

Safe Physical Touch and Positive Verbal Communication in Early Childhood Education: Teachers' Perspectives on Children's Comfort and School Adjustment

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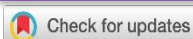
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Safe Physical Touch and Positive Verbal Communication in Early Childhood Education: Teachers' Perspectives on Children's Comfort and School Adjustment

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Abstract

Young children's adjustment to school depends partly on emotionally responsive interactions that help them feel safe, accepted, and ready to participate. This qualitative descriptive study explored how three teachers at Santo Yosef Kindergarten, Purwokerto, perceived the routine use of developmentally appropriate physical touch and positive verbal communication in relation to children's comfort and classroom participation. One homeroom teacher represented each level: Playgroup, Kindergarten A, and Kindergarten B. Data were generated through structured face-to-face interviews organized around three questions concerning initial adjustment conditions, teachers' reported responses during routine relational support, and signs interpreted as greater comfort. Analysis used a structured descriptive approach based on data reduction, cross-informant display, and conclusion verification. Teachers associated non-coercive touch - including a high-five, a warm pat, supportive hand-holding, and a comforting hug when welcomed by the child - together with praise, appreciation, and encouragement, with calmer behavior, greater confidence, more open interaction, and stronger participation. They also emphasized individual preferences, patience, consistency, permission, and safeguarding boundaries. Because the evidence consists of retrospective teacher reports from a single institution, the findings indicate perceived relational associations rather than causal effectiveness. The study positions touch and positive words as optional components of responsive teacher-child interaction whose educational use must remain individualized, transparent, and grounded in children's right to accept or refuse contact.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Physical Touch; Positive Verbal Communication; Safeguarding; Teacher-Child Interaction

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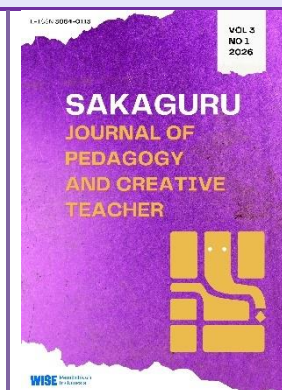
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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood classrooms are relational environments in which learning is inseparable from children's developing capacity to regulate emotion, approach unfamiliar activities, communicate needs, and participate with adults and peers. Recent research with very young children indicates that teacher-child closeness and the quality of early childhood programs work together in supporting early learning, while large-scale and longitudinal studies have repeatedly linked emotionally supportive teacher-child interactions with school readiness, engagement, social competence, and longer-term adjustment [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. These associations do not imply that relational warmth is a simple intervention with uniform effects; rather, they position everyday interaction quality as a proximal context through which children experience school as predictable, responsive, and socially meaningful. Attachment-informed educational perspectives further describe teachers as potential sources of situational safe-haven and secure-base support without

assuming that every teacher-child relationship constitutes an attachment bond [6], and contemporary reviews caution researchers to distinguish observed relational quality from clinically assessed attachment security [7]. In the present study, the phrase 'sense of comfort' is therefore used as a non-clinical, teacher-reported construct referring to signs that children appear sufficiently calm, accepted, and emotionally settled to interact, express needs and feelings, focus on activities, and participate in classroom routines; it is not treated as a measure of attachment, psychological safety, anxiety disorder, or emotional well-being.

The relevance of responsive interaction is especially pronounced during school entry, when children must coordinate emerging self-regulation with new routines, adults, peers, expectations, and separations from familiar caregivers. Studies of teacher-child relationships show that closeness and low conflict are associated with behavioral self-regulation, classroom engagement, and adaptive school functioning, while emotionally and instructionally supportive classrooms can buffer risk and provide children with more consistent opportunities to participate [8], [9], [10], [11]. A co-regulation perspective adds that young children do not manage emotion and attention independently; adults structure routines, interpret cues, modulate demands, and provide interpersonal support that can help children return to participation after distress or uncertainty [12]. This relational view is particularly useful for the present study because the teachers did not report using physical touch or positive words as isolated treatment components. Instead, they described these behaviors as part of broader, repeated teacher-child interactions occurring during arrival, classroom transitions, learning activities, and other school routines. The central question is therefore not whether touch or praise 'works' in a causal sense, but how teachers understand these practices within a responsive relational ecology and what safeguards they consider necessary when supporting children who differ in temperament, preference, and adjustment needs.

