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## Research Article

# Family Socioeconomic Status and Social-emotional Development among Young Children in Malaysia

<sup>1</sup>Suziyani Mohamed and <sup>2</sup>Hasnah Toran

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Ministry of Education Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

## Abstract

**Background and Objective:** The impact of family socioeconomic status on children social-emotional development often debated. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the influence of family socioeconomic status on the children social-emotional development. **Materials and Methods:** Three constructs of socioeconomic status of the families were analyzed in this research, parent's level of education, parent's occupation and parent's monthly income. About 237 children age 42-54 months have been involved in the study. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric analysis of Kruskal-Wallis test. **Results:** The analysis found that there is a significant difference between the level of social-emotional development of children with parents' education level, parents' income and parents' occupation. However, the analysis of the level of social-emotional development of children with father's occupation found no significant differences. Analysis of the effect size of the Epsilon-Squared found that a strong relationship between the level of social-emotional development of children with mother's education level, mother's occupation and father's income, an average relationship to the father's education level and poor relationship to the father's occupation. **Conclusion:** The study altogether found that socioeconomic status of families play an important role in influencing the social-emotional development of children. The organizations involved in the early childhood education should take the proactive endeavor so that children with the low socioeconomic status to be given better service to foster their social-emotional development.

**Key words:** Socioeconomic, social-emotional, young children, poverty, preschool

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**Corresponding Author:** Suziyani Mohamed, Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

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**Competing Interest:** The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

**Data Availability:** All relevant data are within the paper and its supporting information files.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Poverty will not only cause strain to a family economy but it will also cause parents in constant stress and eventually hindering them from carrying out their responsibilities towards their children. This scenario caused children from this group is categorized as at risks children to be vulnerable to various development issues. Children growing up in poverty experience many disadvantages which leading to inequalities in health, cognitive and psychosocial development and education attainment compared to children from family with high socioeconomic status<sup>1</sup>.

There are numerous of researches proven that family socioeconomic status gave a significant impact towards children development wholly including social-emotional development<sup>2</sup>. Children raised within family with low socioeconomic status are classified as at risk children whose has higher risk to face with poor social-emotional skills compared to children raised in family with high socioeconomic status<sup>3,4</sup>.

These children are found to have difficulties to focus, possessing personal capability and low social competency, having behavior issue, always displaying psychiatric disturbance symptoms and maladaptive behavior<sup>5</sup>. According to the data shared in United States, one out of five children (1:5) from low socioeconomic status was identified to experience social-emotional development issues<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile another research showed that 30% of children came from low socioeconomic status family is recognized to have behavior issues, compared to 3-6% of children from high socioeconomic status family<sup>7</sup>.

Lack of interaction between parents and children had been identified as one of the contributing factor to issue in social-emotional development among children from low socioeconomic family<sup>8</sup>. This is due to parents spending more time at work than spending quality time with children as well as unresponsive and lack of social support towards their children. In fact, research found out that there was a difference in the numbers of hours spent for significant conversation between the children and their parents based on the socioeconomic status of their family.

Children living in poverty are often unable to participate in social, leisure and celebratory activities and are often unable to keep up with the latest fashion trends in clothing and grooming, which can adversely affect their friendships, self-esteem and may result in them feeling ashamed, excluded and even stigmatized<sup>1,9,10</sup>. This differences in experience

causing a gap in communication between children with different socioeconomic status. The effect, these children will mingle with children they are comfortable with, which are communication and behavior as equal as theirs.

In short, children came from family with low socioeconomic possessed higher risks to experience issues with social-emotional development, afterwards to affect the quality of their life in the future. In United States, the government had introduced a Head Start program as a special support service for children from low socioeconomic status family. The main purpose of this program is to ensure children are ready to enter primary school. One of the main objective of this program is to ensure these children social-emotional development at a satisfactory level before they begin schooling. Study carried out on children at Head Start found that 55% of them possessing low social-emotional skills, 50% displaying aggressive behavior and 31% more recognized to have depression and stress<sup>11</sup>.

