

Building bonds: Key approaches in strengthening caregiver-child relationships in early learning



Sarah A. Alahmari^a | Moses Adeleke Adeoye^b 

^aKing Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia.

^bAl-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Abstract The early years of a child's life are marked by heightened sensitivity to relational experiences, making the caregiver-child relationship a critical determinant of emotional, social, and cognitive development. In early learning settings, these bonds influence a child's sense of security, readiness to learn, and overall well-being. Despite their importance, such relationships are often undervalued in pedagogical frameworks or compromised by systemic challenges such as caregiver stress, cultural disconnects, and inadequate training. This research seeks to explore and synthesise effective strategies for strengthening caregiver-child relationships in early childhood education, with particular emphasis on emotional responsiveness, cultural competence, and relational consistency. The research adopts a descriptive methodology grounded in secondary data analysis. Peer-reviewed literature, theoretical models, and policy documents published between 2010 and 2024 were systematically reviewed and thematically analysed to construct a comprehensive, evidence-informed framework for relational caregiving. Findings reveal five core relational strategies: responsive caregiving, predictable routines, emotional literacy and attunement, cultural competence and inclusion, and play-based communication. These strategies significantly enhance children's emotional regulation, language acquisition, identity formation, and social competence. However, their implementation is often hindered by structural barriers including high staff turnover, limited training, and socio-economic inequities. The research concludes that relational caregiving is foundational—not supplementary—to effective early childhood education. Its contribution lies in offering a holistic, practice-oriented framework that bridges theory with context-sensitive application. By centring the emotional and cultural dimensions of care, this research provides educators, policymakers, and caregivers with actionable insights to foster inclusive, emotionally safe, and developmentally enriching learning environments.

Keywords: caregiver-child relationship, responsive caregiving, emotional literacy, cultural competence, early childhood education

1. Introduction

The early years of a child's life are marked by rapid developmental change and heightened sensitivity to relational experiences. Within this formative period, the caregiver-child relationship emerges as a critical determinant of a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development. These relationships serve as the first social context in which children learn to interpret the world, regulate emotions, communicate needs, and internalise values. In both home and institutional early learning environments, the quality and consistency of caregiver-child interactions can either support or hinder developmental outcomes. Caregiver-child relationships form the emotional and developmental foundation of early learning experiences. These bonds, developed through daily interactions, play a pivotal role in shaping a child's emotional security, social competence, cognitive development, and learning capacity. In early childhood education settings, the quality of these relationships can significantly influence a child's readiness to learn, their ability to regulate emotions, and their sense of safety and belonging (Kalra & Shah, 2023). Secure and responsive caregiver-child relationships foster an environment in which children feel valued and supported. This emotional security encourages exploration, problem-solving, and active engagement with learning tasks. Positive, reciprocal interactions with caregivers help children develop essential life skills such as empathy, communication, and conflict resolution (Mahoney et al., 2021). Furthermore, verbal exchanges and shared experiences like reading, storytelling, and play contribute not only to language acquisition but also to emotional bonding and cognitive growth (Johnson et al., 2020; Sperry et al., 2019).

The scope of this paper encompasses the multidimensional role of caregiver-child relationships in early childhood education settings. Specifically, it examines how daily interactions, emotional attunement, consistent routines, language exchanges, and culturally responsive practices contribute to the holistic development of children from infancy through the preschool years. Drawing on insights from developmental psychology, early childhood pedagogy, and sociocultural theory, the paper considers a wide range of relational strategies employed by professional caregivers—including early childhood educators, childcare workers, and home-based caregivers—within diverse early learning contexts. The relevance of caregiver-child



relationships has been substantiated by decades of empirical research. Secure and responsive relationships between caregivers and children have been consistently linked to enhanced emotional security, self-regulation, language acquisition, prosocial behaviour, and school readiness (Lin & Faldowski, 2023). These bonds provide children with a secure base from which to explore their environment and engage in developmentally enriching experiences. Conversely, inadequate or inconsistent caregiving may contribute to behavioural challenges, academic delays, and socioemotional vulnerabilities later in life (Mahoney et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2020).

Furthermore, as early childhood education systems increasingly emphasise holistic, child-centred approaches to learning, there is a growing recognition of the relational dimension of pedagogy. The caregiver is not merely a facilitator of instruction but a co-regulator, emotional anchor, and model for communication. Strategies that nurture trust, reciprocity, and emotional availability in caregiver-child interactions are foundational to creating inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant learning environments. Recognising this central role, this paper adopts a descriptive research methodology based on secondary data to explore and synthesise current research and theoretical perspectives on caregiver-child relationships. It does not involve the collection of new empirical data, but instead draws from peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and conceptual models to identify effective, evidence-informed strategies for strengthening relational bonds in early learning settings. These include, but are not limited to, responsive caregiving, attunement to emotional cues, structured routines, language-rich interactions, cultural competence, and play-based engagement. Through this thematic exploration, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how caregiver-child relationships can be intentionally supported to foster optimal developmental outcomes in young children.

1.1. Theoretical foundation

Understanding caregiver-child relationships in early learning environments requires a multidisciplinary theoretical lens. Several foundational theories provide insight into how relational dynamics shape a child's development, including Attachment Theory, Emotional Literacy Frameworks, Sociocultural Models of Development, and Cultural Competence Theory. These frameworks collectively illuminate the mechanisms by which secure, responsive, and inclusive caregiving practices contribute to children's emotional, social, and cognitive growth.