Physical touch requires especially careful conceptual and ethical treatment. Developmental research shows that social touch can communicate affect, affiliation, reassurance, and interpersonal meaning, but its interpretation depends on context, relationship, culture, bodily location, timing, and the recipient's response [13]. Video-based studies in early childhood education have documented affectionate, comforting, assisting, and guiding touch as part of ordinary relational care, while also showing that the same embodied action can carry different social functions depending on how it is initiated and received [14], [15]. Recent work on institutional touch similarly emphasizes that touch in early childhood settings is relationally complex and must be analyzed as situated practice rather than presumed to be inherently nurturing [16]. Experimental research further demonstrates that touch can communicate distinct emotions, reinforcing the need to understand tactile communication as meaningful but context-dependent [17]. Classroom research also indicates that relationship quality and affective classroom climate are associated with children's peer behavior and withdrawal or aggression [18]. Taken together, this literature supports a deliberately bounded position: developmentally appropriate touch may form part of responsive care, but professional use must be optional, observable, non-coercive, sensitive to children's verbal and nonverbal refusal, and governed by institutional safeguarding rather than normalized as an entitlement of adults.

Positive verbal communication requires similar nuance. Praise, appreciation, and encouragement can support motivation when they are sincere, informational, autonomy-supportive, and focused on controllable processes, yet praise is not uniformly beneficial and can undermine motivation when it communicates fixed ability or unrealistic evaluation [19], [20]. Research on inflated praise shows that overly evaluative language may create pressure or avoidance, particularly for children who are vulnerable in their self-evaluations [21], [22]. For early childhood practice, these findings favor specific, respectful feedback - for example, recognizing effort, progress, cooperation, or persistence - over global labels that define a child's worth or compare the child with peers. This distinction matters in the present context because teachers described 'positive words' not merely as cheerful speech but as praise, appreciation, and encouragement used while children were adapting to school routines. Accordingly, the manuscript interprets positive verbal communication through responsive teacher support and motivational feedback rather than through a simplistic 'words of affirmation' mechanism.

Indonesian early childhood research provides context for these practices but also illustrates why a stronger international framing is needed. Studies have described responsive teacher approaches for children's sense of security [23], nonverbal communication including touch and interpersonal distance [24], interpersonal communication for emotion support [25], affection-oriented teacher communication [26], non-harsh love-language-informed parenting or teaching [27], physical touch and words of affirmation in parent-child relationships [28], and positive morning statements as part of school habituation [29]. These contributions show that caring communication is already salient in Indonesian educational discourse. However, much of this literature examines single communication modes, broader parenting practices, or developmental outcomes without placing touch, verbal support, teacher perception, child refusal, and safeguarding within one explicit analytic frame. At Santo Yosef Kindergarten, teachers described a routine repertoire that included warm pats, high-fives, supportive hand-holding, comforting hugs when welcomed by the child, praise, appreciation, and verbal encouragement. The setting therefore provides a bounded case

for examining how teachers themselves make sense of combined embodied and verbal support across Playgroup, Kindergarten A, and Kindergarten B.

The research gap lies in the limited qualitative evidence on how early childhood teachers interpret the combined routine use of non-coercive touch and positive verbal support during school adjustment while simultaneously negotiating professional boundaries and children's right to refuse contact. Existing international literature establishes the importance of teacher-child relationship quality, co-regulation, social touch, and contingent feedback, but these strands are often studied separately and usually through observational, experimental, or quantitative relational measures. This study brings those strands together at the level of teacher meaning-making in one Indonesian early childhood institution. Accordingly, the study aims to describe the forms of safe physical touch and positive verbal communication reported by teachers at Santo Yosef Kindergarten, to examine the signs teachers interpret as children's greater comfort and participation, and to identify the practical and safeguarding conditions that shape the use of these relational practices.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore teachers' perspectives regarding the use of safe physical touch and positive verbal communication as part of routine relational practices in early childhood education. A descriptive qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to understand how teachers interpreted, experienced, and described relational interactions within their natural educational context rather than to evaluate causal effects or measure intervention outcomes.

The study was conducted at Santo Yosef Kindergarten, Purwokerto, Indonesia, as a bounded early childhood education setting. The research focused on teachers' accounts of how developmentally appropriate physical touch and positive verbal communication were integrated into daily classroom interactions and how these practices were perceived in relation to children's comfort and classroom participation.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were three homeroom teachers representing different educational levels within the institution: Informant A from Playgroup, Informant B from Kindergarten A, and Informant C from Kindergarten B. One teacher from each level was purposively selected because each participant had direct responsibility for daily interactions with children at different developmental stages.

The purposive selection was intended to provide contextual variation across classroom levels rather than statistical representativeness. Consistent with the concept of information power, the focused research objective, specific participant roles, and bounded educational context supported an in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives [30]. However, due to the limited number of participants, the findings are interpreted as context-specific accounts and do not support population-level generalization. The available research documentation did not provide information regarding teachers' years of professional experience or a separate recruitment record. Therefore, these characteristics were not included as analytical criteria.

Data Generation

Data were generated through structured face-to-face qualitative interviews with the three participating teachers. All informants responded to the same three core questions designed to explore teachers' perceptions of children's adjustment, relational support practices, and indicators of classroom comfort.

The first question explored teachers' descriptions of children's early school-adjustment conditions before relational support practices became routinely implemented. The second question examined teachers' perceptions of children's responses when developmentally appropriate physical touch and positive verbal communication were consistently integrated into daily interactions. The third question explored the signs that teachers interpreted as indicating greater comfort and readiness to participate in classroom activities.

The available research materials did not document standardized interview duration, formal pilot testing of the interview guide, or a verbatim transcription procedure. Therefore, the analysis was positioned as a structured descriptive interpretation of interview records and supporting field notes rather than as a transcript-intensive phenomenological analysis. Children were not directly recruited as research participants, interviewed, or assessed using standardized psychological instruments. Consequently, references to children's comfort, adjustment, and participation represent teacher-reported perceptions rather than independently measured child outcomes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification [31]. The analytical process began with repeated examination of interview records and field notes to achieve familiarity with the dataset. Descriptive coding was then conducted to identify recurring ideas related to: children's initial adjustment difficulties; emotional reassurance and calming responses; confidence and interaction; classroom participation; individual preferences toward physical contact; consistency of teacher support; and safeguarding considerations.

Following initial coding, the coded data were organized through cross-informant comparison to identify similarities, differences, and contextual variations among Playgroup, Kindergarten A, and Kindergarten B. Interpretive statements were continuously examined against the original interview records to ensure that conclusions remained grounded in participants' accounts. Importantly, divergent evidence was retained throughout the analysis process. For example, differences in children's preferences regarding physical touch and the need to rebuild relational routines after prolonged absence were considered meaningful contextual information rather than treated as inconsistencies.

No intercoder reliability coefficient was reported because the available research documentation did not establish an independent parallel-coding procedure. The overall qualitative analytical pathway is presented in Figure 1, illustrating the transformation of contextual teacher accounts into descriptive codes, cross-informant comparisons, and context-bounded thematic interpretations.

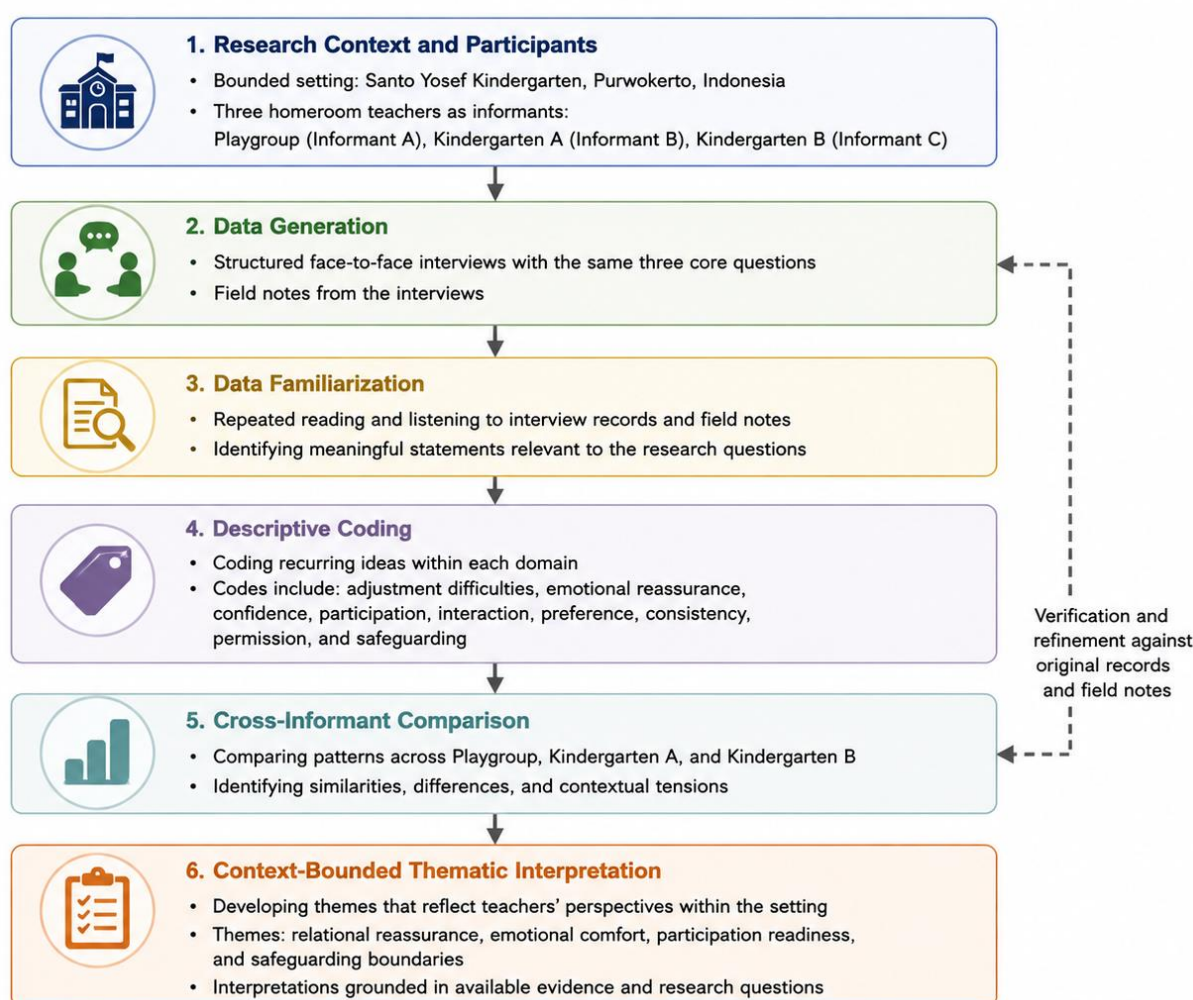


Figure 1. Qualitative Data Generation and Analytical Pathway for Exploring Teachers' Perspectives on Safe Physical Touch and Positive Verbal Communication

Figure 1 illustrates the analytical pathway employed in this study, showing how contextual teacher accounts were transformed into descriptive codes, cross-informant comparisons, and context-bounded thematic interpretations. The pathway emphasizes the relationship between data generation, systematic

qualitative analysis, and interpretive verification while maintaining the boundaries of teacher-reported evidence.

Trustworthiness

To strengthen methodological transparency, this study followed principles from international qualitative research reporting frameworks, including the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) and the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) [32], [33]. Trustworthiness was addressed through several strategies, including:

1. Source checking, by comparing interpretations with the available interview records and field notes;
2. Cross-informant comparison, by examining similarities and differences among teachers from different classroom levels;
3. Attention to disconfirming evidence, by retaining variations and limitations rather than presenting only positive interpretations; and
4. Analytical boundary clarification, by explicitly distinguishing teacher perceptions from measured child outcomes.

