Journal of Rural Community Nursing Practice (JRCNP)
Volume 4 Issue 2, September 2026, pp 189-220
https://ebsina.or.id/journals/index.php/JRCNP
eISSN 2986-7401, pISSN 2986-8424

Fostering Screen-Free Emotion Regulation in Generation Alpha: An Age-Stratified Focus Group Study of Developmental Shifts in Tantrum Management

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Article History
Submitted: 14-08-2026
Revised: 20-08-2026
Accepted: 02-09-2026

ABSTRACT

Background: Generation Alpha is growing up in a device-saturated environment where device-dependent tantrum soothing is an early entry point into later screen and behavioral addiction, since poor childhood self-regulation predicts addiction decades later. **Purpose:** As part of developing a Javanese local wisdom parenting framework, this needs-assessment phase compared caregiver experiences with toddler and preschooler tantrums. By identifying key developmental targets for self-regulation, the study provides an empirical foundation to inform future local wisdom based interventions as an alternative to gadget-dependent soothing. **Methods:** This qualitative descriptive study used two age-stratified focus group discussions with reflexive thematic analysis. Participants were 16 purposively sampled caregivers in Jember, Indonesia: 8 caregivers of toddlers (1.5-3 years) and 8 of preschoolers (3.1-4.5 years), with audio-recorded, group-coded transcripts. **Results:** Analysis yielded four toddler themes and five preschool themes, synthesized into five comparative themes spanning emotion regulation, gadgets as control versus instant soother, meaningful-activity substitution, nutritional fulfillment, and parent-child dynamics, revealing a continuum from externally regulated, gadget-assisted soothing toward child-initiated coping, negotiated screen use, and egalitarian communication. **Conclusions:** Tantrum-management strategies shift from externally regulated soothing toward dialogic, autonomy-supportive approaches. Community and family health nurses should stage self-regulation counseling by developmental phase and operationalize the findings from this study as an initial, evidence-based reference point for a future local-wisdom family nursing strategy during home visits, supporting an addiction-free Generation Alpha.

KEYWORDS

Generation alpha, Emotional regulation, Screen addiction, Local wisdom parenting, Focus group discussion

How to cite:
Nirwanawati, S., Faradisa, L. N., Ervyanna, E. R., Rondhianto, & Pairoh, H. (2026). Fostering Screen-Free Emotion Regulation in Generation Alpha: An Age-Stratified Focus Group Study of Developmental Shifts in Tantrum Management. Journal of Rural Community Nursing Practice. 4(2), 189-220. https://doi.org/10.58545/jrcnp.v4i2.956

1. BACKGROUND

Approximately 93% of parents encounter a recurring challenge: the cessation of screen time frequently precipitates emotional dysregulation in young children (Hiniker et al., 2016). In response, providing a digital device to pacify distress, a practice conceptualized in the literature as *media emotion regulation*, has emerged as a prevalent coping strategy in

contemporary child-rearing (Coyne et al., 2021). However, longitudinal evidence links reliance on this strategy to poorer emotional knowledge, reduced empathy, and heightened emotional reactivity over time (Coyne et al., 2023). The implications of these early regulatory patterns extend far beyond immediate behavioral management. Early self-regulation, which is fundamentally shaped by parental responses to childhood distress, is a robust predictor of substance use, behavioral addictions, and broader mental health outcomes up to three decades later (Robson et al., 2020). Consequently, the management of early emotional outbursts represents a critical developmental juncture, potentially serving as a foundational precursor to the addiction pathway.

Recent pediatric-nursing evidence sharpens this picture. Gadget-dependent soothing is already measurably associated with technology-addiction risk in children as young as 24-36 months (Çetinkaya et al., 2026), and low parental digital awareness is one of the few modifiable levers against it (Yilmaz Kurt et al., 2025). The American Academy of Pediatrics now frames children's digital experience as an entire "ecosystem" capable of displacing sleep, activity, and face-to-face connection (Munzer et al., 2026). In Indonesia, parents themselves frequently introduce gadgets as a feeding or behavior-control tool before they harden into an unregulated habit (Sisbintari & Setiawati, 2022), and internet addiction is emerging as an early-childhood concern that current family interventions barely address (Theopilus et al., 2024). Because emotion regulation is now understood as a coregulated, family-level process rather than an individual trait (Paley & Hajal, 2022), difficulties in this window are a recognized risk factor for later problems, placing nurses, especially in maternal-child and psychiatric-mental health practice, at the center of early, family-based prevention.

However, the evidence base has a critical blind spot. Nearly all research on media-based soothing comes from Western, high-income settings and treats “early childhood” as one undifferentiated block (Coyne et al., 2023; Hiniker et al., 2016); almost no qualitative work compares how tantrum management actually differs between toddlerhood and the preschool years, or how it is shaped by the multigenerational, grandparent-involved caregiving common to Indonesian households (Chand & Somaiah, 2023; Khoirunnisa, 2026). Within Indonesia itself, the limited existing evidence also rarely

distinguishes digital access, parenting norms, or family structure between urban and rural settings, even though these factors plausibly shape how gadget-dependent soothing develops and is managed differently across community types: national and provincial data show substantial urban–rural gaps in children's screen exposure and device access, with smartphone use among early childhood children reported at 44.69% in urban areas versus 34.76% in rural areas in East Nusa Tenggara, and a large share of children under six already accessing mobile phones and the internet nationwide (Antara News, 2026; Nurrohmah et al., 2025).

Two frameworks guide this study. Erikson's psychosocial stages predict that toddlers, still negotiating autonomy versus shame and doubt, remain dependent on external caregiver regulation, while preschoolers entering initiative versus guilt are developmentally primed for self-directed coping (Rorije et al., 2023); the family-coregulation model adds that this shift unfolds through scaffolded, gradually withdrawn support across the whole family system, not through any single parenting technique (Paley & Hajal, 2022). Together they generate this study's working proposition: effective tantrum strategies should visibly move, as children mature, from parent-controlled, device-assisted soothing toward approaches that scaffold the child's own emerging self-regulation.

This is where the study breaks new ground. It forms the needs-assessment phase of a larger program, "Toward an Addiction-Free Generation Alpha," which aims to develop Wulang Wuruking Praja: a parenting model rooted in the Javanese wulang wuruk literary-pedagogical tradition, exemplified by Serat Wulang Putra and Serat Sasana Sunu, which transmit moral instruction through exemplary practice and communally reinforced values such as patience and social responsibility (Purwadi, 2026; Santosa et al., 2026; Hermawan et al., 2024). The communal family setting that reinforces this teaching beyond any single parent. Indonesian etnoparenting scholarship confirms such practices exist (Rachmawati, 2020). This initial assessment does not evaluate whether participating families actively practice wulang wuruk. Instead, it maps the daily intersections between gadget use and tantrum management, providing essential empirical data to inform a future, culturally grounded phase of the program that can directly examine this connection.

This study aimed to explore and compare, through focus group discussions, how parents and caregivers of toddlers and preschool-aged children in Indonesia experience, interpret, and manage their children's tantrums, with particular attention to digital devices, substitute activities, feeding practices, and family relational dynamics, in order to identify the self-regulation gaps and family strengths a future Wulang Wuruking Praja-based intervention could, in a later phase, choose to address.

2. METHODS

Design

This qualitative descriptive study used two age-stratified focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore parental tantrum-management experiences, comparing caregivers of toddlers (1.5-3 years) and preschoolers (3.1-4.5 years) to capture developmental contrasts that a single-group design could not reveal. It forms the needs-assessment phase of a larger program that is developing a Wulang Wuruking Praja-based local-wisdom parenting model to strengthen self-regulation toward an addiction-free Generation Alpha.

Participants and Setting

Data collection took place during an ongoing children's playdate activity (NufamKids) in Jember, Indonesia, in a closed discussion room set apart from the main play area to minimize ambient noise and foot traffic and to protect recording quality and confidentiality. Toddlers' need for supervision split caregivers' attention during the FGD, whereas preschoolers' independence supported fuller focus. We consider this a methodological limitation affecting the depth of toddler-group responses, not an advantage for the preschool group (see Limitations). The research team comprised a nurse researcher (mental health/psychiatric nursing), a psychologist, and a child nutrition specialist, preventing any single professional lens from dominating the interpretation of the transcripts' emotional, psychological, and feeding-related content.

Participants were purposively sampled parents/primary caregivers of toddlers (1.5-3 years, n = 8) or preschoolers (3.1-4.5 years, n = 8) actively participating in the NufamKids playdate in Jember, able to communicate in Indonesian, and willing to complete the full FGD; caregivers of children with a diagnosed developmental, neurological, or psychiatric condition, non-primary/occasional care-

givers, or those unable to attend the full session were excluded. Of 23 caregivers initially screened, 16 met the criteria and were purposively selected (8 per group). Recruitment and coding were monitored in real time, and purposive sampling ended once both groups began converging on repeating categories; thus, the final sample of 16 reflects thematic saturation rather than the playdate schedule. The remaining 7 eligible caregivers were not enrolled after saturation was reached. However, the playdate's fixed time window limited same-day scheduling; this logistical constraint did not determine the final sample size.

Data collection

Data were collected on 20 June 2026 through two semi-structured FGDs, one per age group, held face-to-face in the closed discussion room during a NufamKids playdate session. Each FGD covered three topic sessions (10-15 minutes each): tantrum experiences and soothing strategies; the role of gadgets/screens and substitute activities; and feeding practices and family dynamics, guided by questions such as "Can you describe what usually happens when your child has a tantrum?" Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked against recordings for accuracy. As noted, receiving a NufamKids playdate ride ticket required completing the full FGD; the remaining 7 screened caregivers did not proceed because, after saturation-driven sampling closed, no full FGD session could be scheduled within the playdate's available time.

Data analysis

Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants for review and confirmation, and data saturation was reached when both groups began converging on the same emerging categories across consecutive sessions. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis: codes were generated manually and organized in NVivo, with two researchers independently coding each transcript and resolving disagreements through discussion or, when needed, a third reviewer's adjudication. Codes were synthesized separately by group before integration into five comparative cross-group themes; participants were anonymized as P#-TDL (toddler group) and P#-PSK (preschool group).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness followed Nowell et al.'s (2017) criteria for credibility,

dependability, confirmability, and transferability, supported by cross-group comparison, verbatim-grounded themes, member checking, detailed descriptions of the two developmental groups, an audit trail of coding decisions, and triangulation of transcripts with field notes. Because the playdate group is a standing community collaboration between the research team and caregivers rather than a group assembled solely for this study, most participants already knew the facilitators; to manage this familiarity bias, the team kept reflexive journals, held peer-debriefing discussions after each FGD, and bracketed prior assumptions about "appropriate" gadget use and parenting before coding began. During the FGDs, facilitators used neutral, non-evaluative probes (e.g., asking "what happens" rather than "why") and avoided any verbal or nonverbal cues of approval or disapproval when caregivers described screen-based soothing, thereby reducing social-desirability pressure around less "ideal" parenting practices.

Ethical consideration

This study received ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Nursing, Universitas Jember (No. 278/UN25.1.14/KEPK/2026); additional site permission was obtained through the Faculty of Nursing and LPPM Universitas Jember for access to the NufamKids playdate group, granted in writing and verbally. Written and verbal informed consent were obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained via the anonymized P#-TDL/P#-PSK coding system. The Health Research Ethics Committee approved the playdate-ride-ticket compensation described below. Consent procedures clarified that participation was voluntary, that caregivers could withdraw at any time without losing access to the NufamKids playdate, and that compensation was tied only to completing the FGD, not to response content, to minimize undue inducement.

3. RESULTS

Participant Description

This study involved two focus group discussions (FGDs) representing distinct developmental stages of early childhood: a group of parents/caregivers of toddlers (1.5-3 years) and a group of parents/caregivers of preschool-aged children (3.1-4.5 years). This grouping was designed to capture differences in caregiving characteristics that correspond to each developmental stage: the toddler group centered on early-

childhood caregiving characteristics (early communication, toilet training, tantrums, and physical exploration), while the preschool group centered on transitional-period characteristics (early peer socialization, independent emotion regulation, and structured instruction).

Table 1. Participant Characteristics by Group

Characteristic	Toddler Group (1.5-3 yrs)	Preschool Group (3.1-4.5 yrs)
Number of participants	8	8
Parental age (mean)	32 years old	33 years old
Occupation (mode)	Housewife	Housewife
Highest education (mode)	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Bachelor's Degree (S1)
Child age range (mean)	3 years old	4 years old

The two groups were closely matched demographically, which strengthens confidence that the thematic contrasts reported below reflect the children's developmental stage rather than differences in caregiver age, occupation, or education. In both groups, participants were predominantly homemakers with a bachelor's degree in their early thirties, differing systematically only in the age of the child they were caring for, a mean of 3 years in the toddler group and 4 years in the preschool group, consistent with the two age brackets by which participants were recruited. A group-specific anonymization system was used to distinguish participant groups clearly, namely code P#-TDL for toddler-group participants and P#-PSK for preschool-group participants, as used consistently in the verbatim quotations throughout this section.

Overview of Findings

Analysis of the toddler group yielded four themes and eight categories, comprising parental emotion regulation, gadgets as behavioral control, substitution of meaningful activity, and intergenerational caregiving conflict. Analysis of the preschool group yielded a richer thematic structure of five themes and thirteen categories, comprising the management of caregiving emotion regulation, revitalizing real play spaces, the dilemma of dependence on an instant soother, a natural approach to nutritional fulfillment, and an egalitarian space in the parent-child relationship. To illustrate the developmental transition in caregiving from the toddler to the preschool stage, the findings from both groups were synthesized into the following five comparative themes.

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Theme 1: Child Emotion Regulation and Tantrum Accompaniment (Toddler 1.5-3 Years vs. Preschool 3.1-4.5 Years)

Toddler Group (1.5-3 Years)

In the toddler group, parental emotion regulation was colored by a condition of "giving in to circumstances," which appeared in two forms: combining feeding with television viewing, and involving external intervention from another caregiver. Concern over nutritional intake also drove parents to observe their child's development closely. At the same time, parents described a self-adjustment phase expressed through emotion-regulation education, that is, helping the child recognize and name their own emotions.

> "Anak yang mengalami GTM cenderung lebih mudah makan ketika diberikan tontonan melalui TV." [A child who refuses to eat (GTM) tends to eat more easily when given something to watch on TV.] **(P1-TDL)**
>
> "anak dibantu mengenali dan menamai emosinya serta diberikan validasi terhadap perasaannya" [the child is helped to recognize and name their emotions and is given validation for their feelings] **(P2-TDL)**

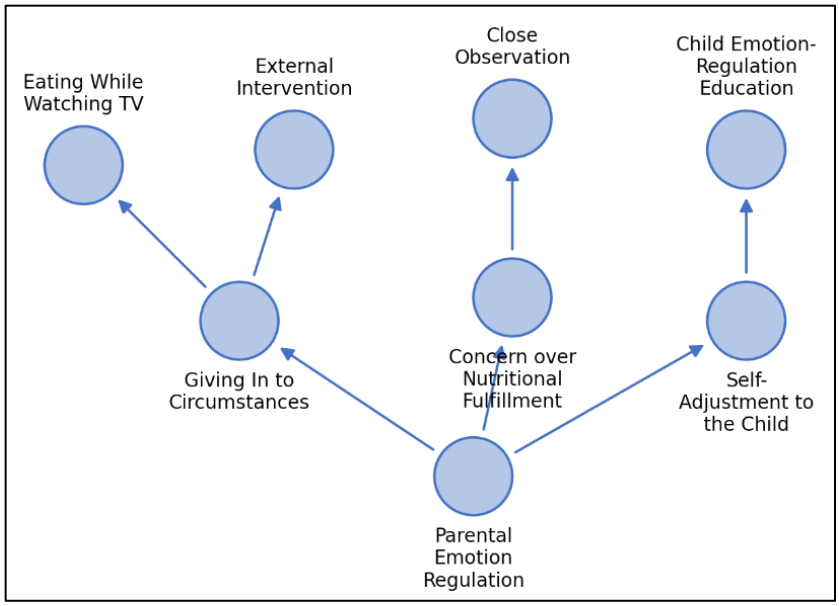

Figure 1a. Theme of Parental Emotion Regulation (Toddler Group)