1.2. Attachment theory

Attachment theory, first developed by John Bowlby and further elaborated by Mary Ainsworth, serves as a foundational framework for understanding how early caregiver interactions shape a child's sense of security, trust, and emotional regulation (Holmes, 2014). Central to the theory is the concept of the attachment system, a biological and psychological mechanism through which infants seek proximity to caregivers in response to stress or uncertainty. Secure attachment is formed when caregivers are consistently responsive—that is, attuned to the child's cues, and prompt and appropriate in their responses. Insecure or disorganised attachment styles, in contrast, often emerge in contexts of inconsistent, neglectful, or frightening caregiving (Granqvist et al., 2017; Bretherton, 2013). These early experiences are internalised into what Bowlby termed "internal working models", which shape how children perceive themselves and others in future relationships (Sherman et al., 2015). In early learning contexts, secure attachments foster emotional resilience, learning motivation, and social competence. Children with secure bonds demonstrate greater curiosity, language development, and risk-taking behaviour in exploratory learning tasks (Mikulincer et al., 2011; Van Der Voort et al., 2014). Attachment theory thus emphasises the need for emotionally available caregivers, structured environments, and consistent interaction patterns as a basis for healthy development.

1.3. Emotional literacy and attunement

Emotional literacy frameworks highlight the ability to recognise, understand, express, and regulate emotions—skills which are foundational to a child's social and psychological functioning (Sharp, 2014). These frameworks align with emotional attunement, which refers to a caregiver's capacity to detect and respond empathetically to a child's emotional states. Responsive caregiving—defined as the caregiver's consistent ability to recognise and respond to a child's verbal and non-verbal cues—supports the development of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy in children (Bailey & Rivers, 2018; McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Emotional literacy is not innate but learned through co-regulation, whereby caregivers model appropriate emotional responses, validate children's feelings, and create safe spaces for emotional expression. This framework affirms that emotionally literate caregivers are better equipped to scaffold children's emotional growth. Practices such as active listening, verbal affirmation, and shared storytelling support the dual goals of cognitive stimulation and emotional bonding.

1.4. Sociocultural models of early childhood development

Drawing from the work of Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner, sociocultural theories argue that learning and development are embedded within social interactions and cultural contexts. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that children learn best when supported by a more knowledgeable other—often a caregiver—who provides scaffolding to bridge the gap between current abilities and potential growth. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological

Systems Theory expands on this by situating the child within multiple nested systems (e.g., microsystem, mesosystem), each influenced by family, caregivers, educators, and cultural norms. These models emphasise that caregiver-child interactions are not isolated, but are mediated by family structures, institutional routines, and cultural expectations. In early learning settings, the caregiver's role as a guide, collaborator, and co-learner is central. Strategies like guided play, decision-making support, and collaborative communication reflect the sociocultural emphasis on learning through interaction and participation. These theories reinforce the importance of routine, shared activities, and relational consistency as facilitators of learning and belonging.

1.5. Cultural competence theory

Cultural competence theory underscores the need for caregivers to recognise, respect, and integrate children's cultural identities into their caregiving practices (Garneau & Pepin, 2015; Kirmayer, 2012). In increasingly multicultural learning environments, caregivers must navigate differences in language, values, traditions, and family structures. Culturally competent caregiving involves more than celebrating diversity—it requires intentional practices such as: Learning key words or phrases in a child's home language, including culturally relevant materials and routines, engaging families in curriculum planning, and avoiding deficit-based assumptions about children's backgrounds. When caregivers affirm children's cultural identities, they support the development of positive self-concept, belonging, and inclusive peer interactions (Ben Abd Elsalam, 2023). Cultural competence theory is particularly relevant in contexts where caregiver-child mismatches in cultural norms may otherwise lead to misunderstanding or emotional distance.

To support the theoretical integration, several recurring concepts central to this research are defined as follows: **Responsive Caregiving:** A dynamic process whereby caregivers perceive and accurately interpret a child's needs, then respond in a timely and developmentally appropriate manner. It is foundational to attachment security and emotional regulation. **Attunement:** The emotional and behavioural synchrony between caregiver and child, characterised by sensitivity to subtle cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. **Emotional Availability:** The caregiver's ability to be present, empathetic, and non-intrusive in interactions, enabling the child to feel seen, heard, and emotionally safe. **Scaffolding:** The provision of structured support tailored to a child's developmental stage, gradually reduced as the child gains competence. **Cultural Responsiveness:** The intentional integration of children's cultural contexts into caregiving and teaching practices, fostering trust, identity, and inclusion. In summary, these theoretical foundations establish the basis for understanding why and how strong caregiver-child relationships influence early learning. They collectively inform the evidence-based strategies examined in this paper, providing a framework for relationally grounded and culturally sensitive early childhood education practices.

2. Research Method

This paper adopts a descriptive research methodology based entirely on the analysis and synthesis of secondary data. The goal is to provide an in-depth exploration of the strategies and contextual dynamics involved in strengthening caregiver-child relationships within early learning environments. Rather than collecting new empirical data, the paper integrates findings from existing peer-reviewed studies, theoretical frameworks, and policy documents to present a comprehensive overview of best practices and guiding principles. A structured literature review was conducted across established academic databases, including ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO, focusing on literature published between 2010 and 2024. Keywords used included: caregiver-child relationship, responsive caregiving, attachment theory, early childhood, emotional literacy in preschool, cultural competence in early education, and play-based learning. Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed journal articles, conceptual/theoretical papers, and policy documents addressing children aged 0–6 years in early learning contexts. Exclusion criteria included studies outside the target age range, unpublished theses, and documents not available in English. From the initial search, 112 studies were retrieved; 68 met the inclusion criteria and were analysed in depth. Limitations of this review include the reliance on English-language sources, potential exclusion of regional grey literature, and variability in methodological rigour among included studies. This secondary-data-based methodology supports the paper's aim of offering a comprehensive, evidence-informed exposition rather than hypothesis testing or statistical generalisation. The outcome is an integrative framework designed to inform educators, caregivers, and policymakers seeking practical strategies to promote secure, enriching, and developmentally beneficial caregiver-child relationships in early education settings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Core dimensions of caregiver-child relationship building

Caregiver-child relationships in early learning are shaped by a constellation of relational, emotional, cultural, and pedagogical factors. These relationships serve not only as the emotional foundation for child development but also as the medium through which learning, identity formation, and resilience are fostered. This section presents a detailed analysis of five core dimensions essential for cultivating strong, secure, and developmentally beneficial caregiver-child relationships: responsive caregiving, consistency and predictable routines, emotional literacy and attunement, cultural competence and

inclusion, and play-based learning and communication. Each of these dimensions contributes uniquely to children's emotional, social, and cognitive development and must be thoughtfully implemented within diverse early learning environments.

3.2. *Responsive caregiving*

Responsive caregiving refers to the ability of caregivers to consistently perceive, interpret, and appropriately respond to children's verbal and non-verbal cues. It involves active listening, emotional availability, and a commitment to meeting each child's unique developmental and emotional needs in real time (Collins et al., 2010). Responsive caregiving is a cornerstone of secure attachment formation, enabling children to develop trust in their caregivers and confidence in their ability to influence their environment. Such children are more likely to engage in exploratory behaviours, express their needs clearly, and form positive peer relationships. Responsiveness enhances emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and language acquisition, laying the groundwork for long-term academic success (Gross et al., 2017; Meins, 2013). Julian et al. (2017) indicate that secure, responsive caregiver-child interactions contribute significantly to classroom behaviour, emotional self-regulation, and language development. Van Der Voort et al. (2014) further affirm that children with responsive caregivers demonstrate greater emotional resilience and empathy in group settings. These findings are echoed by Mikulincer et al. (2011), who found that securely attached children are more inclined to take intellectual risks, explore, and problem-solve. The effectiveness of responsive caregiving can be compromised by systemic factors such as high caregiver-child ratios, emotional exhaustion, and inadequate training. Moreover, cultural differences in child-rearing expectations may influence how caregiver responsiveness is expressed and interpreted. What is considered attentive in one cultural context may be perceived as overbearing or intrusive in another (Brown et al., 2020). Thus, responsiveness must be both developmentally appropriate and culturally attuned.

3.3. *Consistency and predictable routines*

Consistency refers to the regularity and reliability of caregiver behaviours, expectations, and responses, while predictable routines are structured, repeatable daily activities that provide rhythm and order to a child's experience (Stegelin, 2013). A consistent environment allows children to develop a sense of control, safety, and stability, which are essential for healthy emotional development. Predictable routines reduce stress and anxiety by allowing children to anticipate what comes next, fostering self-regulation and executive functioning (Sarkar, 2024). Consistency in rules, reactions, and emotional tone also reinforces prosocial behaviour and promotes cooperation. According to Ferretti and Bub (2014), children exposed to consistent daily routines demonstrate improved emotional regulation and are more likely to engage positively with peers and caregivers. Oades-Sese et al. (2011) further found that consistency in caregiving was positively associated with resilience, even in children from high-risk or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. While structure benefits most children, routines must remain flexible enough to accommodate the developmental variability, temperament, and cultural context of each child. For instance, some cultural communities value spontaneity and child-led exploration more than rigid schedules, and overly prescriptive routines may unintentionally stifle emotional expression or autonomy (Bryce-Clegg, 2024). Moreover, under-resourced early learning environments may struggle to implement structured routines due to staffing constraints and unpredictable schedules.

3.4. *Emotional literacy and attunement*

Emotional literacy is the capacity to identify, understand, express, and manage emotions constructively, while attunement refers to a caregiver's sensitivity and responsiveness to the emotional states of children (Rees, 2016). Emotionally attuned caregivers validate children's feelings, co-regulate intense emotions, and model constructive emotional expression. When caregivers model and support emotional literacy, children develop essential intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, including empathy, frustration tolerance, and conflict resolution. Attuned caregiving also enhances language development, as children learn to articulate internal experiences with increasing precision and confidence (Johnson et al., 2020). Vaughan et al. (2013) found that children who received frequent emotional validation exhibited lower levels of anxiety and better peer interactions. McCabe and Altamura (2011) emphasised that caregiver support for emotional literacy is predictive of social competence and emotional self-regulation in early childhood settings. The development of emotional literacy is influenced by cultural norms regarding emotional expression. For example, in some collectivist societies, emotions such as anger or sadness may be downplayed in favour of group harmony, affecting how caregivers interpret and respond to children's affective displays (Kirmayer, 2012). Additionally, caregivers dealing with chronic stress or trauma may struggle with emotional availability, limiting their capacity for attunement (Magnuson & Schindler, 2019).

