



## **Psychological Overview of Children in Conflict with the Law at Ternate Special Child Development Institution**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to identify early psychological conditions among children at the Ternate Class II Special Child Development Institution (LPKA) and to describe the emotional, social, and behavioural responses that emerge during development. The study used a qualitative descriptive approach with purposive sampling, involving 12 children aged 13–18 years who met specific criteria and were willing to participate. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation, using semi-structured interview guidelines, observation sheets, and field notes. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, including transcription, data reduction, coding, and theme extraction. The research findings indicate that most children experience emotional vulnerabilities such as fear, guilt, and anxiety; a need for social acceptance and emotional support; and adaptive skills and potential resilience that develop through positive interactions in institutional settings. Key contributing factors include previous experiences of violence, lack of family support, and social stigma. These findings underscore the importance of ongoing psychological support, a humanistic counselling approach, and consistent social support to improve children's psychological well-being during and after counselling.

**Keywords:** children in conflict with the law, psychological conditions of children, special child development institutions

### **INTRODUCTION**

Children are a vital asset for the nation's future and deserve protection, care, and the opportunity to develop optimally. However, in reality, many children find themselves in legal trouble and are required to undergo counselling at Special Child Development Institutions (LPKA). Children in conflict with the law (ABH) are individuals under 18 who are involved in the criminal justice process, either as perpetrators, victims, or witnesses (Peraturan Menteri Negara Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak Nomor 15 Tahun 2010). Based on Undang-undang

Nomor 11 Tahun 2012 concerning the Juvenile Criminal Justice System, every child in conflict with the law has the right to receive special treatment that guarantees the continuity of their growth and development as well as their psychological well-being.

However, the reality on the ground shows that the process of fostering children in LPKA often causes significant psychological stress. Children placed in closed foster care environments face various forms of stress, such as a sense of loss of freedom, fear of punishment, regret for their actions, and social pressure resulting from the stigma of being a "criminal." Research shows that some LPKA inmates feel unsafe, anxious, and emotionally stressed while in the correctional institution (Syahfitri & Putra, 2021). This situation can give rise to various emotional and behavioural reactions, such as anxiety, guilt, withdrawal, and difficulty in building healthy social relationships (Septiani et al., 2021).

According to Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development, adolescence is a stage of identity search (identity vs. role confusion) in which individuals try to understand themselves and their role in society. In the context of children in conflict with the law, this stage becomes more complex because their self-identity is shaken by negative experiences and social labels (Santrock, 2019). Meanwhile, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) asserts that basic needs, such as safety and social acceptance, serve as a foundation for healthy psychological development. When these needs are not met, for example, neglect or psychological abuse in childhood (which reflects unmet emotional and psychological needs), it negatively impacts adolescents' social-emotional competence (Strathearn et al., 2020).

Past experiences, such as domestic violence, poverty, lack of parental support, and negative social interactions, also influence the psychological condition of children in LPKA (Aditaracman & Hamzah, 2023). Various studies show that children who experience traumatic

experiences are more vulnerable to emotional and behavioural disorders, especially if they do not receive adequate psychological support during the foster care period (Rinaldi & Yuliani, 2020). Therefore, understanding their psychological condition early is an important step in determining the appropriate intervention and guidance.

Although research on the psychological well-being of children in conflict with the law has been conducted across various contexts, most studies continue to focus on legal aspects, criminal factors, or the effectiveness of guidance programs in general. Studies that specifically identify the psychological conditions of children in LPKA, especially in the early stages of development and in the context of the Eastern Indonesian region, such as LPKA Class II Ternate, are still minimal. In addition, there has been little research that comprehensively describes their emotional, social, and behavioural experiences during training. This gap is important because differences in socio-cultural context can influence the form of psychological experience, the need for support, and the response to rehabilitative programs. This study seeks to address this gap by early identification of children's psychological well-being in conflict with the law at the Ternate Class II Penitentiary. The primary focus of this study is to describe the emotional, social, and behavioural experiences of children during their rehabilitation period and to identify factors influencing their psychological well-being. The results are expected to serve as a basis for developing more humane rehabilitation programs oriented toward children's psychological recovery.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Approaches and Types of Research**

This research uses a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive approach to understand and describe in depth the psychological conditions of

children in conflict with the law, without manipulating the variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach enables researchers to gain a holistic understanding of children's emotional, social, and behavioural experiences in foster care settings (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019).

### **Research Subject**

The subjects of this study were children in conflict with the law undergoing rehabilitation at the Ternate Class II LPKA. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2014). The participant criteria for this study included: children aged 13–18 years who had undergone at least 3 months of coaching and were willing to participate and provide informed consent after the researcher explained the study. The study included 12 children, selected based on their openness and willingness to participate in the interview.

### **Research Instruments**

This study also utilised several instruments, including semi-structured interview guides, non-participant observation sheets, and systematically compiled field notes. The interview guides were used to explore children's subjective experiences regarding their feelings, social interactions, and behavioural responses to the institutional environment. The semi-structured format was chosen to allow the researcher flexibility to develop questions based on participants' responses, as recommended in a qualitative approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Patton, 2014). Meanwhile, observation sheets were prepared to record nonverbal behaviour, the intensity of social interactions, emotional expressions, and the dynamics of children's daily activities in a natural, unobtrusive manner, without the researcher's direct involvement. Field notes were then used to capture impressions, the context of the situation, and important information not captured by other means.

The research instrument was developed based on several relevant developmental and social psychology theories. Erikson's psychosocial development theory (1968) provides the primary foundation for understanding the dynamics of children's identity, as adolescence is a stage of identity versus role confusion that is particularly vulnerable to disruption when children experience stigma and pressure in the foster care environment. In addition, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943; 1954) was used as a basis for formulating questions about the needs for safety, emotional support, social acceptance, and self-esteem, which are fundamental to children's psychological functioning. The research instrument also draws on Lazarus' (2006) stress and coping theory to explore sources of stress, children's assessments of the coaching situation, and the coping strategies they use to adjust. Furthermore, the concept of social support as a protective factor against stress, as proposed by Cohen and Wills (1985), also serves as a reference in compiling observation indicators of the quality of children's relationships with mentors, counsellors, and peers. In addition, Cooley's (2017) theory of self-stigma and self-concept provides a basis for understanding how children interpret society's views of them and how these views shape the formation of identity and self-confidence.

Based on this theoretical foundation, all research instruments were designed to capture children's experiences holistically, from emotional and social aspects to the adaptation and identity-formation processes during their time in the LPKA. This instrumental approach ensured that the data obtained was not only descriptive but also able to reveal the deep psychological dynamics experienced by the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was carried out thematically using the model by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of data reduction through sorting and simplifying data from interviews and observations relevant to

the research focus. After that, the data were presented in a descriptive narrative to illustrate the research findings systematically. The final stage was drawing conclusions, which aimed to early identify the psychological conditions of children in conflict with the law at the Ternate Class II LPKA. To increase data validity, this study employs triangulation of sources and methods by comparing data from interviews, observations, and guidance officer information (Denzin, 2017).

## RESEARCH RESULT

The research results are presented under three main aspects that serve as the basis for the research instrument: emotional, social, behavioural, and adaptation.

### Emotional Aspects

In the initial phase of entering LPKA, almost all children exhibited strong emotional reactions in the form of fear, anxiety, and tension. The children described the institutional environment as a strange place that caused psychological stress. Some experienced sleep disturbances and feelings of insecurity, as expressed by participant A (16 years old), who admitted to feeling very afraid and having difficulty sleeping in the first few days.

*"When I first entered, I was really scared. I couldn't even sleep. It felt like I was in a strange place with everyone's eyes on me."*  
(Participant A, 16 years old)

These reactions indicate the emergence of acute stress symptoms such as tension, insomnia, and excessive anxiety. After an initial adjustment period, new emotions related to self-evaluation emerge: guilt and regret for the actions that landed them in the LPKA. Participant M (18 years old) expressed regret and a desire to correct his mistakes to make his family proud.

*"I'm sorry, I didn't expect my actions to disappoint my family. I just want to go home and make my family proud again"* (Participant M, 18 years old)

This feeling of guilt then serves a dual purpose: as a psychological burden and as an initial motivation for change. In general, participants' emotional experiences were characterised by fear, anxiety, guilt, and an internal effort to regain self-acceptance.

### **Social Aspects**

Children demonstrate a strong need for acceptance, attention, and emotional support from adults and peers. Participants stated that warm interactions with mentors and counsellors helped them feel calmer and more valued. Participant D (15 years old) reported feeling more enthusiastic about participating in activities when adults listened to his stories.

*"When someone comes to chat, I feel cared for. It makes me even more enthusiastic about participating in activities."* (Participant D, 15 years old)

Observations show that children who receive consistent interpersonal support tend to be more emotionally stable than those who tend to isolate themselves. Furthermore, some children expressed concerns about social rejection after leaving LPKA. Fear of stigma was a persistent source of anxiety, as expressed by participant J (17 years old), who worried about how society would view him when he returned home.

*"I'm afraid I won't be accepted when I go home. People will see me as a criminal."* (Participant J, 17 years old)

This anxiety reflects an unresolved psychological burden, particularly related to self-image and social acceptance. Therefore, this social aspect confirms that emotional support within the institutional environment is an important protective factor against stress and directly affects a child's ability to adjust.

## **Behavioral and Adaptation Aspects**

In the early stages, children struggle to adapt to a closed, rule-filled environment. However, as they develop, most demonstrate positive adaptation. Children begin participating in various activities, such as religious activities, sports, and skills training provided by the institution.

One prominent finding in this area was the emergence of children's resilience potential through hairdressing training. Participant H (17 years old) demonstrated his ability as a hairdresser and felt that this skill boosted his confidence.

*"I'm happy to be able to hone my hairdressing skills. Now I can help my friends here. When I graduate, maybe I can start my own business."* (Participant H, 17 years old)

These activities are not just a way to fill time, but also a way for children to develop a positive identity as productive individuals. Researchers' observations indicate that children who actively participate in training activities tend to be more open, optimistic, and confident. They also have long-term goals, such as starting a business after completing the training period. However, some children still expressed anxiety about the future, particularly regarding social acceptance after reintegration. Overall, behavioural and adaptive aspects demonstrate that children have the potential for resilience, which develops through positive experiences, social support, and active involvement in developmental activities.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study illustrate that the psychological condition of children in conflict with the law (ABH) at the Class II Ternate Correctional Institution (LPKA) is a complex phenomenon involving emotional, social, behavioural, and adaptive aspects. Children in the



correctional environment not only face legal consequences but also must face psychological challenges such as fear, regret, loss of self-worth, and the process of rediscovering their identity. Within the framework of developmental psychology, this aligns with the concept that adolescence is a critical transitional period marked by the search for identity and emotional stability (Erikson, 1968).

The initial stages of a child entering LPKA are marked by intense emotional reactions such as fear, anxiety, and rejection of the new environment. These conditions indicate a form of adaptive stress arising from the loss of freedom and sudden changes in the social environment. According to Lazarus' (2006) stress and coping theory, stress arises when an individual perceives a situation as threatening to his or her well-being and feels that he or she lacks the resources to cope.

Interview results showed that most children experienced sleep disturbances, emotional tension, and feelings of insecurity. This condition aligns with the findings of 'Ashifa and Humaedi (2024), which states that children in custody in the early stages of detention tend to exhibit symptoms of psychological stress, such as irritability, crying, and social withdrawal. However, over time, children begin to show signs of adjustment. Children adapt through the support of peers and correctional officers, who act as a buffer against stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This demonstrates the importance of supportive interpersonal relationships in a closed coaching environment.

After the initial phase of anxiety, children begin to show feelings of guilt and regret for their past actions. In the context of moral development, this phenomenon indicates the process of internalising values and engaging in moral self-evaluation. According to Kohlberg and Hersch (1977), teenagers who begin to think at a conventional level will judge behaviour based on social norms and a sense of responsibility towards others.

The results of this study align with those of Fadila et al. (2020), who conducted a study at the Tangerang Child Protection Institution (LPKA) and found that inmates who received moral counselling demonstrated increased ethical awareness and personal responsibility. Their feelings of guilt served as a gateway to developing a reflective attitude toward the past. In the context of psychotherapy, this feeling of guilt has rehabilitative value. According to Frankl (2006), awareness of mistakes can become a source of new meaning for individuals if directed toward self-improvement and future improvement. Therefore, feelings of guilt among foster children can be seen as an early sign of positive motivation for change.

In addition, children's need to be noticed, listened to, and valued emerged as a key theme in this study. Children in foster care who felt cared for by their foster care staff or counsellors reported better emotional well-being than those who felt neglected. In line with Maslow's (1954) theory of needs, the need for a sense of belonging (love and belongingness) serves as the foundation for healthy personality development. In a closed environment like LPKA, emotional support from empathetic adult figures helps replace the warmth of family. A study by Selly et al. (2023) also supports this: foster children who receive personal attention from their mentors show improvements in social skills and emotional control. Social support not only reduces psychological stress but also builds children's trust in the foster care system (Acoba, 2024). Thus, positive interpersonal relationships are a crucial protective factor for children's mental health in LPKA. A humanistic and participatory development environment has been shown to reduce aggressive behaviour and increase self-confidence (Rinaldi & Yuliani, 2020).