Preschool Group (3.1-4.5 Years)

Unlike the toddler group, emotion-regulation management in the preschool group appeared more structured and oriented toward the child's independence. Parents gave the child opportunities to regulate emotions independently, and the child began to be habituated to stress-

coping. Verbal affection was used in difficult moments through verbal instruction and instilled education, accompanied by parents' hope for the child's emotional recovery, practiced through activity distraction and direct accompaniment during tantrums. Nevertheless, temporary soothing through gadgets still emerged as an instant strategy, followed by verbal catharsis from the parent.

"berusaha sabar saat anak tantrum" [trying to stay patient when the child has a tantrum] **(P1-PSK)**

"mengalihkan perhatian dengan bermain bersama, playdate, sensory play, memberikan mainan lain" [redirecting attention through playing together, playdates, sensory play, offering another toy] **(P2-PSK)**

"merasa "kalah" saat lelah atau sibuk, memberikan HP kembali agar anak berhenti menangis" [feeling they have "lost" when tired or busy, handing the phone back so the child stops crying] **(P3-PSK)**

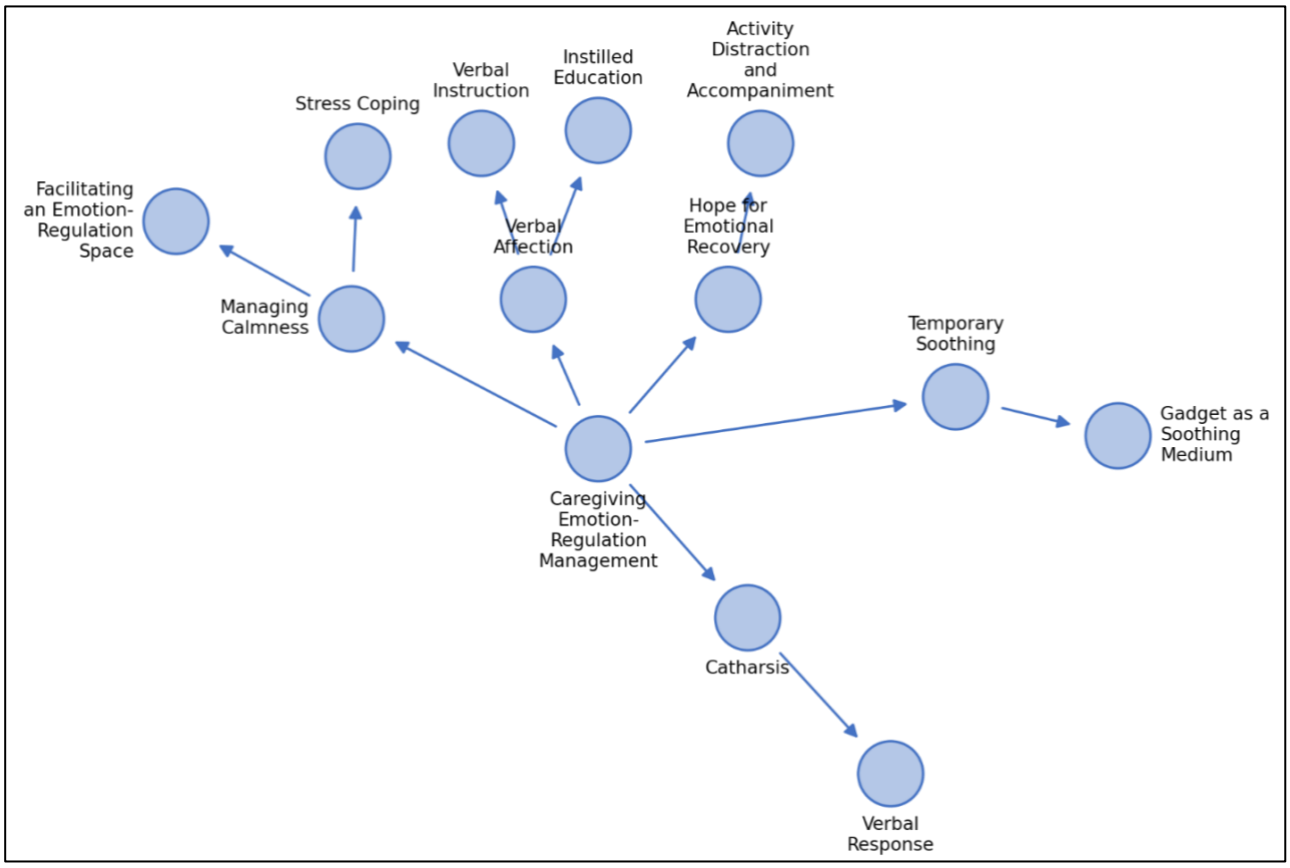

Figure 1b. Theme of Caregiving Emotion-Regulation Management (Preschool Group)

This contrast is consistent with Erikson's stages of psychosocial development: at toddler age the child is still within the autonomy-versus-shame-and-

doubt stage, so emotion regulation remains heavily dependent on external parental assistance, whereas at preschool age the child enters the initiative-versus-guilt stage, which encourages parents to begin giving the child room to take the initiative to regulate their own emotions (Rorije et al., 2023).

Theme 2: The Role of Gadgets as Behavioral Control and an Instant Soother

Toddler Group (1.5-3 Years)

In the toddler group, gadgets functioned mainly as behavioral control related to feeding. Toddlers' dependence on eating-while-watching activity took two forms: related to GTM (food refusal) and related to the child's already-established eating preferences or habits.

> "anak tidak terlalu tertarik pada gadget tetapi tetap terbiasa makan sambil menonton TV meskipun tidak terlalu fokus pada tayangan" [the child is not very interested in the gadget itself but is still accustomed to eating while watching TV, even without focusing closely on the program] **(P3-TDL)**

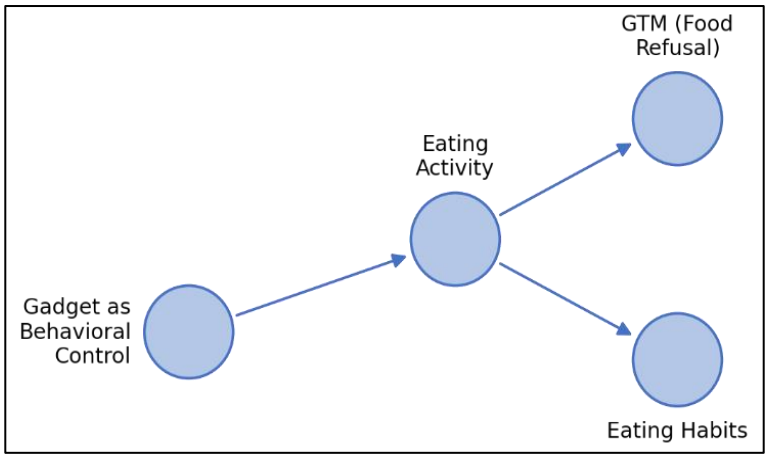

Figure 2a. Theme of Gadgets as Behavioral Control (Toddler Group)

Preschool Group (3.1-4.5 Years)

In the preschool group, gadget use shifted into a dilemma of dependence on an instant soother. This dilemma arose from external motivation in the form of rewards given after the child ate, as well as the child's own initiative when bored, alongside limits on gadget use, particularly during meals, implemented through rules the family had agreed upon.