3.5. *Cultural competence and inclusion*

Cultural competence refers to a caregiver's ability to understand, respect, and meaningfully integrate the diverse cultural, linguistic, and social identities of children and their families into caregiving practices and curriculum (Garneau & Pepin, 2015; Halpern et al., 2021). Children develop a strong sense of identity, belonging, and self-worth when their cultural background is affirmed and valued in their learning environment. Inclusive practices also promote positive social behaviours, reduce bias, and strengthen home-school partnerships, which are critical for holistic development and sustained learning

engagement (Morcom, 2017). Navarrete and Jenkins (2011) showed that children whose cultural identities were positively reinforced in early education reported higher global and ethnic self-esteem. Similarly, Halpern et al. (2021) observed that culturally inclusive programming fostered stronger relational bonds and increased participation in learning activities. While cultural competence is essential, its implementation can be limited by language barriers, institutional biases, or a lack of training among caregivers. Cultural competence must go beyond superficial representation (e.g., cultural holidays) to involve deep engagement with families and reflexivity among educators. It also requires acknowledging and addressing power imbalances in educational contexts (Tarman & Tarman, 2011).

3.6. *Play-based learning and communication*

Play-based learning integrates purposeful, child-initiated play with caregiver-supported educational outcomes. It emphasises imaginative, exploratory, and cooperative activities where communication and emotional connection are central. The caregiver assumes a role as facilitator, observer, and co-participant (Pierotti et al., 2018). Through shared play experiences, children develop essential language, social, and cognitive skills. Play enables emotional expression, problem-solving, and the development of narrative thinking. When caregivers engage meaningfully in play, they reinforce relational trust, promote communication, and support collaborative learning (Croft et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2019). Meins (2013) highlights that caregivers who engage in interactive play support higher-order language skills and emotional bonding. Lim (2024) found that play-centred caregiver interactions significantly enhanced communication and empathy in preschool-aged children. The value placed on play varies across cultural and educational systems. In some settings, academic pressures may reduce time allocated to play, limiting its relational and developmental benefits. Additionally, some caregivers may lack confidence or training in facilitating developmentally rich, child-led play experiences (Waters et al., 2024).

The five core dimensions explored—responsive caregiving, consistent routines, emotional literacy, cultural competence, and play-based communication—form a synergistic framework for relationship-building in early childhood education. When implemented with sensitivity to developmental stages, cultural backgrounds, and institutional contexts, these relational practices create emotionally safe, inclusive, and enriching environments that promote optimal child development. However, successful application requires ongoing caregiver training, contextual flexibility, and institutional support to address structural limitations and cultural complexities. Strengthening caregiver-child relationships through these dimensions is essential not only for academic preparedness but for lifelong social and emotional well-being.

3.7. *Challenges and barriers to building strong caregiver-child relationships*

While the caregiver-child relationship is widely recognised as foundational to early childhood development, a range of interrelated challenges and systemic barriers continue to inhibit its optimal development in practice. These obstacles include communication gaps, inadequate caregiver training, cultural disconnects, high staff turnover, emotional stress, and socioeconomic inequities. Each of these issues weakens the relational capacity of early learning environments, threatening the emotional security, cognitive growth, and social well-being of young children—particularly those in under-resourced or marginalised settings.

3.8. *Communication gaps*

Effective communication is central to relational caregiving. However, communication gaps—both linguistic and developmental—remain a persistent barrier in many early childhood contexts. These gaps arise when caregivers are unable to accurately interpret or respond to a child's verbal or non-verbal cues, often due to language differences, speech delays, or a lack of responsive communication strategies. Children's attempts to express needs or emotions may be misunderstood or dismissed, leading to frustration, behavioural challenges, and missed opportunities for bonding. According to Brown et al. (2020), language mismatches between caregivers and children, or between caregivers and families, hinder the establishment of trust and mutual understanding. This disconnect undermines emotional availability and can lead to feelings of insecurity or emotional isolation in children. Moreover, caregivers who are not trained in interpreting developmental communication cues—such as gestures, facial expressions, or behavioural changes—may inadvertently overlook children's emotional needs (Rees, 2016).

3.9. *Inadequate training and professional development*

Another significant barrier is the widespread lack of comprehensive training in relationship-building, child development, and emotional responsiveness among early childhood caregivers. Many early learning professionals enter the field with limited preparation in attachment theory, responsive caregiving techniques, or cultural competence, which are essential to fostering meaningful caregiver-child interactions (Sharp et al., 2018). Caregivers who lack foundational knowledge in early childhood development may rely on behavioural management rather than relational approaches, potentially missing opportunities to nurture emotional bonds and socioemotional growth. Furthermore, insufficient professional development contributes to low confidence and job dissatisfaction, especially in high-stress environments. As emphasised in the research, equipping caregivers

with the skills to foster secure attachments—through responsive listening, emotional attunement, and culturally aware practices—is crucial for high-quality early learning (Meins, 2013).

3.10. Staff turnover and continuity of care

High staff turnover represents one of the most disruptive challenges in early childhood settings. Frequent changes in caregiving personnel undermine the continuity required to form stable, secure relationships. Consistency is a critical component of attachment development; when caregivers are replaced frequently, children may become withdrawn, anxious, or resistant to forming new bonds (Sarkar, 2024). Research suggests that low child-to-caregiver ratios, stable caregiving assignments, and consistent routines support the formation of trust and emotional safety. In contrast, high turnover leads to fragmented relationships, reduced emotional investment, and delays in developmental progress. The emotional toll of constant transitions also affects caregivers, who may feel overburdened and emotionally disconnected from their roles, especially in environments with limited institutional support or recognition.

3.11. Cultural disconnects and insensitivity

Early childhood education settings are increasingly multicultural, yet many caregivers are not adequately trained to navigate cultural differences in child-rearing practices, emotional expression, or behavioural expectations. Cultural disconnects occur when caregivers' values, communication styles, or disciplinary approaches conflict with those of the children and families they serve. For example, differences in norms regarding emotional expressiveness, eye contact, independence, or obedience may lead to misinterpretation of a child's behaviour. A lack of cultural responsiveness can result in marginalisation or behavioural mislabeling, particularly for children from non-dominant cultures (Halpern et al., 2021; Morcom, 2017). Furthermore, children may feel invisible or invalidated when their cultural identity, language, or family structures are not reflected or respected in their learning environment. This undermines their sense of belonging and may impair the formation of trusting relationships with caregivers.

3.12. Socioeconomic inequities and structural constraints

Socioeconomic challenges have a cascading impact on the quality of caregiver-child relationships. Caregivers working in under-resourced environments often face large group sizes, minimal support staff, inadequate materials, and time constraints, limiting their capacity to provide individualised, emotionally responsive care. These conditions heighten caregiver stress and reduce emotional availability (Magnuson & Schindler, 2019; Berry & Malek, 2017). Furthermore, children from low-income households are disproportionately impacted by systemic inequities, including poor access to high-quality early childhood programs, frequent school disruptions, and limited health or social services. These structural barriers not only reduce the consistency and quality of caregiving but also deepen developmental disparities. When basic needs are unmet—for either caregivers or children—emotional connection becomes secondary to survival and task completion.

3.13. Emotional stress and mental health challenges

Finally, caregiver well-being plays a central role in shaping caregiver-child interactions. Chronic stress, burnout, or untreated mental health conditions can significantly limit a caregiver's ability to remain emotionally available, patient, and attuned. Stress reduces the capacity for empathy, increases emotional reactivity, and often leads to emotionally disengaged caregiving practices (Music, 2016; Rees, 2016). Caregivers under duress may unintentionally adopt controlling, inconsistent, or distant interaction styles, which undermine trust and security. As noted by Rankin et al. (2022), relational caregiving requires emotional presence and reflection—both of which are compromised in high-stress conditions. This issue becomes even more pressing in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings where caregiver well-being is further strained by low wages, limited support, and high demands.

These challenges are not isolated or anecdotal—they are systemic. The barriers identified above reflect broader equity concerns in early childhood education, where access to high-quality relational caregiving is often stratified along lines of race, class, and language. Children from marginalised communities are more likely to experience fragmented caregiving, cultural misalignment, and emotional neglect, compounding pre-existing developmental vulnerabilities. Addressing these barriers requires a multi-tiered approach involving: Policy investment in caregiver training and support, Retention strategies to reduce turnover, Culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy, Institutional prioritisation of caregiver mental health, and Structural reforms to ensure equitable resource distribution. While the benefits of strong caregiver-child relationships are well established, persistent challenges—ranging from communication breakdowns to systemic inequities—continue to limit their realisation in early learning environments. Overcoming these barriers requires a deliberate commitment to professional development, equity-driven policies, culturally responsive caregiving, and caregiver well-being. By confronting these obstacles with clarity and compassion, early childhood systems can create emotionally safe, inclusive, and developmentally empowering spaces for all children.

3.14. Integrative framework for strengthening caregiver-child relationships

The development of secure, emotionally responsive, and culturally attuned caregiver-child relationships is a complex process shaped by relational, theoretical, and contextual dynamics. To consolidate the diverse dimensions explored throughout this paper, an integrative framework is presented below. This model highlights key relationship-building strategies, their associated developmental benefits, relevant theoretical underpinnings, and the implementation challenges that may hinder their effective adoption in early learning environments. The framework serves both as a conceptual map for researchers and as a practical tool for educators, administrators, and policymakers. By explicitly linking theory to practice and acknowledging systemic constraints, it encourages informed, reflective, and equity-centred approaches to early caregiving. The integrative framework is summarised in Table 1, which outlines the core strategies, developmental outcomes, theoretical underpinnings, and key implementation challenges.

Table 1 Core strategies for enhancing caregiver-child relationships in early learning.

Strategy	Developmental Outcome	Supporting Theory	Implementation Challenge
Responsive Caregiving	Trust, emotional security, and self-regulation	Attachment Theory (Bowlby, Ainsworth)	Caregiver burnout, inadequate training
Consistency & Predictable Routines	Emotional stability, executive functioning	Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner)	Staffing limitations, rigid scheduling constraints
Emotional Literacy & Attunement	Empathy, emotional regulation, and communication skills	Emotional Literacy Frameworks, Co-regulation Models	Cultural variation in emotional expression
Cultural Competence & Inclusion	Positive identity formation, belonging, resilience	Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky), Cultural Competence Theory	Lack of training, implicit bias
Play-Based Learning & Communication	Language acquisition, cognitive development, and peer interaction	Sociocultural Theory, Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky)	Undervaluation of play, curriculum rigidity

Source: Policy documents (2010–2024).

