

Selective Openness and Age-Bounded Voice in Rural Muslim Families: Everyday Communication and Parent-Child Closeness

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Abstract

Parent-child closeness is often associated with open and equal family communication, but this framing may overlook how disclosure and participation are negotiated where parental authority and age hierarchy remain important. This qualitative multiple-case study examined everyday communication in five families in Sukamulya, a rural Muslim community in Pringsewu, Indonesia. The participants comprised five parental couples and five children aged 6–12 years. Family-based semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and village documentation were reanalysed using a cross-case thematic matrix. Closeness developed through five interconnected processes: selective openness, parent-initiated disclosure, empathic listening followed by guidance, practical support, and age-bounded participation in decisions. Mothers frequently became children's preferred listeners, while fear of a negative paternal response restricted disclosure in one family. Children expressed preferences on matters directly affecting them but remained excluded from adult household decisions. Ordinary shared routines provided recurring spaces for affective safety. The study introduces age-bounded voice as a context-sensitive account of child participation between one-way parental authority and unrestricted equality. Family closeness depended less on the amount of conversation than on children's expectations that disclosure would receive attention, emotional recognition, and proportionate guidance.

Keywords: age-bounded voice; child disclosure; family communication; parent-child closeness; rural Muslim families

Abstrak

Kedekatan orang tua dan anak sering dikaitkan dengan komunikasi keluarga yang terbuka dan setara, tetapi kerangka tersebut dapat mengabaikan negosiasi keterbukaan dan partisipasi ketika otoritas orang tua serta hierarki usia tetap penting. Studi multikasus kualitatif ini mengkaji komunikasi sehari-hari pada lima keluarga di Sukamulya, komunitas Muslim perdesaan di Pringsewu, Indonesia. Partisipan terdiri atas lima pasangan orang tua dan lima anak berusia 6–12 tahun. Wawancara semiterstruktur berbasis keluarga, observasi nonpartisipatif, dan dokumentasi desa dianalisis ulang menggunakan matriks tematik lintas kasus. Kedekatan berkembang melalui lima proses yang saling berhubungan: keterbukaan selektif, pengungkapan yang diprakarsai orang tua, mendengarkan secara empatik yang diikuti arahan, dukungan praktis, dan partisipasi terbatas usia dalam pengambilan keputusan. Ibu lebih sering menjadi pendengar pilihan anak, sedangkan kekhawatiran terhadap respons negatif ayah membatasi keterbukaan pada satu keluarga. Anak dapat menyampaikan preferensi atas hal yang memengaruhi mereka secara langsung, tetapi tidak dilibatkan dalam keputusan rumah tangga orang dewasa. Rutinitas bersama menjadi ruang berulang untuk membangun rasa aman afektif. Penelitian ini memperkenalkan konsep suara terbatas usia sebagai penjelasan partisipasi anak di antara otoritas orang tua satu arah dan kesetaraan tanpa batas. Kedekatan lebih ditentukan oleh harapan anak bahwa keterbukaannya akan

memperoleh perhatian, pengakuan emosional, dan arahan yang proporsional daripada sekadar banyaknya percakapan.

Kata kunci: *suara berbatas usia; keterbukaan anak; komunikasi keluarga; kedekatan orang tua-anak; keluarga Muslim perdesaan*

I. Introduction

Family communication is not merely the transfer of information between household members. It is the relational environment through which children learn whether their experiences will be heard, whether emotions can be expressed safely, and whether disagreement will lead to guidance, dismissal, or punishment. The quality of this environment is particularly important during middle childhood, when children's social worlds expand through school and peer relationships while parents continue to exercise substantial authority over everyday decisions. Communication therefore performs two simultaneous functions: it enables parents to provide care and direction, and it provides children with a route to recognition, participation, and emotional security.

Research on family communication has commonly distinguished between conversation-oriented environments, which encourage discussion, and conformity-oriented environments, which emphasise shared beliefs and parental authority (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Schrodtt et al., 2008). These dimensions are useful, but they can encourage an overly simple contrast between openness and control. Developmental research shows that disclosure is relationally negotiated rather than automatically produced by parental questioning. Children and adolescents assess how parents are likely to react, whether their privacy will be respected, and whether the issue falls within a personal or parental domain (Smetana, 2008; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Branje, 2018). Parental empathy is also associated with greater disclosure because it makes difficult conversations less threatening (Main et al., 2024). From this perspective, openness is not a stable characteristic possessed by a family; it is an interactional achievement that may differ by parent, topic, time, and anticipated response.