> "membuat aturan penggunaan HP, membatasi HP saat makan, menentukan jadwal bermain HP, kekompakan keluarga dalam

menerapkan aturan" [setting rules for phone use, limiting phone use during meals, scheduling phone-play time, and family consistency in enforcing the rules] **(P4-PSK)**

"Memberikan motivasi atau hadiah sederhana, mengajak jalan-jalan setelah makan" [giving simple motivation or rewards, taking the child for a walk after eating] **(P5-PSK)**

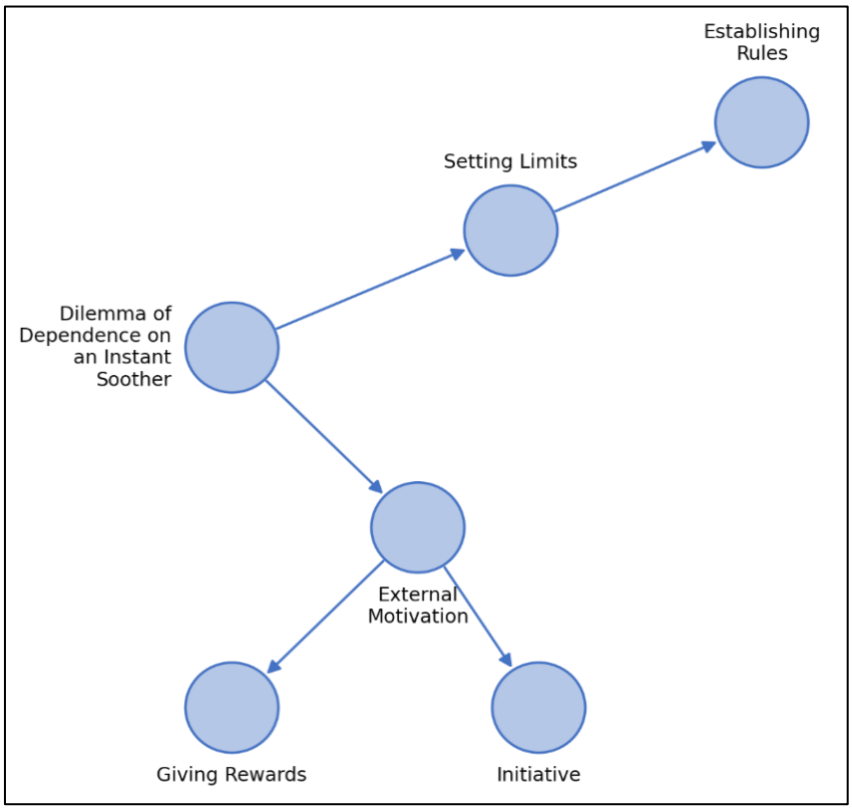

Figure 2b. Theme of the Dilemma of Dependence on an Instant Soother (Preschool Group)

This pattern shows a shift in the function of gadgets: at toddler age the gadget is more of a passive attention-diverter during feeding, whereas at preschool age parents begin consciously questioning and limiting the gadget's role as an emotional soother, consistent with preschoolers' growing cognitive readiness to understand and follow jointly agreed rules.

Theme 3: Substitution of Meaningful Activity and Real Play/Interaction Space

Toddler Group (1.5-3 Years)

Activity substitution in the toddler group was realized through daily routines of literacy activity, attentive/mindful activity, and shared verbal storytelling activity with parents, alongside screen-time limits that emphasized physical activity.

"Anak dibiasakan membaca buku atau mendengarkan dongeng sebelum tidur" [the child is habituated to reading books or listening to bedtime stories] **(P4-TDL)**

"anak diajak bercerita mengenai kegiatan yang dialami sepanjang hari" [the child is invited to talk about the activities experienced throughout the day] **(P5-TDL)**

"pengurangan penggunaan gadget membuat anak lebih banyak bermain atau belajar" [reducing gadget use makes the child play or learn more] **(P6-TDL)**

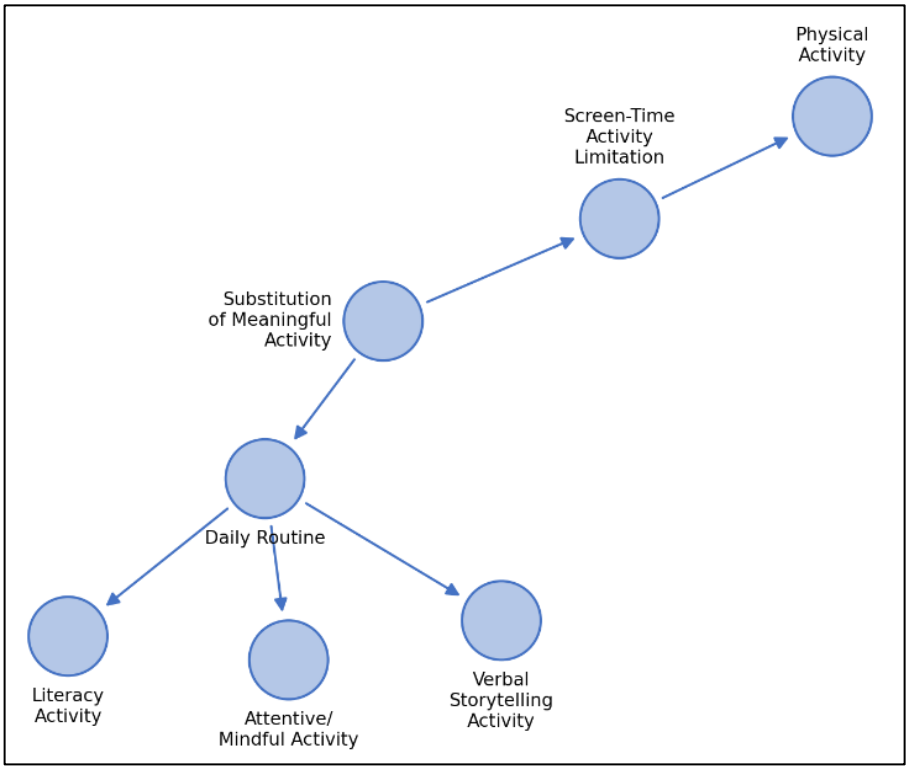

Figure 3a. Theme of Substitution of Meaningful Activity (Toddler Group)

Preschool Group (3.1-4.5 Years)

In the preschool group, activity substitution developed into an effort to revitalize a real play space, marked by social interaction realized through the participation of close others such as siblings, aunts/uncles, and peers, as well as physical activity such as playing outdoors.

"bermain bersama saudara" [playing together with siblings] **(P6-PSK)**

"bermain di luar rumah" [playing outside the house] **(P7-PSK)**

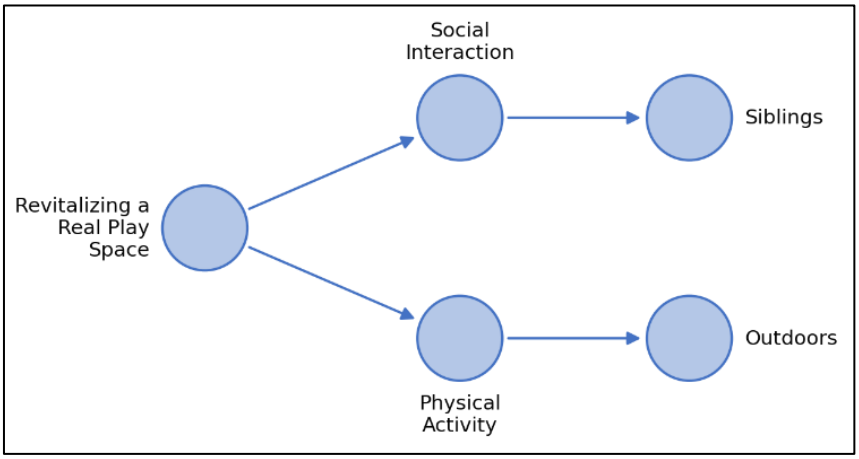

Figure 3b. Theme of Revitalizing a Real Play Space (Preschool Group)

This difference illustrates a continuum of activity substitution: at toddler age, substitution is still centered on a one-directional routine with the parent, whereas at preschool age it broadens into the realm of socialization with peers and the wider environment, consistent with the early socialization needs of the preschool transition period.