Rooted in Attachment Theory, responsive caregiving is critical to fostering trust and secure attachments. Children who experience consistent and sensitive responses from caregivers develop emotional security, greater independence, and self-regulation skills. However, caregiver burnout and insufficient training often impede the sustained practice of responsiveness, particularly in high-demand or under-resourced settings. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this strategy emphasises the importance of environmental regularity for emotional and behavioural regulation. Predictable routines reduce anxiety and promote executive function skills such as attention control and memory. Implementation challenges include staff shortages and the rigid demands of institutional schedules, which may limit routine adaptability and individualised attention. The development of emotional literacy is underpinned by theories of co-regulation and emotional scaffolding, where children learn to manage emotions through modelled and supported experiences. Attuned caregivers validate children's feelings and enhance communication. Implementation barriers include variability in cultural norms around emotion, which may affect how caregivers interpret and respond to children's expressions. Informed by Sociocultural Theory and Cultural Competence Theory, culturally inclusive caregiving promotes positive self-concept, identity affirmation, and peer integration. When children's languages, traditions, and family values are acknowledged and integrated into caregiving practices, their learning and social confidence improve. However, implicit bias, linguistic barriers, and a lack of professional development in cultural responsiveness remain significant hurdles. Grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, play-based learning facilitates cognitive growth through guided social interaction. Play offers opportunities for language enrichment, emotional expression, and social bonding. Unfortunately, in many formal educational contexts, play is undervalued, and structured curricula leave little time for imaginative or exploratory play. This integrative model underscores the interconnectedness of relational strategies, developmental goals, and educational theory, while also providing a critical lens for identifying and addressing practical barriers. The inclusion of implementation challenges ensures that the framework remains realistic and context-sensitive, encouraging reflection on how policies, training programs, and cultural awareness must evolve to support holistic child development. Educators and caregivers can use this framework to: Conduct program audits on relationship quality, identify areas for professional development, and Advocate for structural improvements that enhance relational consistency and inclusivity.

3.15. Implications for policy and practice

The results of this descriptive analysis indicate that loving, responsive, and culturally sensitive caregiver-child connections are not just advantageous but crucial for early childhood development. To convert this comprehension into systemic influence, it is essential to translate theory and research into implementable practices and policy agendas. This delineates essential implications for professional development, curriculum design, family involvement, and context-sensitive strategies—each serving as a conduit for integrating relational quality into the foundation of early learning systems. Continuous

investment in professional development is essential for providing early childhood educators and caregivers with the relational, emotional, and cultural competencies required to establish robust caregiver-child relationships. Training should extend beyond classroom management to include attachment theory, responsive caring, emotional literacy, attunement, and cultural competency. Early learning courses should be designed to enhance cognitive results while also emphasising the relational and emotional aspects of learning. Developmentally appropriate curriculum must include children's cultural origins, emotional requirements, and interests, therefore fostering settings that are both educational and supportive. Integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) goals across many learning areas, highlighting collaboration, empathy, and emotional regulation. Incorporate play-based, narrative, and exploratory learning techniques that enable caregivers to interact relationally while facilitating growth. Develop adaptable courses that facilitate significant one-on-one engagements between caregivers and children. Facilitate multilingual personnel and translation resources to eradicate linguistic obstacles in caregiver-family interactions. Effective relational caring cannot adhere to a uniform approach. Strategies must be tailored to align with the social, cultural, and economic settings of the communities in which they are executed. This is especially crucial in resource-limited, bilingual, or culturally varied environments when caregiver-child interactions are influenced by overarching structural imbalances.

3.16. Discussion of findings

The research synthesised literature on caregiver-child relationships to identify five core dimensions essential for fostering secure, developmentally enriching bonds in early learning settings: responsive caregiving, predictable routines, emotional literacy and attunement, cultural competence and inclusion, and play-based communication. These strategies were shown to promote emotional regulation, cognitive development, empathy, identity formation, and language skills in young children. Importantly, the research also identified systemic barriers—such as caregiver burnout, inadequate training, cultural disconnects, and socioeconomic inequities—that limit the effectiveness and consistency of relational caregiving. From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce and expand upon foundational frameworks in developmental psychology. Attachment theory, for instance, continues to provide strong evidence that consistent responsiveness is linked to emotional security and resilience (Bowlby, Ainsworth). This aligns with Van Der Voort et al. (2014), who found that sensitive parenting fosters secure attachment and long-term socioemotional competence. The current research builds on this by situating attachment security within broader ecological and sociocultural contexts, showing how consistency in routines and cultural responsiveness contribute to developmental outcomes beyond the dyadic caregiver-child bond.

Comparisons with similar studies further highlight the robustness of the integrative model. For example, Julian et al. (2017) demonstrated that interventions aimed at enhancing caregiver responsiveness significantly reduced risks for later psychopathology, a finding echoed in this research. Likewise, McCabe and Altamura (2011) stressed the predictive power of caregiver support for emotional literacy in determining children's social competence. This study extends their work by integrating emotional literacy as part of a multi-dimensional relational framework rather than treating it as a standalone construct. The emphasis on cultural competence is another distinctive contribution. While Garneau and Pepin (2015) conceptualised cultural competence as a professional necessity in healthcare and education, the present findings suggest that it is also a developmental necessity: children's identity formation and social integration are deeply connected to how their cultural backgrounds are respected. Similar to Morcom (2017), who studied Aboriginal children in language immersion programs, this paper affirms that cultural affirmation strengthens both self-esteem and learning engagement. Play-based learning as a relational strategy also gains greater depth in this discussion. Walsh et al. (2019) and Lim (2024) showed that play enhances communication and peer bonding. The current synthesis embeds play within the caregiver-child relationship as both a pedagogical and relational tool, highlighting its role in developing trust, narrative competence, and socioemotional resilience. Compared to studies that frame play as a developmental activity, this research emphasises its relational dimension, thereby broadening its pedagogical significance. The findings also converge with systemic critiques from Magnuson and Schindler (2019), who highlighted the impact of caregiver stress on relational capacity. By connecting these structural challenges with theoretical perspectives, the paper underscores that relational caregiving cannot be isolated from broader institutional and socioeconomic contexts. This reflects a shift in the literature from micro-level relational dynamics to macro-level systemic concerns, as also discussed by Brown et al. (2020). Overall, this research contributes theoretical depth by demonstrating that caregiver-child relationships are best understood as a holistic ecosystem where attachment, emotional literacy, cultural responsiveness, consistency, and play operate synergistically. Unlike earlier studies that isolated specific relational dimensions, the integrative model highlights their interdependence and situates them within real-world challenges such as staff turnover, policy limitations, and inequitable resource distribution. This alignment of theory, practice, and systemic critique provides a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of early caregiving relationships.