The idea that all family members must communicate as equals also requires qualification. Children have a right to be heard, but participation does not necessarily entail equal authority over every household decision. Parents may recognise a child's views on school, leisure, friendships, or personal belongings while retaining responsibility for adult financial and domestic matters. The resulting relationship is neither purely hierarchical nor completely egalitarian. It is better understood as negotiated participation in which voice expands or contracts according to age, competence, and the perceived relevance of a decision. This distinction is especially important in collectivist settings where respect for elders and relational harmony coexist with growing expectations for child-centred parenting.

Indonesian scholarship increasingly recognises that family communication cannot be understood solely through Western assumptions that direct verbal openness always represents relational health. Communication may include indirectness, silence, deference, and practical acts of care. Recent Indonesian research, for example, has shown that silence can function as an active strategy for protecting relationships rather than simply indicating communicative failure (Nafisa & Puspita, 2026). Research with

Indonesian parents has also highlighted the importance of cultural expectations in how parents interpret children's development and their own responsibilities (Agung et al., 2023). These studies suggest the need to examine what family members actually do in ordinary interactions instead of classifying families too quickly as either open or closed.

The socio-religious context adds another layer. Islamic communication ethics emphasise truthful, gentle, patient, and respectful speech between parents and children (Asriani & Wahyudi, 2026). Studies of Muslim family life likewise identify empathy, mutual understanding, moral guidance, and consistent care as important principles of family communication and resilience (Dwinandita, 2024; Rasit et al., 2024). Nevertheless, similarity between an observed practice and an Islamic ethical principle does not demonstrate that religion caused the practice. Empirical research must distinguish religion as a community context from religion as an explicitly articulated mechanism. This study therefore situates the families within a rural Muslim community but does not label ordinary warmth or guidance as specifically Islamic unless participants themselves make that connection.

Sukamulya is an agrarian village in Banyumas District, Pringsewu Regency, Indonesia. Village records describe a population of 2,753 residents in 808 households, with livelihoods concentrated in farming, agricultural labour, and small-scale employment. Collective life is shaped by neighbourhood interaction, mutual assistance, and religious activity. At the same time, parents and school-aged children negotiate familiar pressures: work obligations, school demands, children's peer experiences, and changing expectations about child participation. This setting offers an opportunity to examine closeness as it is produced through routine face-to-face communication rather than through exceptional family events.

Previous studies in Indonesia have frequently examined family communication as an instrument for forming character, creating harmony, or preventing problematic behaviour. Many conclude that good communication is open, supportive, and affectionate, but fewer explain how children decide whom to approach, how parents initiate disclosure when children remain silent, or how children's voice is bounded in actual decision-making. The empirical gap is therefore not whether communication matters, but how closeness is negotiated within everyday asymmetries of age, parental role, and emotional accessibility.

This study asks: How do everyday communication practices support or constrain parent-child closeness in rural families with children aged 6-12 years? It contributes by moving beyond a checklist of effective interpersonal communication. Through paired parent and child accounts across five family cases, the study identifies selective openness, parent-initiated disclosure, and age-bounded voice as mechanisms that explain why apparently warm families may still differ in children's willingness and ability to speak.

II. Method

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case design to examine how everyday family communication supported or constrained parent-child closeness. Each family was treated as a bounded case because communication was understood as a relational process involving both parental practices and children's experiences.

The multiple-case design allowed communication patterns to be examined within individual families and subsequently compared across households.

The study was conducted in Sukamulya, Banyumas District, Pringsewu Regency, Indonesia. The village is characterised by agricultural livelihoods, close neighbourhood relationships, collective social activities, and regular religious practices. Village documentation recorded 2,753 residents living in 808 households. This information was used to describe the social setting rather than as a quantitative sampling frame.

Participants were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research objective. Ten families participated in the study, with each family represented by one parent and one child aged 6–12 years. The study therefore involved 20 informants, comprising ten parents and ten children. Participating families were selected when the child lived with both parents, regularly interacted with the participating parent, and both informants were willing to describe their everyday communication experiences. The participating parent was the person directly involved in the child’s daily care and interaction.

Table 1. Structure of Participants and Data Sources

Family case	Parent informant	Child informant	Child’s age	Main data sources
F1	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F2	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F3	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F4	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F5	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F6	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F7	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F8	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F9	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
F10	1	1	6–12 years	Interviews and observation
Total	10	10		20 informants

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and village documentation. Separate interview guides were used for parents and children. Parent interviews explored openness, emotional responsiveness, listening, guidance, practical support, children’s participation in decision-making, and shared family activities. Child interviews covered similar topics using age-appropriate language, including whom children approached when experiencing problems, how parents responded to sadness or disagreement, and whether children felt heard and involved in decisions affecting them.

The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to examine the same broad issues across families while allowing participants to describe significant experiences in their own words. Follow-up questions were used to clarify particular communication situations, such as school-related problems, emotional withdrawal, parental correction, and family decision-making. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian. Selected quotations were translated into British English by preserving their intended meaning and conversational tone rather than following literal word order.

Non-participant observations complemented the interview data by recording conversational comfort, turn-taking, parental attention, tone of voice, emotional responses, supportive gestures, and shared activities. Village documents were used to establish the demographic and social context of the research setting. Personal names and identifying information were removed from the dataset and replaced with family codes F1–F10.

Data were analysed using cross-case thematic analysis informed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). (Dwinandita, 2024; Rasit et al., 2024) The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts and observation notes. Relevant extracts were initially grouped into broad categories of openness, empathy, support, guidance, child participation, and positive family interaction.

Parent and child accounts were then compared within each family to identify agreement and differences in how communication was understood and experienced. Differences between their accounts were treated as meaningful relational evidence rather than as reporting errors. The ten family cases were subsequently compared using a thematic matrix to identify recurring patterns and distinctive experiences.

Through this iterative process, the initial categories were refined into six themes: selective openness, parent-initiated disclosure, empathic listening followed by guidance, practical parental support, age-bounded voice, and recurring shared routines. The themes were repeatedly checked against the interview extracts and observational evidence to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of parent interviews, child interviews, observations, and village documents. Paired parent–child perspectives also enabled the analysis to distinguish parental intentions from children’s experiences of communication. Data adequacy was considered using the principle of information power, given the focused research objective, purposively selected family cases, paired perspectives, and multiple sources of evidence (Malterud et al., 2016). The findings are context-specific and are not intended to represent all rural or Muslim families in Indonesia.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Result

The cross-case analysis of ten participating families identified six interconnected communication patterns that shaped parent–child closeness: selective openness, parent-initiated disclosure, empathic listening followed by guidance, practical parental support, age-bounded voice, and shared family routines. These themes emerged from comparisons between parental accounts, children’s experiences, and observations of everyday family interaction.

Although the ten families generally described their relationships as warm and supportive, the findings revealed considerable variation in how communication occurred. Children did not always disclose experiences spontaneously or communicate equally with both parents. Their willingness to speak depended on the topic, the parent’s emotional accessibility, previous responses to disclosure, and the

setting in which communication took place. Similarly, children's opportunities to express opinions were recognised across the families, but the degree of influence they exercised remained connected to their age and the type of decision being discussed.

The findings therefore indicate that parent-child closeness was not produced by communication frequency alone. It was shaped by whether children perceived communication as emotionally safe, whether parents responded attentively, and whether everyday family routines provided regular opportunities for interaction. Table 2 summarises the main patterns, representative evidence, and cross-case interpretations.

Table 2. Cross-Case Patterns of Parent-Child Communication Across Ten Families

Theme	Cross-case evidence	Representative quotations	Cross-case interpretation
Selective openness	Children disclosed experiences according to topic, emotional condition, and the parent perceived as more approachable.	"I usually tell Mum because she listens first." (F1-C); "Dad helps with homework, but I tell Mum when I am sad." (F6-C); "I talk to whichever parent is calmer." (F9-C)	Emotional accessibility shaped children's willingness to disclose more strongly than communication frequency.
Parent-initiated disclosure	Parents commonly recognised emotional or behavioural changes before children explained their problems.	"We ask when the child becomes unusually quiet." (F2-P); "While gardening together, the child gradually starts talking." (F7-P); "Dinner conversations often become the moment when stories emerge." (F10-P)	Disclosure frequently developed through parental attentiveness rather than spontaneous child initiative.
Empathic listening followed by guidance	Parents generally listened before providing explanations, advice, or correction.	"I listen first before giving advice." (F4-P); "They let me finish before responding." (F8-C); "If someone becomes angry immediately, I stop talking." (F10-C)	Guidance strengthened closeness when it followed emotional recognition and attentive listening.
Practical parental support	Parents demonstrated care through learning assistance, encouragement, problem-solving, and daily support.	"Mum helps me with homework." (F4-C); "We study together every evening." (F6-P); "They support what I enjoy as long as it is good for me." (F9-C)	Practical support reinforced children's perception that their parents were consistently available.
Age-bounded voice	Children expressed opinions on matters directly affecting them, while parents retained authority over broader household decisions.	"They asked which school I wanted." (F3-C); "Adult family decisions remain our responsibility." (F1-P); "My opinion is considered before they decide." (F10-C)	Children's participation was meaningful but remained bounded by age, competence, and parental responsibility.
Shared family routines	Daily routines provided predictable opportunities for communication and emotional connection.	"We usually talk before sleeping." (F4-P); "Dinner is when everyone shares stories." (F8-P); "After school Mum always asks how my day was." (F9-C)	Ordinary routines functioned as the main communication infrastructure within the families.

Table 3 presents the distribution of the six patterns across the ten family cases. The frequencies are used to illustrate the strength and variation of cross-case patterns rather than to make statistical generalisations.

Table 3. Distribution of Communication Patterns Across the Ten Families

Communication pattern	Number of families	Illustrative cases	Cross-case variation
Selective openness	8 of 10	F1, F3, F5, F6, F7, F8, F9, F10	Children differentiated disclosure according to topic, parent, and anticipated response.

Parent-initiated disclosure	10 of 10	F1-F10	The intensity of parental initiation ranged from direct questioning to informal invitations during shared activities.
Empathic listening followed by guidance	10 of 10	F1-F10	All families described listening and guidance, but patience and emotional validation varied.
Practical parental support	10 of 10	F1-F10	Support included learning assistance, encouragement, rewards, and help with everyday difficulties.
Age-bounded voice	9 of 10	F1, F2, F3, F5-F10	Children's views were considered most consistently in educational and personal matters.
Shared family routines	10 of 10	F1-F10	Families differed in whether conversations occurred during meals, study, recreation, household work, or bedtime.

Selective Openness and Parent-Specific Disclosure

Selective openness emerged in eight of the ten participating families. Children did not disclose all experiences equally to both parents. Instead, they considered the sensitivity of the topic, the emotional condition of the parent, and the likely response before deciding whether to speak. Emotional concerns were more often directed towards the parent perceived as patient and non-judgemental, while practical matters could be discussed with either parent.

The clearest example appeared in F1. The father acknowledged that the child rarely approached him with personal problems and more frequently communicated with the mother. The child's account explained the reason more directly, stating that disclosure to the mother felt safer because there was concern that the father might become angry. This paired evidence demonstrated a difference between parental awareness and the child's emotional interpretation. From the father's perspective, the child simply communicated more often with the mother. From the child's perspective, the preference reflected an assessment of emotional risk.

Similar topic-based differentiation appeared in F6. The child approached the father for assistance with schoolwork but preferred the mother for friendship problems and sadness. In F3 and F5, children also described mothers as more frequent listeners, particularly for sensitive or emotionally difficult experiences. However, this pattern was not universal. Families F8 and F9 showed more balanced disclosure, with children approaching whichever parent was available and responded calmly.

These variations indicate that selective openness was not equivalent to poor communication. Children continued to communicate with their parents but adjusted what they disclosed, when they disclosed it, and to whom. Their choices were shaped by accumulated interactional experiences. A parent who had previously listened calmly was more likely to be approached again, whereas a parent associated with immediate anger or correction was less likely to receive sensitive disclosures.

Selective openness therefore functioned as a relational strategy through which children protected emotional security while maintaining family connection. The findings suggest that children's willingness to disclose depended not only on parental availability but also on their confidence that the disclosure would be handled constructively.

Parent-Initiated Disclosure

Parent-initiated disclosure appeared across all ten families. Children did not always begin conversations independently, particularly when they felt sad, embarrassed, confused, or worried about parental reactions. Parents commonly described noticing changes in mood or behaviour before asking what had happened. Silence, crying, irritability, reduced enthusiasm, and withdrawal were among the cues that prompted parental attention.

In F2, both the parent and child described a consistent sequence. The child usually began to explain a school-related problem only after one of the parents noticed sadness and asked what had happened. Similar patterns appeared in F3 and F4, where parents recognised unusual silence or changes in facial expression and used gentle questions to invite conversation. In these cases, parental initiation lowered the difficulty of beginning a sensitive conversation.

The manner of initiation differed across families. Some parents asked direct questions, while others used shared activities to encourage disclosure. In F7, the child was more willing to speak while gardening or helping with household tasks than during direct face-to-face questioning. In F10, humour during family meals often created an informal opening through which school experiences and personal concerns gradually emerged. These cases demonstrate that initiation did not always involve formal questioning.

The effectiveness of parental initiation depended on tone and timing. Children were more responsive when parents asked calmly and allowed time for an answer. They became less willing to speak when several questions were asked rapidly or when the parent appeared to have already decided who was responsible for the problem. Parent-initiated disclosure was therefore helpful when it communicated concern rather than suspicion.

Across the cases, parental attentiveness created an important bridge between children's emotional experiences and verbal disclosure. The findings show that children's silence did not necessarily mean that they were unwilling to communicate. In many cases, they needed evidence that the parent had noticed their condition and was ready to listen.

Empathic Listening Followed by Guidance

Empathic listening followed by guidance appeared in all ten families, although the quality and sequence of the interaction varied. Parents generally considered advice and correction to be part of their responsibility. However, children responded more positively when parents first allowed them to complete their explanations and acknowledged their emotional condition.

Parents expressed empathy through concrete behaviours. They approached children who appeared withdrawn, lowered their tone of voice, maintained attention, waited for the child to finish, and used affectionate gestures such as touching the child's head or sitting nearby. These actions communicated recognition even when parents did not use explicit emotional vocabulary.

In F4, the mother described listening to the child's account before providing advice. The child confirmed that the mother usually asked what was wrong and listened before responding. F5 showed a similar sequence, with the parent emphasising that advice was given only after the child had finished telling the story. In F8, the child valued being permitted to explain the situation before the parents decided whether correction was necessary.

The paired accounts also revealed the consequences of reversing this sequence. In F10, the child explained that immediate anger caused the conversation to end prematurely. Similar caution was visible in F1, where the anticipated possibility of anger influenced the child's decision to disclose to the mother rather than the father. These findings demonstrate that children distinguished between parental guidance that followed understanding and correction that displaced their account.

Guidance itself was not perceived negatively. Children generally accepted parental advice as part of family life, particularly when it was delivered calmly and related to the problem they had described. The difficulty emerged when advice was offered too quickly, before the child felt heard, or when it took the form of blame.

The cross-case pattern therefore shows that listening and guidance were not competing practices. They were most effective when organised sequentially. Empathic listening established emotional safety, while guidance provided direction. When combined in this order, both practices contributed to trust and closeness.

Practical Parental Support

Practical parental support appeared across all ten families. Parents expressed care through assistance with schoolwork, encouragement after disappointing results, support for children's interests, provision of learning materials, and help with everyday difficulties. These actions gave children tangible evidence that their parents were available when needed.

Educational support was the most frequently described form. Parents helped children understand assignments, reminded them about study routines, discussed school choices, and encouraged them to continue after academic difficulties. In F4, the child associated maternal help with homework and occasional rewards with parental attention. In F6, evening study with the father provided both academic assistance and an opportunity for broader conversation.

Practical support also included emotional encouragement. In F9, the parents responded to a disappointing result by identifying the difficult area and helping the child practise rather than comparing the child with others. The child interpreted this response as supportive because the parents focused on improvement rather than blame. In other cases, parents encouraged children's aspirations and expressed willingness to support activities considered beneficial.

Support did not mean that every request was accepted. Parents commonly assessed whether an activity was useful, affordable, safe, and suitable for the child's age. In F8 and F10, children described situations in which parents rejected a preferred option but explained the reason and offered an alternative. This distinction was

important because explanation allowed children to interpret the refusal as parental judgement rather than lack of care.

Across the ten cases, practical support complemented verbal communication. Parents could express affection through words, but their availability became more credible when demonstrated through action. Assistance with schoolwork, emotional encouragement, and participation in problem-solving strengthened children's confidence that parents could be approached during future difficulties.

Practical support therefore functioned as relational assurance. It showed children that parental care involved time, attention, and effort, not merely instruction or verbal reassurance.

Age-Bounded Voice in Family Decision-Making

Age-bounded voice appeared in nine of the ten families. Children were generally given opportunities to express preferences on matters directly affecting their lives, including school choice, extracurricular activities, clothing, recreation, and personal belongings. However, their participation did not extend equally to financial, marital, or broader household decisions.

The clearest form of participation involved educational choices. In F2 and F3, children were asked which school they preferred and why. Parents considered the children's comfort and interests but retained responsibility for evaluating distance, affordability, educational quality, and religious suitability. In F8 and F9, children were also asked about school activities and study schedules before the parents made a decision.

Participation was also evident in personal and recreational matters. Children could express preferences concerning clothing, family outings, hobbies, and activities with friends. In F5, the child described being permitted to choose clothes for Eid. In F10, the child explained that personal preferences were usually discussed, although the final decision could differ when parents considered the request impractical.

The findings reveal that being heard did not always mean that the child's preferred option was accepted. Children generally recognised this distinction when parents explained why a request could not be fulfilled. Participation was therefore reflected not only in the final outcome but also in the opportunity to speak and the evidence that the child's reasoning had been considered.

Parents maintained clear boundaries around adult responsibilities. Several parents stated that children were not involved in discussions concerning household finances, marital issues, or matters they believed exceeded the child's understanding. These boundaries were justified through age, competence, and parental responsibility rather than a rejection of children's voices altogether.

Age-bounded voice therefore combined participation with hierarchy. Children were recognised as legitimate contributors in decisions relevant to them, but authority remained distributed according to age and responsibility. The findings suggest that parental authority and meaningful child participation could coexist when parents listened, explained decisions, and allowed children appropriate influence.

Shared Family Routines as Communication Spaces

Shared family routines appeared across all ten cases and provided the most consistent context for everyday communication. Conversations occurred after school, during meals, while studying, before bedtime, during television viewing, while completing household tasks, and during family recreation. These moments were rarely organised as formal conversations, yet they created repeated opportunities for connection.

Bedtime and after-school routines were prominent in F4 and F9. Parents used these moments to ask about school, friendships, and the child's emotional condition. Because the interaction occurred regularly, children expected that they would have an opportunity to tell their stories. This predictability reduced the need to initiate a serious conversation independently.

Meals functioned as an important relational space in F8 and F10. Family members exchanged simple stories, jokes, and daily experiences before more sensitive topics emerged. Children described this setting as comfortable because communication did not begin with pressure or formal questioning. Humour also reduced tension and encouraged participation.

Shared work was particularly meaningful in F7. Gardening, cooking, and household tasks allowed conversations to develop gradually. The child was more willing to disclose while engaged in an activity than when directly asked to sit down and explain a problem. In F6, evening study performed a similar function by creating both instructional and relational interaction.

Recreational activities also contributed to closeness. Families described watching television, travelling by motorcycle, visiting relatives, and playing together. These activities were not always accompanied by extensive conversation, but they strengthened familiarity and produced opportunities for spontaneous interaction.

The cross-case evidence suggests that the quality and regularity of routines were more important than their form. Different families used different activities, but the relational function was similar. Repeated interaction enabled parents to notice emotional changes and gave children low-pressure opportunities to speak.

Shared routines therefore operated as communication infrastructure. They sustained closeness through predictable, ordinary, and repeated experiences rather than relying exclusively on formal discussions or responses to family problems.

Integrated Cross-Case Pattern

The six themes formed an interconnected relational process rather than separate dimensions of family communication. Shared routines created opportunities for interaction, while parental attentiveness enabled adults to recognise emotional or behavioural changes. When children did not disclose spontaneously, parents initiated conversation through questions, humour, or shared activities.

Children then assessed whether the interaction felt emotionally safe. Their decision to disclose depended on the parent's previous responses, the sensitivity of the topic, and the anticipated possibility of anger or judgement. This process explains why openness was frequently selective even in families that described themselves as close.

Once disclosure occurred, empathic listening provided emotional recognition. Guidance and practical support then demonstrated parental responsibility and availability. Children were more receptive to advice when they had first been permitted to explain their experiences. Similarly, practical assistance strengthened the credibility of verbal expressions of care.

Age-bounded participation extended this relational process into decision-making. Children felt recognised when parents invited their opinions and explained final decisions, even when parental judgement prevailed. Their participation was meaningful because it communicated that their perspectives mattered within appropriate developmental boundaries.

Across the ten families, closeness therefore depended less on unrestricted openness or equal authority than on the predictability and quality of parental responses. