

## Research Article

# Communication Between Mothers and Children with Mental Disorders

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## Abstract.

Parental communication affects children's mental health. This research aimed to understand communication between working parents and children with mental disorders. This research focused on two issues: the effectiveness of parents' communication and parents' communication patterns. This was a qualitative study. Researchers interviewed five mothers. The criteria for selecting the participants were based on the number of working hours being over 42 hours per week, children aged 5-18 years, children showing symptoms of mental illness according to the SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), and having children who lived in cities. Macassar. All five informants were women who worked as government employees, traders, bank employees, and private employees. The interview was semi-structured. Thematic analysis was used to analyze participants' answers. The results showed that parents experienced the two cases of communication that were initially identified in this study, implementing effective communication and implementing communication patterns in their families. This study recommends further research to be conducted in other cities and with a more diverse sample as a comparison.

**Keywords:** Communication Effectiveness; Communication Patterns; Mental Health

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## 1. Introduction

Mental health is one aspect that is important in achieving overall health. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that mental and physical health are equally important (World Health Organization, 2013). Mental health can be considered conscious of individual well-being, which means that individuals can manage stress through self-awareness to remain productive in life and become individuals who contribute to the environment (Muslic et al., 2021).

Based on data from WHO, there are currently around 450 million people who experience mental disorders. Furthermore, it is said that Indonesia is the country with the highest number of people experiencing mental disorders in Southeast Asia (World Health Organization, 2019). Basic Health Research data (Tim Riskesdas, 2018) reveals that the number of cases of mental disorders with symptoms of anxiety and depression

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at the age of 15 years and over is around 6.1% of the total population of Indonesia or the equivalent of 11 million people.

Mental illness can cause devastating personal, social and economic impacts on individuals, families and communities (Gadermann et al., 2012; Levinson et al., 2010). One in five adolescents is considered to have a mental illness that will last into adulthood (Kessler et al., 2005). Mental illness that appears before adulthood costs ten times higher than that which appears later in life (Knapp & Evers, 2011). Mental health costs are the highest source of global economic burden in the world (Stewart & Wild, 2014).

In addition to professional assistance, coping with mental illness requires the support of family and friends (Waldmann et al., 2020). A stable and supportive family environment can contribute to adolescents' psychosocial and mental health problems (Repetti et al., 2002). Research has found that authoritative parenting styles and open and respectful communication between family members that involve adolescents rationally contribute to social competence and reduce the likelihood of mental health problems and risky behaviour (Baumrind, 1991). Open family interactions provide teaching opportunities for parents to shape positive coping and health behaviours, allow adolescents to express concerns and feel valued, and are conducive to adolescent mental health (Repetti et al., 2002).

Interaction within the family can be influenced by parents' availability of time. But nowadays, many parents are working and even going through working hours. This causes the interaction between parents and their children to be limited (Saraswati, 2008). In urban areas, one of the causes that require both parents to work outside the home is economic factors, education, career, and others. Another study revealed that in urban areas, only 2% of mothers work for leisure and 98% work due to economic factors (Ananda, 2013).

Parents' working conditions may influence the effectiveness of communication with children even though parents play an important role in establishing communication with children to prevent children from being exposed to mental health problems. Every parent has their pattern and style in carrying out their duties to educate their children (Susilowati, 2012). In terms of communication, every family also has several communication patterns that they consider to achieve effective communication. However, research like this is still very rare, so the picture of the effectiveness of working parents' communication in maintaining the mental health of their children is still being determined.

## 2. Method

This study uses interactive qualitative research to gather information and in-depth understanding regarding the effective communication of working parents in maintaining their children's mental health. Research data was obtained directly from research subjects through interviews.

The research subjects were working parents, totaling five people. These five people are parents (husband/wife) who meet the criteria. Selection of criteria is based on: (1) parents of wife/husband or single parent of wife/husband who work in Makassar City with working hours that exceed working hours stipulated in UU No1 Tahun 1951 (Law No. 1 of 1951), namely 42 working hours in one week, (2) parents of wives/husbands or single parents of wives/husbands who have children aged 5-18 years, (3) parents of wives/husbands or single parents of wives/husbands who have children with characteristics showing symptoms of mental unhealthy according to SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), and (4) husbands/fathers, wives/mothers who have children who live in Makassar City.

The semi-structured interview technique was applied in this study. Semi-structured interviews are used because there is some understanding of the themes or problems being studied, so more information is needed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Informants were first asked for their willingness to be interviewed. The informants were also asked about their children's willingness to be given the SDQ questionnaire for selection. The informants were interviewed directly. The interview session for each informant lasted approximately 60 minutes. Each informant received the same questions.

Thematic analysis was used in this study to explore participants' responses. Thematic analysis is most common in qualitative studies to elicit interviewee responses (Lochmiller, 2021). The researcher recorded the results of the interviews and analyzed them thematically. The informants' response transcripts were coded in nodes. Nodes are the basic unit of the transcript data structure. Themes are significantly important in the data-based research questions representing patterned response levels or meanings in the data set, while sub-themes give structure to the broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This study identified two items: i) communication effectiveness and ii) communication pattern

### 3. Results

This study explores information related to the effectiveness and communication patterns of five mothers who work in Makassar City and have children who show symptoms of mental disorders based on screening using the SDQ. In general, the results of this study indicate that although they only have a little time for their children, working parents maximize their time and available media such as handphones.

Informant 1, in his interview, revealed that:

*“Mereka kadang cerita pada saat makan malam, atau kalau pulang sekolah pas dijemput mereka pasti langsung cerita. Biasanya cerita tentang sekolahnya” (wawancara, informan 1).*

The results of this interview show that parents maximize the free time they have to establish communication with their children at dinner or other moments when they are with them, such as when picking up children after school.

#### 3.1. Effectiveness of Parent-Child Communication

##### 3.1.1. Openness

In the context of communication effectiveness, the communication process of the five informants contained openness to children, empathy, support, and positive attitude. When their children ask to buy something they don't need, they try to open up the financial problems in their family. This was disclosed by informant 4:

*“I told her “Ainun, we have to save money. I'm the only one looking for money, and I'm going to retire soon, so we have to be smart about saving from now on” (interview, informant 4).*

Informant 4's condition as a single parent requires her and her child to minimize expenses further. Meanwhile, her child, who is still 11 years old, always wants to buy what she wants.

##### 3.1.2. Empathy

### 3.2. The results of the study also show that parents tend to have empathy for their children, which is shown in the communication that occurs between them

*"It depends, because sometimes we have to understand. For example, when children are doing something but we forbid it, we also have to understand and not always force it so that the children are not disappointed either. Unless there is an urgent situation such as something spilled, the main thing is that it must be cleaned up immediately" (interview, informant 1).*

Understanding the child's condition before doing something is something called parental empathy. Informant 1 places himself if he is his child, so he understands that when asking a child for help, he must first see if there is no other work his child is doing. It is different from the empathy shown by informant 3 to their child. He felt sorry for his child, who had many activities at school from morning to evening, so he gave his child the freedom to play with his cell phone while at home. As said in his interview:

*"When I come home from school, my child is enthusiastic about telling what he experienced at school. But if it's after maghrib, my child will hold the cell phone until he sleeps. He might heal himself because I feel sorry to see him tired from morning to evening at school" (interview, informant 3).*

#### 3.2.1. Positiveness

Positiveness was also shown by all informants, who showed various attitudes such as thinking positively of others, appreciating, giving praise and giving appreciation.

*"Yes, I often praise when my child gets good grades at school, I say, "That's great. Because you study hard, you get an A+, and if you don't study, you won't get good grades" (interview, informant 5).*

Informant 5 shows a positive attitude by praising children when children get achievements at school.

#### 3.2.2. Supportiveness

The next aspect explored in this research is supportiveness. However, researchers did not find any attitude of support or supportiveness. When their child makes a mistake, the parents don't ask first what happened and are immediately angry with the child. This

makes communication not go both ways, so effective communication is not created. When they wanted to send their children to the school of their choice, the informants also did not give their children the opportunity to choose. As informant five said:

*"I want him to become a tahfiz (a memoriser of the Al-Qur'an) because his school is a tahfiz school. That's why he is often encouraged by his father because he usually tells me that he eats a little there. All kinds of complaints are encouraged "just be patient, son, that's what it is, there's no easy study." (interview, informant 5).*

This incident also occurred with informant one who immediately pinched her child during an argument with his brother. She revealed in his interview:

*"I once wrongly accused anyone who made a mistake, then I pinched him. he was angry and crying. I said, "I'm sorry, son, I don't know". I used to hug him and ask, "does it hurt, son?" but if he were wrong, we would still punish him. We don't want to talk to him so he will regret his mistake." (interview, informant 1).*

Just because they don't listen to children when they are emotional, the informants don't hesitate to punish their children, which can result in psychological disturbances for children; children feel afraid and don't have the confidence to defend themselves; who are not wrong.

### 3.2.3. Equality

On the aspect of equality, the informants did not think that they were equal to their children. Informant 4 stated in his interview that his son often became a know-it-all.