4. Conclusion

This research highlights a vital but often underemphasized component of early childhood education: the caregiver-child relationship as a foundational influence on emotional security, cognitive development, and social competence. Unlike previous studies that treated caregiving as a structural or instructional role, this research integrates relational, emotional, and cultural

dimensions to offer a more holistic understanding. It uniquely emphasises the intersection of responsive caregiving, emotional attunement, and cultural competence within institutional learning contexts. The value of this research lies in its development of an integrative framework that links theory to practical strategies while acknowledging real-world implementation challenges. By consolidating evidence from attachment theory, sociocultural perspectives, and emotional literacy frameworks, the research offers a multidimensional roadmap for strengthening caregiver-child relationships. This contribution is particularly timely as early childhood systems seek to centre equity, mental health, and inclusive pedagogy in developmental practice. Ultimately, the research reinforces that nurturing, relationally responsive caregiving is not supplementary to early learning—it is its core.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research was not funded.

References

- Bailey, C. S., & Rivers, S. E. (2018). An overview of emotional intelligence in early childhood. *An introduction to emotional intelligence*, 64–80. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781394260157.ch5>
- Ben Abd Elsalam, M. (2023). Culture and gender identity development in children. *International Journal of Education and Learning Research*, 6(1), 76–91. <https://doi.org/10.21608/ijelr.2024.293955.1012>
- Berry, L., & Malek, E. (2017). Caring for children: Relationships matter. *ChildGauge*, 2017, 51.
- Bretherton, I. (2013). Internal working models of attachment relationships as related to resilient coping. In G. G. Noam & K. W. Fischer (Eds.), *In development and vulnerability in close relationships* (pp. 3–27). Psychology Press.
- Brown, A., McIsaac, J. L. D., Reddington, S., Hill, T., Brigham, S., Spencer, R., & Mandrona, A. (2020). Newcomer families' experiences with programs and services to support early childhood development in Canada: A scoping review. *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society*, 1(2), 182–215. <https://doi.org/10.37291/2717638X.20201249>
- Bryce-Clegg, A. (2024). *Shifting the gaze: Exploring more-than-human entanglements in reception classrooms* (Doctoral thesis, EdD, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK).
- Cao, H., Liang, Y., & Zhou, N. (2020). Proximal interpersonal processes in early childhood, socioemotional capacities in middle childhood, and behavioural and social adaptation in early adolescence: A process model toward greater specificity. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 48(11), 1395–1410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-020-00696-7>
- Collins, N. L., Ford, M. B., Guichard, A. C., Kane, H. S., & Feeney, B. C. (2010). Responding to need in intimate relationships: Social support and caregiving processes in couples. In M. Mikulincer & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Prosocial motives, emotions, and behaviour: The better angels of our nature* (pp. 367–389). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/12061-019>
- Croft, R. L., Byrd, C. T., & Kelly, E. M. (2022). The influence of active listening on parents' perceptions of clinical empathy in a stuttering assessment: A preliminary study. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 100, 106274. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcomdis.2022.106274>
- Ferretti, L. K., & Bub, K. L. (2014). The influence of family routines on the resilience of low-income preschoolers. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 35(3), 168–180. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2014.03.003>
- Garneau, A. B., & Pepin, J. (2015). Cultural competence: A constructivist definition. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 26(1), 9–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659614541294>
- Granqvist, P., Sroufe, L. A., Dozier, M., Hesse, E., Steele, M., van Ijzendoorn, M., Solomon, J., Schuengel, C., Fearon, P., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M., Steele, H., Cassidy, J., Carlson, E., Madigan, S., Jacobvitz, D., Foster, S., Behrens, K., Rifkin-Graboi, A., Gribneau, N., Spangler, G., Ward, M. J., True, M., Spieker, S., Reijman, S., Reisz, S., Tharner, A., Nkara, F., Goldwyn, R., Sroufe, J., Pederson, D., Pederson, D., Weigand, R., Siegel, D., Dazzi, N., Bernard, K., Fonagy, P., Waters, E., Toth, S., Cicchetti, D., Zeanah, C. H., Lyons-Ruth, K., Main, M., & Duschinsky, R. (2017). Disorganised attachment in infancy: A review of the phenomenon and its implications for clinicians and policy-makers. *Attachment & Human Development*, 19(6), 534–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2017.1354040>
- Gross, J. T., Stern, J. A., Brett, B. E., & Cassidy, J. (2017). The multifaceted nature of prosocial behaviour in children: Links with attachment theory and research. *Social Development*, 26(4), 661–678. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12242>
- Halpern, C., Szecsi, T., & Mak, V. (2021). "Everyone can be a leader": Early childhood education leadership in a centre serving culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49(4), 669–679. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01107-8>
- Holmes, J. (2014). *John Bowlby and attachment theory*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315879772>
- Johnson, E. J., Avineri, N., & Johnson, D. C. (2020). Exposing gaps in/between discourses of linguistic deficits. In *Critical perspectives of the language gap* (pp. 6–23). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351016674-2>
- Julian, M. M., Lawler, J. M., & Rosenblum, K. L. (2017). Caregiver-child relationships in early childhood: Interventions to promote well-being and reduce risk for psychopathology. *Current Behavioural Neuroscience Reports*, 4(2), 87–98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40473-017-0110-0>
- Kalra, S., & Shah, D. (2023). Care beyond newborn survival, including child health and early childhood development, mental and psychological health. *Indian Journal of Paediatrics*, 90(Suppl 1), 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12098-023-04701-x>
- Kirmayer, L. J. (2012). Rethinking cultural competence. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 49(2), 149–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461512444673>