These procedures align with qualitative quality criteria emphasizing credibility, transparency, coherence, and interpretive responsibility [34], [35]. Formal member checking, peer debriefing, and quantitative intercoder agreement were not reported because these procedures were not documented in the available research records.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

The findings are organized around three analytic domains corresponding to the interview questions: teachers' reports of children's initial school-adjustment conditions, teachers' perceptions during the routine use of safe physical touch and positive verbal support, and teacher-reported signs interpreted as greater comfort and participation. The evidence consists of retrospective teacher accounts; therefore, all reported differences are presented as perceived patterns rather than as pretest-posttest change or intervention effects.

Teacher-reported Initial School-adjustment Conditions

Based on the interviews, teachers described the children's early days of school as a period of adjustment to a new learning environment. During this phase, they recalled various emotional responses such as shyness, fear, anxiety, and a tendency to cry when separated from parents. Teachers also perceived that some children lacked confidence when interacting with teachers or peers and had difficulty focusing on learning activities. Informant A stated, "They lack the confidence to interact with their teachers or classmates. They also have trouble staying focused on the activities."

A similar observation was reported by Informant B, who explained that "They tend not to make eye contact when interacting with teachers or peers." According to this informant, some children were reluctant to make eye contact and appeared easily anxious in situations that did not align with their wishes. Informant A likewise recalled that when children received reprimands or encountered unexpected situations, they sometimes responded by crying, complaining, or withdrawing. In this study, such behaviors are treated as teacher-reported indicators of adjustment difficulty rather than as clinical evidence of anxiety or attachment status.

Teachers also reported communication difficulties among some children. Informant B stated that "speech articulation is still unclear, so communication with others remains hindered." During learning activities, teachers described some children as less actively engaged, prone to daydreaming, and insufficiently attentive to ongoing activities. They also reported limited peer interaction, with some children preferring to play alone rather than joining group activities.

Informant C similarly described some children as "unfocused and often disrupt their peers, do not follow rules, and are aggressive." Across the three accounts, teachers therefore recalled challenges involving emotional regulation, concentration, communication, rule-following, and social interaction during early school adjustment. These reports establish the contextual conditions against which teachers later interpreted changes in children's comfort and participation.

Across Informants A, B, and C, the beginning of the school year was described as a period of developmental transition in which some children showed situational anxiety, limited emotional-social regulation, and low engagement or focus during classroom activities. These categories were derived from the teachers' retrospective accounts and are not presented as standardized diagnostic categories.

Teachers' narratives suggested that separation from parents was one source of discomfort for some children. Informant A described crying, fear, shyness, and insecurity, while Informant B noted reluctance to make eye contact in the school environment. Communication could also be complicated by unclear speech articulation. Some children responded by withdrawing from group activities and preferring solitary play. These observations are interpreted as school-adjustment behaviors rather than as evidence of a formally assessed separation-anxiety disorder.

Teachers also described contrasting responses to discomfort. While some children withdrew, Informant C observed that others expressed difficulty adapting through aggressive behavior, noncompliance with classroom rules, or disruption of peers. The interviews suggest that children differed in how they managed unfamiliar or frustrating situations, underscoring the need for individualized and non-coercive teacher responses.

These teacher-reported psychosocial conditions were perceived to affect classroom participation. Informants A and B noted that some children appeared to daydream, lose focus, or disengage from sequences of learning activities. From the teachers' perspective, supporting a sense of safety and comfort was therefore an important part of helping children become ready to participate in classroom learning.

Teacher-reported Responses During Routine Relational Support and Implementation Challenges

Informant A reported that when teachers used comforting hugs where accepted, warm pats, high-fives, or hand-holding while providing guidance, together with praise, appreciation, and verbal encouragement, some children appeared calmer and more confident and became more willing to ask and answer questions. The informant also perceived closer teacher-child interaction and a stronger sense of safety at school.

A challenge identified by Informant A was that children differ in personality and preference: some are comfortable with physical touch, whereas others are less comfortable. This variation requires teachers to observe each child's response and avoid assuming that the same form of touch is appropriate for everyone.

Informant B reported perceiving gradual differences during periods when positive touch and verbal support were used consistently in daily interaction. The informant described the child as making more eye contact, appearing more able to manage uncomfortable situations, showing greater interest in communicating and playing with peers, and responding more readily to instructions. These descriptions are retrospective teacher perceptions and do not constitute independently measured behavioral change. Informant B emphasized patience and consistency as continuing challenges. Children develop at different rates, and their responses to touch or verbal affirmation are not always immediate. Teachers therefore need to understand each child's circumstances, preferences, and needs so that the approach remains supportive rather than uncomfortable or coercive.

Informant C reported perceiving the child as more willing to listen and follow classroom rules. The teacher also noted that after an extended absence, familiar routines sometimes needed to be re-established, suggesting that consistency remained an implementation challenge rather than a stable outcome. Taken together, the three teachers perceived the routine use of safe physical touch and positive verbal affirmation as being associated with calmer behavior, greater confidence, and more adaptive interaction with teachers and peers. Because the evidence is based on teacher interviews, these patterns are reported as perceived associations rather than as statistically significant or demonstrably causal changes.

From an emotional-regulation perspective, teachers described comforting hugs when welcomed, warm pats, high-fives, and close physical support as practices they sometimes used when children appeared distressed. Informants A and B perceived some children as calmer and more receptive to guidance in these moments. The accounts are interpreted as perceptions of relational reassurance, not as evidence of secure attachment or a direct physiological effect of touch.

Teachers further linked calmer emotional states with greater readiness to participate in learning. Informant A described increased confidence through greater willingness to ask and answer questions, while Informant B reported more responsiveness to instructional guidance and greater interest in peer interaction. Informant C noted increased willingness to listen to explanations and follow classroom rules. These accounts suggest a perceived relationship between emotional comfort and classroom engagement.

Teacher-reported Indicators of Comfort and Classroom Participation

Informant A described the children as appearing happier, more relaxed, and enthusiastic about participating in activities, with better social relationships with teachers and peers. The informant also emphasized that touch should be appropriate, respectful, openly practiced in the school environment, and intended to provide emotional support within child-protection boundaries.

Informant B similarly perceived positive touch and positive words as being associated with greater comfort in learning. The child was described as calmer in the school environment, more able to build a

relationship with the teacher, and increasingly confident in interacting with peers. The informant also observed greater readiness to participate in learning activities and to express needs and feelings.

To maintain child-protection ethics, Informant B explained that touch was limited to safe, appropriate, and developmentally suitable gestures intended to support the child emotionally—for example, a high-five, an encouraging pat on the back, or a comforting hug when the child wanted support. The teacher also emphasized observing the child's response to determine whether the contact was welcome.

Positive words were described as praise for effort, appreciation of progress, and encouragement intended to build confidence without assigning negative labels or comparing the child with peers. Informant C reported that the child became more focused and willing to listen. The informant also stressed the use of neutral areas of the body and the importance of asking permission before touch, particularly before hugging.

Across the three interviews, teachers described children as appearing calmer, happier, and more willing to participate when safe touch and positive words were used consistently and responsively. These descriptions indicate a teacher-perceived pattern within routine practice; they remain uncorroborated by direct child observation or standardized measures and should not be interpreted as proof of intervention effectiveness. Informant B associated this emotional support with greater self-confidence and a stronger ability to express needs and feelings. Informant C reported improved focus, sustained attention, and willingness to listen to instructions. Teachers also perceived closer communication with children and more active interaction among peers. Taken together, these behaviors were used as practical indicators of the study's construct of "sense of comfort."

Discussions

The interviews suggest that teachers understand physical touch as one optional resource within broader responsive interaction rather than as a universal classroom technique. Across the three levels, teachers described comforting hugs when welcomed, warm pats, high-fives, supportive hand-holding, and brief reassuring contact. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that teacher-child relationships and emotionally supportive interactions are associated with adjustment, engagement, and self-regulation [11], [12]. It also aligns with early childhood touch research documenting that affectionate and comforting touch can function as embodied relational care, while its meaning depends on interactional context and the child's response [13], [14]. The present findings therefore add a teacher-perception perspective to a literature that has often relied on observational or experimental approaches.

The distinction between relational support and causal effect is critical. Social touch can communicate emotional meaning and affiliation [13], [17], but the current study did not directly observe touch episodes, measure children's physiological or behavioral responses, or compare alternative teacher practices. Teachers' descriptions are best understood as situated professional interpretations of how they attempt to help children settle and re-enter participation. This cautious framing is also consistent with the broader teacher-child relationship literature, which shows meaningful associations with school functioning without implying that a single relational behavior independently produces developmental outcomes [3], [4], [5], [6].

Safeguarding is consequently not an ancillary issue but part of the study's central contribution. Teachers emphasized personal space, attention to children's reactions, non-coercion, and asking permission before more intimate gestures such as hugs. International early childhood research similarly shows that touch can combine affection, care, guidance, and control, making professional reflexivity essential [14], [15], [16]. In this study, safe touch is therefore defined by process rather than by a fixed list of gestures: the contact must be contextually appropriate, transparent, responsive to assent or refusal, and immediately discontinued when the child appears uncomfortable. This interpretation is compatible with Indonesian child-protection regulation [36].

Positive Verbal Support as Relational Feedback

Teachers at all three levels described positive verbal communication through praise for effort, appreciation of progress, greetings, reassurance, and encouragement. Such language may communicate recognition and predictability, but praise research shows that the content and function of feedback matter. Praise is more likely to support motivation when it is sincere, specific, and oriented toward controllable processes [19], whereas person-focused or inflated praise can communicate fixed ability, unrealistic standards, or social-evaluative pressure [20], [21], [22]. The examples reported by teachers are therefore interpreted most defensibly as relational and motivational feedback rather than as a generic 'positive words' intervention.

This interpretation also helps place the local 'words of affirmation' terminology in a stronger theoretical position. Indonesian studies have described affectionate communication, nonverbal interaction, and positive language in early childhood settings [27], [28], [29], but the present study does not treat love-

language categories as a validated developmental mechanism. Instead, they are retained as contextual vocabulary for practices that can be examined through established research on teacher-child relationships, co-regulation, and feedback. The distinction is important for international relevance because it connects locally meaningful practice with concepts that are more widely operationalized in educational and developmental research.

The morning greeting and other repeated routines at Santo Yosef Kindergarten may also provide predictable transitions into the school day. Teachers perceived that supportive language helped some children move from reluctance or uncertainty toward participation, a pattern that is broadly compatible with research linking emotionally supportive classroom interactions to engagement and school readiness [2], [9], [12]. Because no direct observation or longitudinal measure was used, however, the routine should be described as a perceived relational cue rather than an empirically established emotional anchor.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Combined Role of Touch and Positive Words

A notable contribution of the study is that teachers rarely described touch and language as separate interventions. Instead, they portrayed them as coordinated elements of a responsive interaction: a child might receive a reassuring gesture together with a calm explanation, praise for effort, or encouragement to try again. Teachers associated this combination with calmness, confidence, expression of needs, peer interaction, attention, and participation. Such reports are conceptually consistent with relational and co-regulatory models in which the quality, timing, and contingency of adult response matter more than any single behavior [7], [8], [9]. They also resonate with Indonesian qualitative reports of responsive communication and affection-oriented practices [23], [24], [27].

The teacher-reported indicators of comfort - calmness, willingness to interact, expression of feelings, focus, and participation - should nevertheless remain analytically separate from standardized developmental outcomes. Large-scale early childhood research has shown that classroom interaction quality can predict social and academic functioning [1], [2], [11], yet the current dataset cannot determine whether the children experienced durable improvement, whether similar patterns would be observed by independent raters, or whether touch and positive language added benefit beyond other aspects of teacher responsiveness. The contribution is therefore interpretive: it identifies how teachers link their relational practices to children's visible participation in one institutional context.

The findings also underscore why praise and touch should not be romanticized. Positive intentions do not guarantee positive reception. Children differ in sensory preference, prior experience, temperament, social confidence, and comfort with adult proximity; likewise, praise can feel supportive, controlling, or evaluative depending on wording and context [13], [19], [22]. Teachers' repeated emphasis on observing children's responses is therefore theoretically meaningful. It shifts professional practice from 'giving affection' to monitoring whether a specific child actually experiences the interaction as supportive.