In Malaysia, awareness of the importance of ensuring that children possessed a good social-emotional skill at early age (below 5 years old) are still under-emphasized. On the contrary, more attention is focused to the mastery of reading, writing and counting skills before they entered primary school. The absence of data about children social-emotional development in Malaysia have encouraged researchers to carry out a research about it. For this purpose, researchers adapted social-emotional screening instrument named Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional (ASQ: SE), specifically to find out does the family socioeconomic of status influence children social-emotional development.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study was a survey research and data collected was a quantitative data using questionnaire. Stratified sampling technique was used in sample selection to ensure there was a characteristic balance in the sample chosen. This sampling technique was chosen to ensure number of research samples were sufficient to represent the characteristic that has been determined. For this study, race factor is chosen as a characteristic for sampling selection. The main purpose of electing race factor was to ensure that the samples consist of multiracial and not only limited to Malay only. For this purpose, Malaysians' demographic statistic distributed by Department of Statistic Malaysia for 2010 was referred to. Statistic showed that the composition of Malaysians citizen consists of 67.4% Malay, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indian and 0.7% others.

**Instruments:** There were two instruments used in this research namely Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social-Emotional (Malaysia) [ASQ:SE(M)] and Demographic Survey Form. ASQ:SE is a children social-emotional screening instrument developed by Centre on Human Development in University of Oregon. ASQ:SE have undergone cross-cultural adaptation for the usage in Malaysia and known as ASQ:SE (M). The main purpose of ASQ:SE was to identify children with social-emotional development problem, that enabling them to go for a detailed assessment.

There are about 36 items used in measuring children social-emotional development in ASQ:SE. Whereby, it is constructed of six main construct which are, self-control, obedience, communication, adaptation, autonomy and affective. Psychometric and clinical epidemiology tests are also carried out to ensure that the adaptation of ASQ:SE can be practiced in this country. Psychometric test carried out found that Cronbach Alpha value for ASQ:SE (M) internal consistency is 0.80 and reliability of item is 0.98. Whilst clinical epidemiology test found that sensitivity value of ASQ:SE (M) is 72.2% and specificity is 94.9%.

Second instrument is Demographic Survey Form. Demographic survey form is important to identify respondents' background such as gender, age, family socioeconomic status and others. With this, environmental factors able to influence and contribute to children development can be studied. Demographic survey form consist of six questions and answer choice are provided for each question. Questions in the Guardian's demographic survey form are age, race, current address, highest academic achievements, working sectors and salary.

**Data collection and analyzed:** Survey form has been distributed randomly at childcare centers around Malaysia. The choosing of childcare center in each state is done randomly based on the accessibility and cooperation given by the childcare center management. Parental involvement in this research is voluntarily. A total of 237 children aged between 42-54 months old involved in this research.

Data gathered are then analyzed using IBM statistic. Descriptive and inference statistic analysis is used to answer research questions set at the early stage of research. The mean comparison for ASQ:SE(M) score and Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test had been conducted to study whether there was a significant difference between the children's level of social-emotional development and the socio-economic status of the family. This non-parametric test was used

because the numbers of sample for each category were not eligible for the parametric analysis in which the number of sample must be  $\geq 30$ . Therefore, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used because it was equivalent to the one-way ANOVA parametric test<sup>12</sup>.

## RESULTS

**Children demographic information:** A total of 237 children aged between 42-54 months old involved in this research. From that total, 59.50% of the respondents are male children and 40.50% of respondents are female children. For race factor, a total of 59.90% of the respondents are Malay, 31.60% are Chinese, 5.10% of the respondents are Indians and 3.40% of the respondents are other race. Based on the data acquired, it is found that data collected are under representation for Malay, Indian and others and over representation of Chinese. However, this value is still accepted as the percentage difference was not obvious.

**Parents demographic information:** The data in Table 1 showed demographic information of parents who have completed ASQ:SE(M). There are four items in the parental demographic form which are age, highest education level, occupation category and monthly income. Based on Table 1, it was found that parents aged between 31-40 years old were the ones who involved the most in the study with a percentage of 60.30% for respondents who are mothers and 64.10% for respondents who are fathers. As for the highest education level, 29.50% of respondents who were mother and 30.80% of respondents who were fathers were Bachelor Degree. The third item was the category of occupation, in which, 31.60% of respondents who were mother were unemployed and 34.20% of the respondents were employed in non-professional field. The last item was the monthly income. A descriptive analysis conducted showed that 33.30% of the respondents who were mother did not have monthly income and 33.80% of respondents who were father had monthly income between RM2001-RM4000.