*"I used to tell my children, "Son, if your parents tell you, just listen, because we have already gone through something like this" (interview, informant 4).*

The same thing was also expressed by informant 1 in his interview:

*"If I say something to a child, that means that's what has to be done" (interview, informant 1).*

#### **Communication Patterns of Parents and Children**

##### **Authoritarian Communication Patterns**

The pattern of communication with an authoritarian style in this study is mostly used by informants. Because they don't have enough time with their children, parents tend to set firm limits and don't give their children great opportunities to talk (communicate/deliberate). As the response of informant 1:

*“Oh, often. Suppose I used to hit the child first when he was three months old. My emotions were still unstable at that time and could not be controlled. I often hit my oldest son. But so far, no. maybe in the past I often hit my children because there were problems and the impact on my children” (interview, informant 1).*

Based on the interview above, the researchers found that the parents, in this case, the mother, have emotional dysregulation, which is a situation in which a person finds it difficult to regulate his emotions. He experiences problems outside the home and impacts the child.

### **Open Communication Patterns**

The pattern of parental treatment when interacting with their children by providing freedom to their children without strict control or supervision is a form of permissive parenting style. This is what informant 3 said:

*“On normal days, there are no rules because I am also relaxed about rules. In the past, the teacher’s rule was that he was only allowed to use his cell phone on holidays, so he realised it himself because his teacher said so. If I say it like that, he doesn’t hear” (interview, informant 3).*

This response is in line with some of the characteristics of permissive parents, namely, not demanding, granting all the child’s requests and needs, and being reluctant to apply rules to children.

## **4. Discussion**

Family communication is quite dependent on the availability of time for family members to communicate with each other. The limited time together is used by parents to make the best use of time with their children. Dinner is one of the moments parents use to communicate. This is in line with research by Elgar et al., (2013), who revealed a relationship between the frequency of family dinners and children’s mental health.

The effectiveness of family communication as a form of interpersonal communication, as stated by DeVito (2008), there are five positive attitudes that need to be considered when someone plans interpersonal communication, including communication within the family, including openness (openness), empathy, supportive attitude (supportiveness), positive attitude (positiveness), and equality. The facts show that the informants have done several things to create effective communication, but the informants still need to remember other things in communicating with children.

Research shows that although the informants fulfil the aspects of openness, empathy, and a positive attitude, the informants do not meet the aspects of being supportive and the aspects of equality. This shows that the communication that occurs between the informant and his child has not shown effective communication. Parents certainly intend to educate their children well, but the way they apply parenting in the family affects children's development (Jensen & McHale, 2017; Richmond et al., 2005), especially their mental health (Ng et al., 2020). However, openness and a supportive attitude from parents are also quite important for maintaining children's mental health (Kowal et al., 2002; Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021).

The results of the interviews found that the informants applied two communication patterns in their families, namely authoritarian and liberating communication patterns. Authoritarian communication patterns tend to lead children to have a uniform view with their parents. Meanwhile, liberating communication patterns are more likely to accept diverse opinions within the family (Koerner & Schrod, 2014). Children who live in families where they are more free in expressing opinions are shown to have higher self-esteem than families who are more authoritarian and have lower levels of depression (Hamon & Schrod, 2012). This is in line with this research which reveals the communication patterns applied by parents with children who are mentally unwell also use authoritarian communication patterns. The results of this study certainly provide a clear picture of recommendations for implementing appropriate communication patterns to maintain children's mental health.

## 5. Conclusion

The informants maximized their communication with children even though they had working hours above normal working hours. Even though they intend to build effective communication, in reality, they have not fulfilled the aspects of effective communication as a whole. The informants were quite open with children in communicating. They often convey family problems to children. The informants also apply aspects of empathy in communicating with children. Even though the informants wanted their children to do what they wanted, the parents still had a sense of fear for their children, especially in terms of the child's ability to carry out parental orders. In the aspect of positive attitudes, informants tend to provide positive reinforcement to children if their children get achievements. However, in the aspect of supportiveness or a supportive attitude,



the informants tend not to show support for the child's wishes in terms of ideals. The informants still want their children to be what the informants want them to be. Likewise in the aspect of equality, the informants clearly perceive children as unequal communication opponents. In addition to the problem of communication effectiveness, the problem of communication patterns was also pointed out by the informants. The informants applied an authoritarian communication pattern and some informants used a liberating communication pattern. The results of this study reveal the communication between parents and children who show symptoms of mental illness. Future research to explore other factors that can affect children's mental health.

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