum... for instance, when he asks for snacks at the store but I say no... that is when those words just spill out [kok metu kata-kata sing ngoten]. He gets so angry, his face turns red, and he can't control it." (Parent of Ha, Personal Interview, 2025).*

This narrative reveals a specific psychological pathway driven by instrumental frustration. The sequence is clear: (1) A specific goal is identified (getting a snack); (2) An obstacle blocks the goal (parental refusal); (3) An overwhelming surge of negative affect (anger/frustration) occurs. Because the child's prefrontal cortex (responsible for inhibition and regulation) is still developing, and his emotional vocabulary is limited (he cannot articulate "I feel disappointed" or "I am frustrated"), the system short-circuits. The abusive word "spills out" as a mechanism of catharsis. It is a verbal explosion designed to release internal psychic pressure, acting similarly to a scream but utilizing the most potent vocabulary available to him.

2) Playground Dynamics: Resource Competition and Immediate Cessation

Triangulated data from Teacher D corroborates this finding within the school setting. The teacher noted that abusive language is not randomly distributed throughout the school day. It spikes during specific high-stress activities, primarily competitive games or unstructured play, where resources (swings, slides, favorite toys) are scarce, and demand is high.

> *"It usually happens when they are fighting over a toy. One child grabs it, the other feels wronged and screams a bad word. But notice, they stop immediately when we reprimand them. It's like they snap out of a trance. They look surprised that they said it." (Teacher D, Field Note Commentary, 2025).*

The observation that children "snap out of it" immediately upon adult intervention is crucial for interpretation. It proves that the behavior is not driven by deep-seated malice or a psychopathic lack of empathy. It is an impulsive loss of control. Once the external regulator (the teacher's voice) intervenes, the child's cognitive control comes back online. This characterizes the behavior as a failure of self-regulation rather than a fundamental character defect. The word is a reflex, not a philosophy.

3.1.3 Peer Group Reinforcement

The third theme identifies the Peer Group as the most potent environmental factor in the transmission, maintenance, and escalation of abusive language. The school playground functions as a "linguistic market" where abusive words have high exchange value, and social dynamics dictate usage.

1) Vertical Transmission: The Role of Older Peers

Subject Rm provided explicit evidence of social modeling. When probed about the origin of his vocabulary specifically asking if he heard it from television or parents he negated those sources and pointed directly to his social circle.

> *"I got it from Haidar and Efendi. They say it all the time when playing football." (Subject Rm, Personal Interview, 2025).*

Further contextual investigation reveals that Haidar and Efendi are older boys (primary school age) who live in Rm's neighborhood. This establishes a clear line of vertical transmission. Younger children, like Rm, look up to older peers as figures of authority, autonomy, and physical prowess. By

mimicking the language of these older boys, Rm is attempting to appropriate their status. He is "trying on" the persona of a tougher, older boy. The abusive word becomes a badge of maturity in his eyes.

2) Horizontal Reinforcement: The Power of Laughter

Perhaps the most insidious mechanism observed was the reaction of the peer group to swearing. During extensive field observations, it was noted that when a child uttered a particularly taboo or novel swear word, the surrounding peers rarely expressed disapproval or shock. Instead, the dominant reaction was laughter.

> "Personal Interview, 2025, June 14, 2025" *"During the soccer game, Subject Rf missed the ball and shouted 'Jancuk' loudly. Three other boys nearby stopped, looked at him, and burst into laughter. Rf looked at them, smiled broadly, and then repeated the word louder. The laughter increased, and another boy joined in mimicking the word."*

This interaction represents a classic operant conditioning loop. The abusive word (behavior) is followed immediately by laughter (positive reinforcement). In the social economy of young boys, laughter signifies acceptance, attention, and entertainment. The peer group effectively rewards the violation of adult norms. This creates a powerful counter-culture where the rules of the classroom ("be polite") are inverted in the playground ("be rude to be funny"). The child learns that being "bad" is the fastest way to become popular.