**Comparison of children's social-emotional development according to family socioeconomic status:** The mean comparison for ASQ:SE(M) score and Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test had been conducted to study whether there was a significant difference between the children's level of social-emotional development and the socioeconomic status of the family. The analysis result of Kruskal-Wallis test

Table 1: Parents demographic information

Items	Mother		Father	
	n	f (%)	n	f (%)
<b>Age</b>				
20-30 years old	63	26.60	32	13.50
31-40 years old	143	60.30	152	64.10
41-50 years old	30	12.70	43	18.10
50 years old and above	1	0.40	10	4.20
<b>Highest education level</b>	10	4.20	9	3.80
Ph.D	38	16.00	35	14.80
Master Degree	60	25.30	42	17.70
Bachelor Degree	70	29.50	73	30.80
Diploma/Certificate	46	19.40	58	24.50
SPM	13	5.50	20	8.40
UPSR/unschooled	-	-	-	-
<b>Category of occupation</b>				
Professional	63	26.60	72	30.40
Semi professional	39	16.50	63	26.60
Non-professional	44	18.60	81	34.20
Unemployed	75	31.60	3	1.30
Others	16	6.80	18	7.60
<b>Monthly income</b>				
Below RM1000	33	13.90	50	21.10
RM1001-RM2000	46	19.40	66	27.80
RM2001-RM4000	62	26.20	80	33.80
RM4001 and above	17	7.20	41	17.30
No income	79	33.30	-	-

Table 2: Comparison between ASQ:SE(M) average score and parents' level of education

ASQ:SE(M) average score	Highest education level						Kruskal-Wallis (p) test	Epsilon- squared values
	Ph.D	Master Degree	Bachelor Degree	Diploma/ Certificate	SPM	UPSR/ unschooled		
Mother	43	49	62	72	81	85	0.000*	0.152
Father	52	48	68	68	72	89	0.005*	0.063

\*significant at  $p < 0.05$

found out that there was a significant difference between the children's social-emotional development and the socioeconomic status of the family ( $p < 0.05$ ) except for the category of father's occupation with the value of  $p > 0.05$ .

The comparison between children's ASQ:SE(M) average score and parents' level of education showed in Table 2. For the mothers' highest education level, the PhD group recorded the lowest average score, which was 43 and the group of mothers with UPSR/unschooled recorded the highest average score, which were 85. Meanwhile, for the fathers' highest education level, the group of fathers with Master Degree showed the lowest average score which was 48 and the group of fathers with UPSR/unschooled still showed the highest education level which was 89. The difference in the level of social-emotional development according to the mothers' and fathers' highest education level was significant.

As for the mothers' occupation category, the professional group recorded the lowest average score which was 51 and the non-professional group recorded the highest average

score which was 76. Meanwhile, for the fathers' occupation category, the professional group showed the lowest average score which was 57 and the semi-professional group showed the highest average score which was 73. The difference in the level of social-emotional development according to the mothers' occupation category is significant, there was not significant for fathers' occupation category shown in Table 3.

For the mothers' monthly income, the group of mothers with the income of RM4001 and above recorded the lowest average score which was 49 and the group of mothers without income recorded the highest average score which was 76. Meanwhile, for the fathers' monthly income, the group of fathers with the income of RM4001 and above showed the lowest average score which was 55 and the group of fathers with the income of RM1000 and below showed the highest average score which was 86. The difference in the level of social-emotional development according to the mothers' and fathers' monthly income was significant as presented in Table 4.

Table 3: Comparison between ASQ:SE(M) average score and parents' occupation category

ASQ:SE(M) average score	Category of occupation					Kruskal-Wallis (p) test	Epsilon- squared values
	Professional	Semi professional	Non-professional	Unemployed	Others		
Mother	51	65	76	75	75	0.000*	0.111
Father	57	73	70	58	71	0.091	0.034

\*significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 4: Comparison between ASQ:SE(M) average score and the parents' monthly income

ASQ:SE(M) average score	Monthly income					Kruskal-Wallis (p) test	Epsilon- squared values
	\$4001 and above	\$2001 to \$4000	\$1001 to \$2000	Below \$1000	No income		
Mother	79	58	68	71	76	0.000*	0.090
Father	55	61	66	86	-	0.000*	0.103

## DISCUSSION

The Kruskal-Wallis test showed that there was a significant difference between the children's level of social-emotional development and the parents' education level, the parents monthly income and the mothers' occupation category, in which the value was  $p < 0.05$ . However, the analysis result between the level of social-emotional development and the fathers' occupation category showed no significant difference as the value was  $p > 0.05$ . The effect size test of Epsilon-squared found a strong relationship between the children's level of social-emotional development and the mothers' highest education level, the mothers' occupation category and the fathers' monthly income. Meanwhile, the effect size analysis for the other groups showed a medium relationship between the children's level of social-emotional development and the fathers' highest education level and the mothers' monthly income as well as a weak relationship for the fathers' occupation category.