Theme 4: Fulfillment of Children's Nutritional Needs

Toddler Group (1.5-3 Years)

Nutrition had not yet stood as an independent theme in the toddler group; instead it was fused with the theme of parental emotion regulation. Concern about GTM and a child's stagnant weight was perceived as a sign of a health problem, even when the child did not experience GTM.

> "orang tua lebih waspada apabila berat badan anak tidak naik karena dianggap sebagai tanda adanya masalah kesehatan meskipun anak tidak mengalami GTM" [parents become more alert when the child's weight does not increase, because it is regarded as a sign of a health problem even when the child is not refusing food] **(P7-TDL)**

Preschool Group (3.1-4.5 Years)

In the preschool group, nutritional fulfillment developed into an independent theme in the form of a natural approach to nutritional fulfillment. Parents implemented supportive eating habituation by introducing a variety of foods and designing an enjoyable eating environment, and by allowing the child's desire to eat to arise naturally, letting the child eat only when

genuinely hungry and stimulating the child's physical activity before meals.

"melakukan aktivitas fisik sebelum makan" [engaging in physical activity before eating] **(P8-PSK)**

"menunggu anak benar-benar lapar" [waiting until the child is genuinely hungry] **(P9-PSK)**

"dikenalkan berbagai makanan sejak kecil" [being introduced to a variety of foods from an early age] **(P10-PSK)**

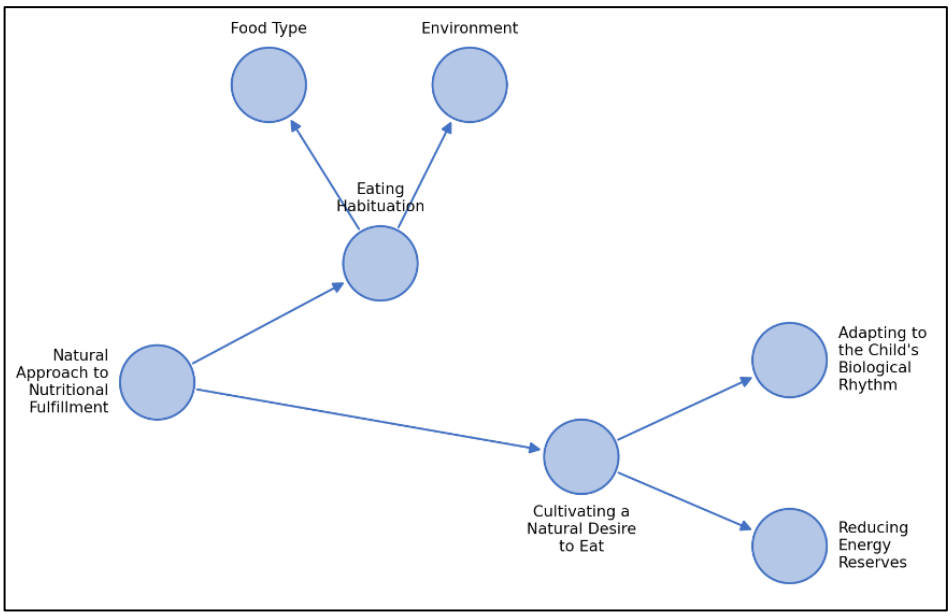

Figure 4. Theme of a Natural Approach to Nutritional Fulfillment (Preschool Group)

This shift indicates that nutritional concerns, which at toddler age were still rooted in anxiety and close surveillance, gradually transform at preschool age into a more autonomous approach grounded in trust toward the child's own hunger-fullness cues.

Theme 5: Parent-Child Relational Dynamics and the Family Caregiving System

Toddler Group (1.5-3 Years)

In the toddler group, family caregiving dynamics were colored by intergenerational caregiving conflict. Parents perceived that older-generation caregiving patterns tended to be more permissive toward toddler gadget play, whereas modern-era caregiving demanded stricter control over children's gadget activity. Modern parenting patterns were often perceived as more complicated, yet regarded as more relevant because they are supported by updated scientific knowledge.

"ketika berada di rumah kakek-nenek anak lebih sering diberikan HP sehingga paparan gadget meningkat" [when at

the grandparents' house, the child is given the phone more often, so gadget exposure increases] **(P8-TDL)**

"parenting modern dianggap lebih relevan karena didukung ilmu pengetahuan yang telah diperbarui, meskipun beberapa metode baru dianggap lebih rumit orang tua cenderung setuju untuk menyesuaikan diri demi perkembangan anak yang lebih optimal" [modern parenting is seen as more relevant because it is supported by updated scientific knowledge; although some new methods are seen as more complicated, parents tend to agree to adapt for the sake of the child's more optimal development] **(P9-TDL)**

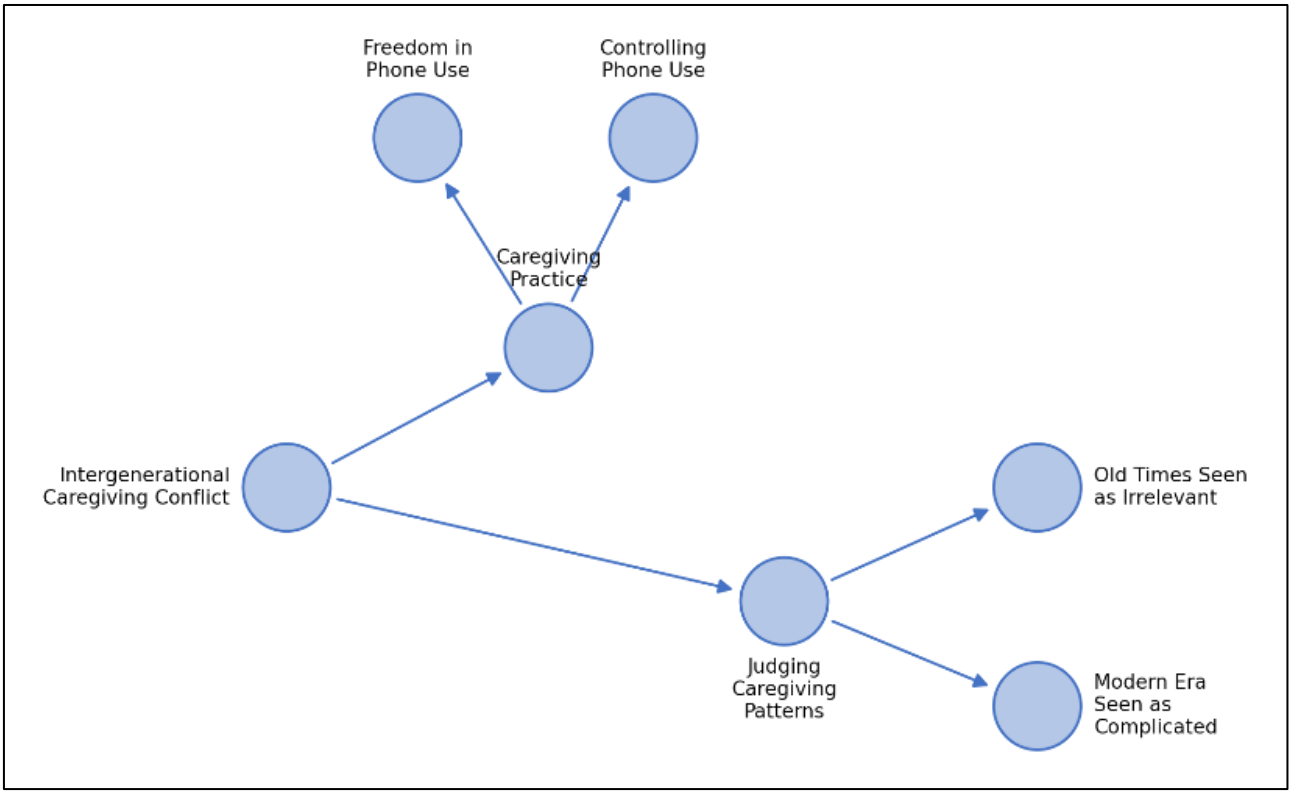

Figure 5a. Theme of Intergenerational Caregiving Conflict (Toddler Group)