One significant finding of this research is the emergence of initiatives to develop children's potential through skills training activities, one of which is becoming a barber. This activity serves as a means of self-

expression and strength-based rehabilitation. In the context of psychological theory, this training supports the formation of self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1997), an individual's belief in their ability to master skills and face life's challenges. When a child successfully cuts a friend's hair and receives praise, the experience of success reinforces their sense of competence and self-confidence.

This activity is also closely related to the stages of identity development according to Erikson (1968), namely, identity vs. role confusion. Children who participate in hairdressing training begin to develop a new social role as "skilled workers" rather than "violators." This process creates a psychological experience that fosters self-worth and a sense of purpose in life. A study by Syahrial et al. (2024) at the Kendari Child Protection and Rehabilitation Centre (LPKA) found that life skills development programs, such as basic computer skills, electronic repair, barbershops, catfish farming, painting and other arts and crafts, and musical instrument skills, significantly improved positive self-concept. Children felt more useful, independent, and optimistic about the future. Similar results were also reported by Firdaus et al. (2021), who highlighted the role of vocational skills in the social reintegration of children post-counselling.

On the other hand, despite showing positive development, most children still feel anxious about the future and fear social rejection after leaving the institution. These feelings indicate a conflict between hopes for change and concerns about social acceptance. This phenomenon aligns with Cooley's (2017) looking-glass self theory, which holds that an individual's self-concept is shaped by perceptions of how others view them. Children in foster care who believe they will continue to be labelled as "perpetrators" will experience obstacles in developing a positive self-concept.

Study Subroto and Aliyandra (2024) shows that societal stigma against former foster children is often a significant barrier to social reintegration, which can ultimately lead to stress, anxiety, and even a desire to withdraw from society. Therefore, the fostering approach should not only focus on technical skills but also include psychosocial counselling and community education programs to help children be accepted back into society in a positive manner.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that the development of children in conflict with the law requires a psychologically and humanistically based approach. Children in foster care are not simply perpetrators of violations, but individuals in the process of psychosocial development who require guidance and space to grow.

The humanistic approach, as outlined by Rogers (1995), emphasises the importance of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and authenticity in the mentor-child relationship. When children feel accepted and heard, their potential for self-actualisation emerges naturally. A study by Zulamri and Juki (2019) shows that individual counselling at LPKA can increase children's openness, empathy, and motivation to learn. Thus, emotional support, skills training, and positive interpersonal relationships must be key pillars of the child development system in LPKA. This approach not only accelerates psychological recovery but also strengthens children's resilience, enabling them to return to society with a new, healthy, productive, and meaningful identity.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results and designing further research. First, the number of participants was limited, and the study focused on only one location: the Class II Ternate Child Protection Institution (LPKA). Social, cultural, and developmental systems across regions can differ, so the psychological experiences of children in care may vary accordingly.

Second, this study relied on qualitative methods using interviews and observations, which rely heavily on participants' openness and honesty. In the context of a closed institution like LPKA, some children may still feel awkward or afraid to express their feelings honestly due to surveillance or fear of the repercussions of their words. This may result in some data being partial or failing to reflect the depth of their psychological experiences fully.

To address and minimise these limitations, future researchers are advised to: 1) involve more participants from various LPKAs in different regions to obtain a more comprehensive and representative picture of the psychological conditions of children in conflict with the law. 2) Use mixed methods that combine qualitative approaches with quantitative psychological measurements, for example, using scales of psychological well-being, stress, or self-efficacy. By taking these steps into account, further research is expected to provide a more substantial contribution to the development of psychologically based development programs, while also enriching academic understanding of the adaptation and resilience processes of children in conflict with the law in Indonesia.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study found that children in conflict with the law at the Ternate Class II Correctional Institution (LPKA) experienced various psychological conditions, such as anxiety, fear, loss of family support, and difficulty adapting early in their rehabilitation period. However, some children demonstrated positive recovery and adaptation skills through religious activities, social support, and skills training, such as developing their potential as barbers. These activities were shown to increase self-confidence and a sense of empowerment. Positive relationships with counsellors and peers were also important protective factors against psychological stress. Overall, this study emphasises that children in

conflict with the law require a rehabilitative and psychologically oriented rehabilitation approach, not simply punishment. Consequently, LPKA needs to strengthen counselling services, offer activities aligned with children's interests, and involve families in the rehabilitation process to optimise social reintegration.

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