Based on the analysis findings obtained, it could be concluded that the socioeconomic status of the family plays an important role in affecting the children's social-emotional development. Researchers thought that the parents' highest education level was the main key that would determine the socioeconomic status of the family whether it is low or high<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, the parents with a high education level usually have high monthly income and they work in a more prestigious occupation category.

Studies showed that the parents' education level definitely have a significant impact ( $p = 0.032$ ) towards the children's social-emotional development<sup>14</sup>. However, another study stated that the mothers' education level only would give a direct effect towards the children's social-emotional development since they are the individuals who spend the most time with the children<sup>15</sup>. The mothers with high education level were found to get involved frequently in the matters relating to their children's education<sup>16</sup>. The mothers

from this group were reported as being capable in providing positive environment while raising their children, giving support and they were always ready to help their children in all aspects. The moral values shown by these mothers will help the children in developing positive self-regulation and thus, it will also help them to succeed in the academic field.

Study reported that the parents from different socioeconomic status tend to practice different parenting style<sup>4</sup>. These researchers also added that the parenting style would give an impact to the children's social-emotional development. An authoritative parenting style and an autocratic parenting style were two parenting styles that were often practiced by the parents in raising children<sup>17,18</sup>. The parents with high education level tend to practice the authoritative parenting style, while those with low education level were more likely to practice the autocratic parenting style.

The parents who practiced the authoritative parenting style were likely to show a responsive attitude, friendly, conduct development-appropriate practices and give children chances to make their own decision. Due to the practice of the authoritative parenting style, a secure attachment between the parents' and children was developed, which then led to the formation and development of a positive social-emotional development<sup>15</sup>.

Meanwhile, the parents who practiced the autocratic parenting style were classified as parents who always had a high expectation and not responsive. The parents from this group were more likely to use punishment approach in raising children. Due to this autocratic parenting style, there was no secure attachment between the parents and the children which then gave a negative effect to the formation and development of the children's social-emotional development.

Besides that, the children from different socioeconomic background were found to go through different daily experience throughout their growth period. The different daily experience that they went through would affect the children's

social-emotional development<sup>19,20</sup>. It would not only create a notable difference in social-emotional development but worse, it contributed to a communication gap between the children from these two worlds<sup>21</sup>. This communication gap will then cause them to mingle around with friends from the same socioeconomic status only.

Based on the research findings, the parties involved in providing the early childhood education service must plan activities and learning programmes that can nurture the children's social-emotional development to an optimal level just like the Head Start Program that has been carried out in the United States. This was to ensure that the social-emotional development problems faced by children will not continue to grow and give a negative effect towards their academic achievement and life quality. This recommendation is in line with the suggestion proposed by early childhood education experts who suggested that the children should be exposed to a good personality formation through a structured and comprehensive program<sup>21-23</sup>. On top of that, this research findings can be made as reference by the parties concerned in framing training programmes for the early childhood education teachers so that they will be more confident and competent in handling issues relating to the social-emotional development among their students.

### **CONCLUSION**

The socioeconomic status of the family plays an important role in affecting the children's social-emotional development. Besides that, families with low socioeconomic status are found to be more likely to face social problems as well as unstable financial and economic problems. A good social-emotional skill will help the children to feel more confident and competent in building relationship, forming friendship, solving problems, strong and resilient in facing problems, able to control their anger and disappointment as well as know how to control their emotion. Children who are able to build positive relationship with individuals around them are found to be more motivated to learn and it is easier for them to accept the learning and succeed in the academic field.

### **SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT**

This study discovered that the parents' education level, the parents' monthly income and the mothers' occupation category have a significant impact on children social-emotional development. This findings can be beneficial to early childhood education services provider. They can use this findings in design a good early childhood program and start

to focus on nurturing young children social-emotional development compared to academic achievement. This study will help the researcher to uncover the critical issues between children social-emotional development and family socioeconomic status in Malaysia that many researchers were not able to explore.

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