Preschool Group (3.1-4.5 Years)

In the preschool group, the focus of family dynamics shifted from intergenerational conflict toward building an egalitarian space in the parent-child relationship. Habituating the child's emotional control was built through meaningful communication via routine dialogue, accompanied by a loosening of parental hierarchy reflected in a growing perception that the child can be positioned as a friend or conversational partner.

"Meluangkan waktu berbicara dengan anak setiap malam" [making time to

talk with the child every evening] **(P11-PSK)**

"membicarakan rencana esok hari, membuat anak merasa didengar" [discussing tomorrow's plans, making the child feel heard] **(P12-PSK)**

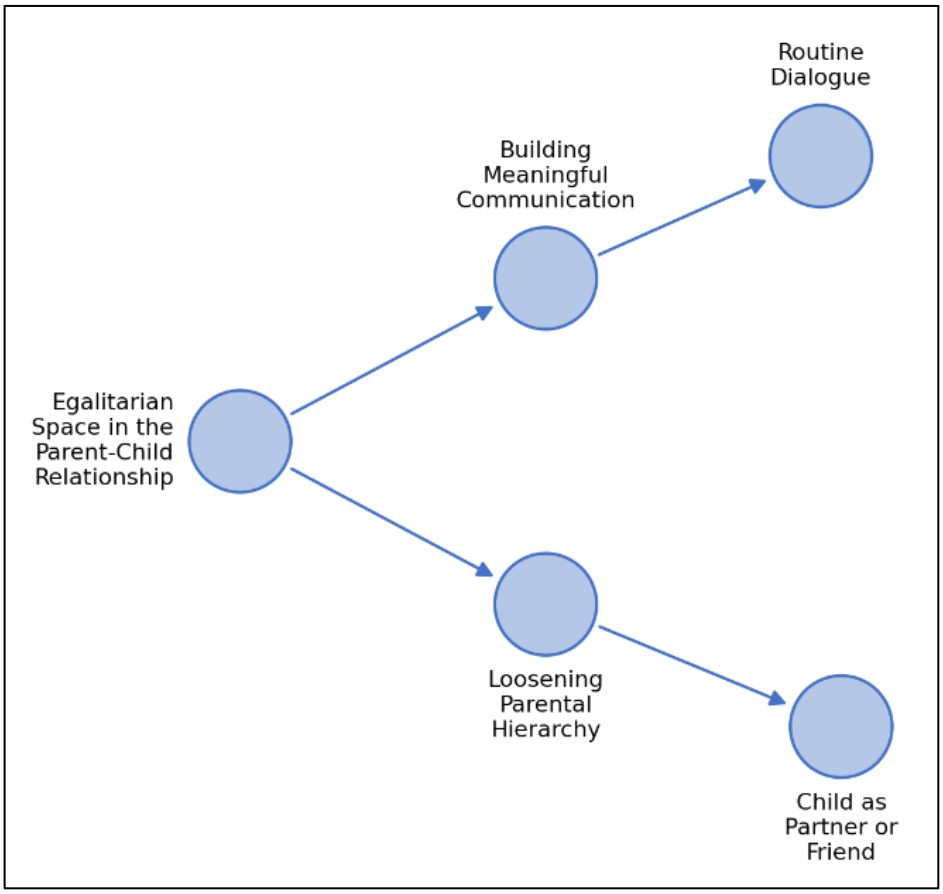

Figure 5b. Theme of an Egalitarian Space in the Parent-Child Relationship (Preschool Group)

This finding shows a shift in the source of caregiving authority: at toddler age, caregiving authority is still heavily influenced by other caregiving figures within the extended family (grandparents), whereas at preschool age that authority begins to be negotiated directly between parent and child through a more egalitarian relationship.

Theme Comparison Matrix

To clarify the developmental continuum from the toddler group to the preschool group, the five themes above are summarized comparatively in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative Summary of the Five Themes across Developmental Groups

Main Theme	Toddler Group (1.5-3 Years)	Preschool Group (3.1-4.5 Years)
Emotion Regulation & Tantrum Accompaniment	Emotion regulation still heavily dependent on external parental intervention (watching TV while eating, one-directional emotion validation)	Emotion regulation increasingly directed toward the child's independence (stress coping, activity distraction, accompaniment during tantrums)
Gadgets as Behavioral Control	Gadgets used as a feeding/GTM aid; dependence is situational and tied to eating patterns	Gadgets used as an "instant soother" during tantrums; a dilemma emerges as parents become aware of dependence risk
Substitution of Meaningful Activity	Substitution through literacy routines, storytelling, and structured verbal activity led by parents	Substitution through a real play space via social interaction with siblings, peers, and outdoor physical activity
Fulfillment of Nutritional Needs	Nutrition concern still fused with GTM and weight issues; not yet an independent theme	Develops into an independent theme: natural eating habituation, introducing varied foods, syncing with family eating patterns
Parent-Child Relations & Family Caregiving System	Dominated by intergenerational caregiving conflict (grandparents vs. parents) over gadget-use rules	Shifts toward building an egalitarian relationship between parent and child through routine dialogue and a loosened hierarchy

Synthesis of Inter-Theme Relationships

Overall, the findings reveal a continuum of caregiving development that moves from dependence on external intervention (toddler age) toward independence and relational equality (preschool age). Challenges that at 1.5-3 years are still physical and situational, such as feeding difficulty, dependence on screen viewing, and rule conflicts with other caregivers, transform by 3.1-4.5 years into challenges that are more socially and emotionally complex, namely the dilemma of using a gadget as a soother, the need for peer socialization, and the negotiation of an equal relationship between parent and child. This transition pattern is consistent with both Erikson's psychosocial developmental stages and Piaget's cognitive stages, in which the preschooler's growing language, cognition, and independence create room for parents to move from direct-control strategies (gadgets, viewing distraction) toward dialogic and participatory strategies.

The theme of "gadgets" forms the common thread connecting both age groups. Within the three FGD sessions, "The Calm Captain" was used only as a working

label for the discussion topic to facilitate conversation; it is not the study's title. In toddlerhood, the gadget functions as a relatively acceptable feeding aid, whereas in the preschool years it shifts into an emotional "remote control" that parents increasingly recognize and attempt to reduce, replacing it with active accompaniment, meaningful activities, and more equal communication between parent and child.

Field Notes and Supporting FGD Data

Beyond the verbatim transcripts summarized above, the FGD analysis document also incorporated field notes recorded by the research team during both sessions, capturing discussion dynamics, gestures, tone of voice, and moments of emotional agreement among parents that a transcript alone does not preserve. All 16 participants took part, 8 in the toddler group and 8 in the preschool group, with each group working through the same three topic sessions described in the Methods (tantrum experiences and soothing strategies; the role of gadgets/screens and substitute activities; and feeding practices and family dynamics), each lasting approximately 10-15 minutes. Within every topic session, discussion followed a consistent two-step format: one participant was first invited to act as a representative, briefly sharing her own experience and initial response to the topic on behalf of the group, after which the floor was opened for the remaining participants to exchange opinions, affirm, qualify, or add to what the representative had shared.