3.1.4 Parenting Style and Media Exposure

The fourth theme exposes a systemic failure in the home microsystem: the abdication of parental supervision to digital devices. The data paints a troubling picture of modern parenting struggles where technology serves not as an educational tool, but as a "surrogate parent" or "digital nanny."

1) The Occupied Parent and the Unfiltered Screen

The parents of Subject Ha were candid about their limitations. Caught in the rigorous demands of work and daily household chores, they admitted to a lack of capacity to constantly monitor their child's media consumption.

> *"He frequently watches television and plays on the phone unsupervised. We are often too busy to check what he is watching every minute. As long as he is quiet, we think he is fine." (Parent of Ha, Personal Interview, 2025).*

This lack of active mediation creates a direct pipeline for aggressive content to reach the child. Ha himself confirmed the source of his vocabulary with innocent honesty during his interview:

> *"I heard it... on the phone... um, YouTube. The man in the game said it." (Subject Ha, Personal Interview, 2025).*

This admission confirms that the child is learning language from algorithms. YouTube's autoplay feature often leads children from benign content (like nursery rhymes) to videos containing gaming streams or skits replete with uncensored, aggressive language. Without a parent present to mediate or contextualize this content (e.g., saying "That man is saying a bad word, we shouldn't say that"), the child absorbs the language as normative. The screen becomes the primary socializing agent.

2) Permissive Grandparenting: The Strategy of Appeasement

A unique and complex dynamic was observed in the case of Subject Rf, who is primarily raised by his grandmother. The interview revealed a parenting style characterized by extreme permissiveness, driven by a desire to avoid conflict and maintain peace.

> *"Rf's mother is working in Surabaya... so I take care of him. He has so much energy. Sometimes, to keep him quiet, I just give him the phone. He watches games, or 'Upin and Ipin'. Whatever makes him happy." (Grandmother of Rf, Personal Interview, 2025).*

Teacher Sn provided a critical external assessment of this dynamic, observing the consequences in the classroom:

> *"His grandmother tends to agree to whatever he wants, just so the child does not become fussy [biar tidak rewel]. There are no rules at home, so he struggles with rules at school." (Teacher Sn, Personal Interview, 2025).*

The phrase *"biar tidak rewel"* (so he doesn't fuss) is the crux of the issue. The gadget is utilized as a digital pacifier. The priority of the caregiver is immediate peace and silence, not the long-term developmental consequence of unfiltered media exposure. This "Appeasement Parenting" creates a vacuum of authority, allowing the child to construct their own moral reality based on digital input without any corrective feedback.

3.1.5 Social Identity and Swearing

The final finding highlights the children's sophisticated, albeit nascent, capacity for Code-Switching. The usage of abusive words is not a constant, uncontrollable tic; rather, it is a performance tailored to the specific audience and social stage.

1) The School Stage vs. The Home Stage

Subject Rf, despite his high frequency of swearing at school, reportedly behaves markedly differently in the domestic sphere. His grandmother noted a distinct change in his demeanor:

> *"When he is not with his friends... sometimes he does not say those words. He is quieter at home. He knows I don't like noise." (Grandmother of Rf, Personal Interview, 2025).*

Conversely, Rf openly admitted to the researcher that school is the appropriate arena for these words:

> *"At school... yes, [I do say them], sister. Everyone does." (Subject Rf, Personal Interview, 2025).*

This behavioral discrepancy indicates that Rf views the school/playground as a specific social stage with its own script. On this stage, swearing is a requirement for "fitting in," demonstrating toughness, or aligning with the dominant peer culture. At home, the script changes. This proves that the child is not "out of control" in a clinical sense; rather, he is a rational social actor navigating different normative systems. He puts on the "mask" of the swearer to survive the social hierarchy of the playground, and takes it off when he enters the domestic sphere to appease his grandmother.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Limited Moral Awareness in Language