- Lim, E. M. (2024). The relationships among teachers' self-efficacy, teacher-child interaction, and peer interaction based on young children's emotional intelligence. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 33(5), 1237–1249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-023-00793-3>
- Lin, M. L., & Faldowski, R. A. (2023). The relationship of parent support and child emotional regulation to school readiness. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(6), 4867. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20064867>
- Magnuson, K., & Schindler, H. (2019). Supporting children's early development by building caregivers' capacities and skills: A theoretical approach informed by new neuroscience research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 11(1), 59–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12319>
- Mahoney, J. L., Weissberg, R. P., Greenberg, M. T., Dusenbury, L., Jagers, R. J., Niemi, K., Schlinger, M., Schlund, J., Shriver, T. P., VanAusdal, K., & Yoder, N. (2021). Systemic social and emotional learning: Promoting educational success for all preschool to high school students. *American Psychologist*, 76(7), 1128. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000701>
- McCabe, P. C., & Altamura, M. (2011). Empirically valid strategies to improve social and emotional competence of preschool children. *Psychology in the Schools*, 48(5), 513–540. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20570>
- Meins, E. (2013). *Security of attachment and the social development of cognition*. Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203775912>
- Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. R., & Rom, E. (2011). The effects of implicit and explicit security priming on creative problem-solving. *Cognition and Emotion*, 25(3), 519–531. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2010.540110>
- Morcom, L. A. (2017). Self-esteem and cultural identity in Aboriginal language immersion kindergarteners. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 16(6), 365–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2017.1366271>
- Music, G. (2016). *Nurturing natures: Attachment and children's emotional, sociocultural and brain development*. Routledge.
- Navarrete, V., & Jenkins, S. R. (2011). Cultural homelessness, multiminority status, ethnic identity development, and self-esteem. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(6), 791–804. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.04.006>
- Oades-Sese, G. V., Esquivel, G. B., Kaliski, P. K., & Maniatis, L. (2011). A longitudinal study of the social and academic competence of economically disadvantaged bilingual preschool children. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(3), 747. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021380>
- Pierotti, R. S., Lake, M., & Lewis, C. (2018). Equality on his terms: Doing and undoing gender through men's discussion groups. *Gender & Society*, 32(4), 540–562. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243218779779>
- Rankin, P. S., Staton, S., Potia, A. H., Houen, S., & Thorpe, K. (2022). Emotional quality of early education programs improves language learning: A within-child across context design. *Child Development*, 93(6), 1680–1697. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13811>
- Rees, C. (2016). Children's attachments. *Paediatrics and Child Health*, 26(5), 185–193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paed.2015.12.007>
- Sarkar, S. (2024). *Emotional edge in parenting: Your complete guide to childhood education*. Notion Press.
- Sharp, C., Shohet, C., Givon, D., Marais, L., Rani, K., Lenka, M., & Boivin, M. (2018). Early childhood development interventions: A focus on responsive caregiving. In *Child and adolescent development: An expanded focus on public health in Africa* (p. 245).
- Sharp, P. (2014). *Nurturing emotional literacy: A practical guide for teachers, parents and those in the caring professions*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203430972>
- Sherman, L. J., Rice, K., & Cassidy, J. (2015). Infant capacities related to building internal working models of attachment figures: A theoretical and empirical review. *Developmental Review*, 37, 109–141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2015.06.001>
- Sperry, D. E., Sperry, L. L., & Miller, P. J. (2019). Reexamining the verbal environments of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. *Child Development*, 90(4), 1303–1318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13072>
- Stegelin, D. (2013). Early childhood education. In F. Schargel & J. Smink (Eds.), *In helping students graduate* (pp. 115–124). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315854816-8>
- Tarman, I., & Tarman, B. (2011). Developing effective multicultural practices: A case study of exploring a teacher's understanding and practices. *Journal of International Social Research*, 4(17).
- Van Der Voort, A., Juffer, F., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2014). Sensitive parenting is the foundation for secure attachment relationships and positive social-emotional development of children. *Journal of Children's Services*, 9(2), 165–176. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-12-2013-0038>
- Vaughan, E. L., Feinn, R., Bernard, S., Brereton, M., & Kaufman, J. S. (2013). Relationships between child emotional and behavioural symptoms and caregiver strain and parenting stress. *Journal of Family Issues*, 34(4), 534–556. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X12440949>
- Walsh, E., Blake, Y., Donati, A., Stoop, R., & Von Gunten, A. (2019). Early secure attachment as a protective factor against later cognitive decline and dementia. *Frontiers in Ageing Neuroscience*, 11, 161. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnagi.2019.00161>
- Waters, S. F., Richardson, M., Mills, S. R., Marris, A., Harris, F., & Parker, M. (2024). Beyond attachment theory: Indigenous perspectives on the child-caregiver bond from a northwest tribal community. *Child Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.14127>