In the toddler group, field notes recorded a discussion tone that grew visibly animated whenever the topic turned to feeding-related gadget use: several participants nodded emphatically and voiced audible agreement ("iya, sama" / "yes, same here") as the session's representative described giving a phone to end a mealtime refusal, and a few exchanged knowing glances and soft laughter, suggesting shared relief at not being alone in the practice. A more subdued, lower-toned register emerged during the family-dynamics topic, particularly when participants touched on disagreements with grandparents over gadget rules; several caregivers lowered their voices and paused briefly before responding, consistent with the sensitivity of raising intergenerational conflict in front of the group.

In the preschool group, field notes described a comparatively more confident and reflective tone throughout, with

participants frequently building directly on one another's answers rather than waiting for a formal turn. The egalitarian-communication topic drew visible emotional agreement, with several participants smiling and nodding as the representative described nightly conversations with her child, and others volunteering similar routines of their own unprompted. The gadget-dependence topic, however, produced a brief dip in energy and softer-spoken responses, particularly from participants who acknowledged handing back a phone out of fatigue, suggesting some discomfort in admitting this practice even within an otherwise open and talkative group. Taken together, these field notes reinforce the credibility of the verbatim findings above: the nonverbal agreement observed around shared struggles, and the hesitation observed around admissions of gadget dependence, corroborate the FGD transcripts rather than introducing any new, unreported pattern.

4. DISCUSSION

Comparison with Existing Literature

The developmental contrast identified in Theme 1, externally regulated soothing among toddlers versus more self-directed coping among preschoolers, aligns closely with Erikson's psychosocial framework, in which toddlers are still negotiating autonomy versus shame and doubt and therefore depend on caregiver-provided external regulation. In contrast, preschoolers enter the initiative-versus-guilt stage that invites more self-directed emotional action (Rorije et al., 2023). It also mirrors the family-systems view that emotion regulation is a coregulated, whole-family process rather than a fixed individual trait, in which caregivers gradually withdraw external scaffolding as the child's own regulatory capacity matures (Paley & Hajal, 2022). Because self-regulation established during precisely this toddler-to-preschool window predicts mental health, behavior, and addiction-related outcomes decades later (Robson et al., 2020), the pace and completeness of this externally-to-self-regulated shift is not merely a developmental curiosity but a plausible early marker of later addiction risk or resilience.

The pattern of gadget use documented in Theme 2 corroborates a substantial body of Western research on "media emotion regulation" and recent pediatric-nursing evidence on technology addiction in young children. Hiniker et al. (2016) similarly found that families routinely used screens to end tantrums, often at the

cost of recurring conflict once the screen was removed, while Coyne et al. (2021) demonstrated that children with more difficult temperaments were especially likely to be soothed with media, which in turn predicted greater problematic media use over time. This mirrors more recent findings that digital parenting behaviors and screen-based soothing are directly associated with measurable technology-addiction risk in children as young as 24-36 months (Çetinkaya et al., 2026) and that low parental digital awareness is a key modifiable risk factor for children's digital-game addiction (Yilmaz Kurt et al., 2025). The present study extends this literature by showing that the parental dilemma around gadget dependence becomes more consciously articulated at preschool age than at toddler age; parents in the preschool group explicitly described "losing" to the child's demands and reaching for a device, language that echoes Coyne et al. (2023) finding that habitual media-based soothing is associated with reduced emotional knowledge and empathy over a one-year follow-up. This convergence suggests that the awareness gap identified in this study, parents recognizing the risk of gadget dependence but still using it under fatigue, is not unique to the Indonesian context but reflects a broader, cross-cultural tension between short-term relief and long-term addiction-related developmental cost. It is consistent with Indonesian qualitative evidence that internet and screen addiction is emerging as an early-childhood concern that current family-based interventions have only begun to address (Theopilus et al., 2024).

Theme 3's finding that meaningful-activity substitution broadens from parent-led literacy routines at toddler age to real, peer-based outdoor play at preschool age is consistent with evidence that unstructured outdoor and body-oriented play meaningfully strengthens preschoolers' social-emotional competence, including self-regulation and relationship skills (Li et al., 2023; Veiga et al., 2023). Notably, the toddler-group substitutes described by parents, bedtime storytelling, verbal recounting of the day's events, are themselves everyday enactments of wulang wuruk, the oral and literary teaching-and-guidance practice documented in classical Javanese pedagogical texts (Purwadi, 2026; Santosa et al., 2026; Hermawan et al., 2024), even though participants did not use that term explicitly; this suggests that Indonesian families already possess indigenous, locally meaningful substitute activities that a

formal parenting model can recognize, name, and reinforce rather than needing to import wholesale from outside the culture (Rachmawati, 2020). Taken together with the present findings, this suggests that "replacing screen time" is not merely a matter of subtraction but requires parents to actively construct a substitute activity appropriate to the child's developmental stage: verbal and literacy-based for toddlers, socially and physically engaging for preschoolers.

The nutrition-related findings in Theme 4 resonate with international evidence on responsive feeding. Parental anxiety over a toddler's weight and food refusal (GTM) in this study mirrors the counterproductive feeding practices, pressure, bribery, and heightened surveillance that have been documented among parents of fussy-eating toddlers seeking informal support online (Fraser et al., 2021) and among low-income caregivers more broadly (Killion et al., 2024). The shift toward a more autonomous, hunger-cue-trusting approach at preschool age observed in this study is precisely the kind of responsive-feeding orientation that nutrition and feeding interventions aim to cultivate earlier in toddlerhood (Mobley et al., 2023), suggesting that Indonesian families may be arriving at responsive feeding intuitively, but later than would be developmentally optimal. This pattern also parallels Indonesian qualitative findings that parenting patterns and feeding routines shift as children age and as parents accumulate caregiving experience (Azzahra et al., 2024).

Finally, Theme 5's account of intergenerational conflict over gadget rules, followed by a preschool-age shift toward parent-child dialogic equality, adds a culturally specific dimension largely absent from the Western media-parenting literature reviewed above, which largely centers on the parent-child dyad without accounting for co-resident grandparents. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on generational differences in attitudes toward children's technology use, which shows that grandparents and parents often diverge in how permissively they treat young children's screen exposure, creating a recurring source of family friction that must be actively negotiated rather than assumed away (Kobayashi et al., 2019). It also echoes Indonesian qualitative evidence that parents combine restrictive, supervisory, and dialogic mediation strategies to manage children's device use, with the specific mix shifting as children mature and become more able to understand and negotiate rules

(Purboningsih et al., 2025). It is broadly consistent with cross-national reviews showing that parenting strategies in digital environments are highly context-dependent and evolve alongside the child's developmental stage rather than following a single universal script (Banić & Orehovački, 2024). The toddler-group finding that gadget use was entwined with feeding routines also parallels Indonesian evidence linking early, high-intensity gadget exposure in toddlerhood to broader developmental concerns, such as delayed speech and language development, which underscores why parents' attempts to renegotiate the gadget's role as children approach the preschool years carry real developmental stakes rather than being merely a matter of household convenience (Asgaf et al., 2024). Read as a whole, this theme is precisely where the communal, praja dimension of the proposed local-wisdom model is most needed: without deliberately including grandparents and other co-caregivers, family-level self-regulation coaching risks being undone the moment the child leaves the parents' direct supervision.