The stark dissonance observed between the children's "moral knowing" (verbalizing that swearing is forbidden) and "moral action" (engaging in the behavior) provides a fertile ground for theoretical analysis. This phenomenon can be robustly interpreted through Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. The subjects in this study, aged 4-6 years, operate squarely within the Pre Conventional Level, specifically Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation. In this developmental stage, a child's morality is entirely externalized. Actions are judged not by their intrinsic ethical quality or their impact on social harmony, but solely by their physical consequences. When Subject Ha asserts, "No, it is not allowed," he is not expressing an internalized ethical stance that "hurting others with words is wrong." Rather, he is reciting a protective mantra to avoid the external sanction of the researcher or teacher. The "goodness" or "badness" of the word is tied to the

presence of the authority figure. This explains why the behavior re-emerges instantly on the playground: when the authority figure (the source of punishment) is distant, the rule loses its binding power.

Furthermore, this gap highlights what Thomas Lickona (2013) describes as the developmental lag between Moral Knowing and Moral Feeling. While the cognitive component (knowing the rule) is present, the emotional component (empathy/guilt) is underdeveloped. This cognitive-emotional disconnect is exacerbated by the phenomenon of Semantic Satiation (Sobirin et al., 2024). Because the children are exposed to these words repetitively via high-frequency usage in YouTube gaming videos, by older peers in the neighborhood, and in daily banter the words undergo a process of semantic degradation. They lose their shock value and their taboo status.

For Subject Rf, who laughed and stated “It is okay [Nggak papa],” the word "jancuk" has been stripped of its offensive meaning. It has transformed from a profanity into a mere interjection, a linguistic particle used to punctuate excitement or frustration. This aligns with recent neuro-cognitive findings by Nawaz et al. (2025), who argue that in the absence of mature executive function, the "fun" or "attention-grabbing" quality of a swear word easily overrides its abstract moral prohibition. The child’s brain prioritizes the immediate social reward (laughter) over the abstract moral rule. Thus, the behavior should be framed not as hypocrisy, but as a symptom of moral immaturity compounded by environmental desensitization.

3.2.2 Emotional Dysregulation as a Trigger

The findings regarding the etiology of tantrums, specifically the narrative provided by Ha’s parent about "spilling out" words when requests are denied, necessitate a fundamental re-evaluation of the intent behind childhood swearing. The behavior observed aligns with the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis proposed by Berkowitz, but with a specific linguistic manifestation. Wiegand (2018) and Haaq (in Zamzami et al., 2021) classify this behavior as Reactive Aggression, a defensive, impulsive response to a perceived threat or deprivation (e.g., not getting a snack, losing a toy). The child is experiencing an "Amygdala Hijack," where the emotional center of the brain overwhelms the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for impulse control. However, the critical insight from this study is that this aggression is verbally specific because of a profound deficit in Emotional Literacy. As Setiadi (2024) suggests, young children often possess a limited Emotional Vocabulary. They may know the words "happy" and "sad," but they lack the linguistic nuance to articulate complex states such as "frustrated," "envious," "overwhelmed," or "feeling treated unfairly." When Subject Ha is denied a snack, he feels a complex surge of negative affect that he cannot name. In the absence of precise emotional labels, the abusive word serves a functional purpose: it acts as a high-intensity signal. It commands immediate attention. A polite request might be ignored by a busy parent or a distracted peer, but a swear word forces a reaction. The observation that children stop immediately upon teacher intervention is pivotal. It indicates that the behavior is not driven by deep-seated malice (*proactive aggression*) but by a temporary lapse in self-regulation. This points to a failure in Emotional Scaffolding by the adults in their lives. The children have been repeatedly told *what not to say*, but they have not been adequately taught *what to say instead* when they are overwhelmed by negative affect. They possess the "brakes" (prohibitions) but not the "steering wheel" (adaptive coping strategies).