Contextual Conditions, Safeguarding, and Practice Implications

Teachers identified institutional consistency, patience, and alignment with a caring educational ethos as conditions supporting responsive practice. At the same time, they described challenges related to individual differences and the need to re-establish routines after absence. These accounts suggest that relational support is embedded in classroom organization and professional judgment rather than delivered as a standardized script. International research similarly indicates that interaction quality is shaped by the broader classroom and program environment [18]. Practical implementation should therefore focus on staff reflection, consistent safeguarding expectations, and developmentally appropriate alternatives for children who do not welcome touch.

Teachers also attributed some inconsistency to differences between school and home routines. Because parents were not interviewed, this explanation cannot be independently verified and should be treated as a teacher interpretation rather than a finding about parenting quality. Future studies should include parent perspectives and direct classroom observation to examine how relational expectations operate across settings. This would also allow researchers to test whether the teacher-perceived signs of comfort are visible to other informants and whether they persist beyond immediate classroom interactions.

For international early childhood practice, the central implication is not that teachers should increase physical contact. Rather, professional responsiveness requires a repertoire of verbal, nonverbal, spatial, and relational supports from which the least intrusive and most child-acceptable response can be selected. Touch, when used, should be non-coercive and contingent on the child's willingness; positive verbal feedback should be specific and respectful rather than inflated or identity-defining principle positions safeguarding, child agency, and relational warmth as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored how three teachers at Santo Yosef Kindergarten interpreted safe physical touch and positive verbal communication within children's early school adjustment. Teachers described non-coercive gestures such as high-fives, warm pats, supportive hand-holding, and comforting hugs when welcomed, together with praise, appreciation, and encouragement. They associated these practices with children appearing calmer, more confident, more willing to communicate, and more ready to participate in classroom routines. The accounts also emphasized individual preference, patience, consistency, permission, and clear safeguarding boundaries. The findings do not establish that touch or positive words caused behavioral or academic improvement. Their contribution lies in showing how teachers integrate embodied and verbal support within a broader responsive relationship and how they negotiate the ethical condition that children must be able to accept or refuse contact. For practice, relational warmth should therefore be individualized and safeguarding-led: touch is only one optional resource, while verbal support should remain specific, respectful, and non-evaluative. More robust multi-site research with direct observation, child-appropriate voice methods, parent perspectives, and longitudinal or mixed-method measures is required before claims about effectiveness can be made.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted at one early childhood institution with only three teacher informants, so the findings are context-bound and do not represent the full range of teacher or child experiences. Second, the evidence is retrospective teacher self-report and is vulnerable to recall and social-desirability bias. Third, children were not interviewed or directly observed for research purposes, parents were not included, and no standardized measures of comfort, anxiety, attachment, emotional regulation, or participation were used; data-source triangulation is therefore limited. Fourth, the available research record does not document standardized interview duration, a formal pilot of the interview guide, a verbatim transcription protocol, participant years of experience, or an independent parallel-coding procedure. Fifth, before/after language in teacher recollections cannot establish causality, intervention effectiveness, or duration of perceived change. Finally, formal ethics approval identifiers, institutional-permission documentation, consent procedures, and data-storage details were not available in the source materials used for this revision and should be verified before resubmission. Future research should recruit multiple early childhood sites and use complementary sources, including systematic classroom observation, child-appropriate methods for eliciting children's perspectives, parent interviews, and validated measures of adjustment and participation. Longitudinal or mixed-method designs could examine whether relational patterns persist over time and whether perceived benefits vary according to child preference, developmental level, or classroom context. Research on educator touch should also report safeguarding, assent/refusal processes, and institutional ethics procedures in enough detail to permit evaluation of both developmental relevance and professional safety.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The researchers collaboratively designed the study, conducted interviews, analyzed the data, and wrote the entire manuscript for this article during three online meetings and two intensive in-person meetings held over three full days. The first author's primary role was to propose the topic, suggest the research methods and subjects, conduct interviews, and describe the data. The second author played a key role in organizing the ideas coherently, analyzing the data, and reviewing the English translation. Meanwhile, the third author contributed by expanding the references, reviewing the entire text, and providing additional ideas.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were not used for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of research findings, or the generation of scientific conclusions. AI-based tools, if used, were limited to language improvement, proofreading, and manuscript formatting assistance under the authors' supervision. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, integrity, and scientific validity of the content presented in this article.

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