This study's urban Jember sample—recruited from a structured playdate group and dominated by degree-holding caregivers—primarily reflects educated, resource-rich Indonesian households. While early childhood smartphone adoption is high nationwide, urban areas lead rural areas (43.04% vs. 41.12%), with stark disparities in digital literacy, parental mediation, and structured indoor alternatives (GoodStats, 2025; Rasmani et al., 2026; Sisbintari & Setiawati, 2022). In rural Java, intergenerational gadget conflict likely manifests differently: parental labor migration frequently leaves more permissive grandparents as primary caregivers for "left-behind children," amid distinct digital infrastructure and deep-seated cultural norms like hormat (Chand & Somaiah, 2023; Khoirunnisa, 2026; Rasmani et al., 2026). Framing these contextual differences as a key boundary condition rather than an insurmountable limitation, we advise future needs assessments to replicate this design in rural and lower-resource settings to ensure upcoming family-nursing interventions serve both realities.

New Knowledge Contributed by This Study

This study contributes a comparative, developmentally staged account of tantrum management that is largely absent from the existing literature, which tends to treat "early childhood" screen-based soothing as a single, undifferentiated phenomenon. By

explicitly contrasting toddler- and preschool-age caregiving strategies within the same study and the same cultural setting, the findings show that the "gadget as remote control" metaphor evoked in the study's title is not a static description but a developmental trajectory: the gadget's role visibly narrows as children move from toddlerhood into the preschool years, being replaced by active parental accompaniment, structured meaningful activity, autonomous eating cues, and more egalitarian family communication. The study also surfaces the previously underexamined role of intergenerational caregiving conflict as a structural barrier to consistent screen-time management in extended-family households, a dynamic that Western dyadic parent-child models of media emotion regulation do not capture. Together, these findings suggest that digital-parenting theory and intervention should be reframed developmentally and structured around the whole-family caregiving system rather than the parent-child dyad or a single, age-undifferentiated set of screen-time rules.

Toward a Wulang Wuruking Praja Model for an Addiction-Free Generation Alpha

It is important to note at the outset of this section that the FGD guide used in this needs-assessment phase did not directly ask participants about local wisdom or wulang wuruk practices; the connections drawn below are therefore the authors' interpretive mapping of generic, developmentally staged parenting findings onto the Wulang Wuruking Praja framework. They are intended to guide and to be tested by the next, more culturally focused phase of this research program, rather than to report a finding that participating families already consciously practice wulang wuruk. Positioned within the broader "Toward an Addiction-Free Generation Alpha" research program, these findings do more than describe current practice; they identify precisely where a Wulang Wuruking Praja-based local-wisdom parenting model could be usefully developed and tested. The gadget's persistent role as a feeding aid in toddlerhood and as a still-used "instant soother" in the preschool years (Themes 1-2) marks the specific developmental window in which self-regulation remains most externally dependent and therefore most malleable, consistent with evidence that self-regulation skills are most responsive to instruction and practice in the early years and that early strengthening of these skills is protective against later addiction and other

adverse outcomes (Robson et al., 2020). The parent-led storytelling, verbal routines, and real-play substitutes families already use (Theme 3) suggest that the raw material for wulang wuruk-style guidance is not absent from Indonesian family life; it has not yet been named, systematized, or deliberately positioned as an alternative to the gadget. Meanwhile, the intergenerational conflict documented in Theme 5 shows why any future model must operate at the level of the praja, the whole family and community system, rather than coaching parents alone. Read together, the five themes function as an empirical needs assessment: they show what a Wulang Wuruking Praja-based intervention must reinforce (storytelling, real play, responsive feeding, egalitarian dialogue), what it must directly address (gadget-dependent soothing and feeding), and who it must involve (grandparents and other co-caregivers, not only parents) if it is to be developed, in a subsequent culturally focused phase, into an intervention that meaningfully strengthens self-regulation and moves Generation Alpha toward an addiction-free trajectory.

Implications

These findings carry conceptual implications for how emotion regulation, digital parenting, and addiction prevention are theorized in early childhood. The developmental gradient in gadget-based soothing and its substitutes supports family-coregulation models that treat emotion regulation as an evolving, scaffolded process (Paley & Hajal, 2022), and extends Erikson's psychosocial framework by showing how the shift from autonomy-versus-shame-and-doubt to initiative-versus-guilt is enacted through everyday tantrum-management choices. Linking these choices to the established relationship between early self-regulation and later addiction risk (Robson et al., 2020), the study frames early tantrum management as an upstream addiction-prevention target and an empirical starting point for a Wulang Wuruking Praja-based parenting model to be tested in a larger, more diverse sample.

For nursing and other child-health practice, counseling should be staged by developmental phase: toddler-family coaching should emphasize direct accompaniment and emotion-naming, while preschool-family coaching should build on the child's initiative through negotiated screen-use agreements and dialogic communication. During home visits and community health profiling, nurses can use these age-stratified indicators to screen for

gadget-dependent soothing and intergenerational conflict. The Wulang Wuruking Praja concept should be formalized as a nursing health-promotion intervention and a family nursing care plan built around storytelling and shared activities. Given that intergenerational gadget conflict presents a unique barrier, direct challenges by young nurses could violate local norms of sopan santun and hormat. We therefore refine our recommendation: rather than hosting potentially confrontational family conferences, nurses should leverage trusted, existing community platforms such as Posyandu, PKK cadre meetings, or arisan gatherings to build a collective, culturally respectful consensus on screen-time guidance among grandparents and co-caregivers.

Limitations

This study also has several limitations. The qualitative, non-probability sample used purposive sampling (N=16: 8 caregivers of toddlers and 8 of preschoolers), limiting statistical generalizability beyond the study community. Group-discussion data may reflect social desirability bias or the dominance of more vocal participants, and the FGD guide did not directly probe local-wisdom practices. Hence, links to the Wulang Wuruking Praja concept reflect the authors' interpretation rather than participants' own framing, a point we now make explicit at the start of the corresponding Discussion subsection rather than only here. The cross-sectional, between-group comparison means the developmental "trajectory" is inferred rather than observed within the same families over time. In addition, because the toddler-group FGD was held in a room close to children who still required active supervision, caregivers' attention may have been divided during the discussion; this plausibly yielded shorter or less reflective responses in that group relative to the preschool group, and should be addressed in future studies through fully separated childcare arrangements during data collection. Participants were also drawn from a single community group, the NufamKids playdate in Jember, which is an urban/peri-urban, relatively well-educated setting, so findings may not fully transfer to caregivers in more remote, lower-resource, or rural community settings, where digital access, family structure, and intergenerational dynamics may differ substantially; future studies should recruit

across more diverse community and rural sites.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that tantrum-management strategies follow a developmental continuum: toddler-age regulation remains dependent on external, gadget-assisted soothing, while preschool-age families move toward child-initiated coping, negotiated screen use, real play, and more egalitarian communication, alongside reduced intergenerational conflict. Effective support cannot be a single, one-size-fits-all script; it must be tailored to the developmental stage and engage the whole family caregiving system, including grandparents. As the formative phase of the "Toward an Addiction-Free Generation Alpha" program, these findings identify concrete developmental targets, storytelling and verbal routines, real play, responsive feeding, and egalitarian dialogue and family-level negotiation that a future Wulang Wuruking Praja-based, local-wisdom parenting model could build on and test in its next, more culturally focused phase. Because the present FGDs did not directly probe local-wisdom practices, this connection remains an interpretive proposal to be evaluated going forward, rather than empirical groundwork for a specific model that has already been established.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank all participating caregivers and the NufamKids playdate community in Jember, Indonesia, for their time and participation in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SN conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, performed data analysis, and wrote the original manuscript; **LNF** and **ERE** contributed to data curation, investigation, and manuscript editing; **R** provided overall supervision; and **HP** validated the final results and manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

This research was funded by the PDP (Penelitian Dosen Pemula) grant from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology (Bima Kemdiktisaintek).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study, including anonymized FGD transcripts, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to restrictions protecting participant confidentiality.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly to assist with language and grammar editing. The authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the manuscript

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