3.2.3 Peer Group Reinforcement

The transmission dynamics observed in this study provide a textbook validation of Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, specifically the processes of *Modeling* and *Vicarious Reinforcement*. The peer group does not merely tolerate abusive language; it actively teaches and rewards it. Subject Rm’s admission that he learns from “Haidar and Efendi” (older boys) illustrates the mechanism of Vertical Modeling. Younger children perceive older peers as possessing higher status, autonomy, and physical power. By mimicking the lexicon of these older boys, Rm is engaging in a process of

Identification. He is attempting to appropriate the perceived power of the older boys by adopting their linguistic symbols. The swear word becomes a totem of maturity and toughness. However, the persistence of the behavior is best explained by B.F. Skinner's Operant Conditioning. The observational data revealed that swearing often elicits laughter from peers. In behavioral terms, peer laughter acts as a potent Positive Reinforcer. The sequence is clear: (1) Antecedent: Social play situation; (2) Behavior: Uttering a swear word; (3) Consequence: Peer laughter and attention. The brain registers this consequence as a "social reward." This creates a clash of Microsystems (referencing Urie Bronfenbrenner). The school classroom represents one microsystem with a set of norms (politeness, quietness), while the playground represents a distinct microsystem with an inverted set of norms. In the "Playground Economy," politeness is often devalued as weakness, while linguistic aggression is constructed as Social Currency. As Sher & Mashkoor (2024) and Armita (2023) argue, in the peer culture of young boys, abusive language is frequently constructed as a performance of masculinity and resilience. A child who refuses to participate in this linguistic exchange risks "social bankruptcy" exclusion or being labeled as timid. Thus, the pressure to conform is systemic; the child swears not just to express anger, but to survive socially.

3.2.4 Parenting Style and Media Exposure

The findings regarding parenting styles and media consumption highlight a critical disruption in the child's ecological system. Lev Vygotsky theorized that learning occurs through interaction with a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) typically a parent or teacher who guides the child's development within the *Zone of Proximal Development*. The findings regarding digital media suggest a disturbing shift: the MKO is being replaced by the Algorithm. When a parent hands a child a smartphone to "stop them from fussing" (as admitted by Rf's grandmother), they are abdicating the role of the MKO to the device. This creates a vacuum of mediation. Subject Ha's admission that he learns words from "YouTube" confirms that digital content creators have become his primary linguistic models. The danger lies in the nature of Para-social Interaction. Children form one-sided relationships with digital figures (YouTubers, gamers) who model aggressive language without consequence. In a video game stream, a player might scream an obscenity when losing, and the game continues; there is no "timeout," no moral lecture, and no negative consequence.

This creates a distorted reality for the child. Because the digital model is not corrected, the child internalizes the behavior as normative. This phenomenon, described by Kundaryanti and Anggraini (2024) as the rise of the "Digital Surrogate," represents a crisis in socialization. The screen does not provide corrective feedback. It does not say, "That wasn't nice." It simply plays the next video. This lack of mediation prevents the child from developing critical filtering skills, leading to the seamless integration of digital aggression into real world interactions. The "Appeasement Parenting" style, characterized by low demands and high responsiveness to the child's desire for digital entertainment, effectively removes the "moral gatekeeper" from the child's life.

3.2.5 Social Identity and Swearing

Finally, the phenomenon of code-switching where Subject Rf swears profusely at school but remains polite at home invites analysis through Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory. The child demonstrates a sophisticated ability to read the social room, understanding the world as a series of stages with different scripts. The school playground functions as the "Front Stage." Here, the audience consists of peers, and the performance goal is social acceptance and status. The script of this stage requires "toughness," high energy, and conformity to the group's rough linguistic norms. Swearing is part of the costume; it is a performative act or a prop used to manage impressions. Rf swears to signal to his friends: *"I am one of you; I am not afraid to break the rules."* Conversely, the home represents the "Back Stage" (or a secondary Front Stage with different rules), where the audience is the grandmother. Here, the performance goal is to maintain harmony and secure affection. The child drops the "tough guy" persona and reverts to the "dutiful grandson" role. This behavioral fluidity proves that the child

possesses a nascent Social Intelligence. He is not "out of control" or lacking in cognitive capacity; rather, he is a rational social actor navigating conflicting norms between two different worlds.

This interpretation, supported by Social Identity Theory (Arini, 2024; Wulandari, 2022), suggests that abusive language is not necessarily a reflection of a "corrupted character" or a permanent pathological flaw. Rather, it is a highly adaptive social strategy. The child is solving a social problem: *"How do I fit in with my friends without getting in trouble with my parents?"* His solution is code-switching. This implies that interventions aimed solely at "fixing" the individual child will fail if they do not address the institutional culture of the school playground that demands such a performance for social survival.

The synthesis of these findings carries profound implications for early childhood education practitioners and parents. The prevalence of abusive language is a symptom of broader systemic issues: emotional illiteracy, unsupervised digital consumption, and peer pressure. Firstly, the curriculum must move beyond behavioral management (punishment) to Emotional Coaching. Schools need to integrate Social Emotional Learning (SEL) that explicitly teaches the vocabulary of frustration. Children must be drilled in saying *"I am angry"* as thoroughly as they are drilled in the alphabet. Secondly, the concept of Parental Digital Literacy needs to be redefined. It is not enough for parents to know how to use a phone; they must understand the developmental cost of the "digital pacifier." Interventions should aim to empower parents to reclaim their role as the primary MKO, engaging in Active Mediation, watching content *with* the child, and discussing the language used. Lastly, teachers must intervene in the Peer Ecology. It is insufficient to reprimand the individual swearer. Teachers must work to alter the reward structure of the peer group, perhaps by implementing group-based rewards for kindness or by creating play scenarios where "toughness" is redefined as "self-control." Only by addressing the environmental roots, the digital input, and the peer reinforcement can the cycle of abusive language be effectively disrupted.

4. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study conducted at TK PGRI Binade Ponorogo reveals that the use of abusive words in early childhood is not merely a manifestation of negative verbal behavior, but a meaningful lived experience within children's social worlds. The core findings indicate that children employ abusive words as part of their language exploration, emotional expression, and social learning. These words are primarily acquired through imitation of significant others parents, peers, teachers, and digital media before children fully understand their moral implications. Abusive language thus reflects an imbalance between rapid language development and still-emerging moral awareness, rather than deliberate harmful intent. The study highlights several important implications for educational practice. First, teacher training programs need to strengthen educators' understanding of language as a moral and emotional tool, not simply a behavioral issue requiring punishment. Teachers should be equipped with strategies for consistent modeling, emotional coaching, and reflective dialogue. Second, parenting education programs are essential to raise awareness of the impact of daily language use at home and the importance of active verbal guidance. Third, media regulation and supervision particularly regarding children's exposure to digital content should be integrated into early childhood education policies, as media plays a significant role in shaping children's verbal repertoires.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to early childhood language and moral development literature by reframing abusive words as a form of affiliative and exploratory behavior rather than purely deviant conduct. Within a phenomenological lens, children's verbal expressions are understood as attempts to negotiate meaning, emotions, and social belonging. This perspective shifts the focus from correction alone to shared meaning-making among children, teachers, and parents. Future research is recommended to adopt longitudinal designs to examine how children's verbal behavior evolves over time alongside moral development. Intervention-based studies that combine teacher training, parenting workshops, and media literacy programs would provide

valuable evidence of effective preventive strategies. Mixed-methods approaches could also quantitatively examine relationships between parenting styles, media exposure, and verbal aggression. This study has several limitations. The sample was limited to one kindergarten, which restricts generalizability. Observation effects and partial parental disclosure may also introduce bias. Despite these limitations, the findings underscore the importance of sustained collaboration among educators, parents, and researchers to cultivate empathetic, respectful, and morally grounded language use in early childhood.

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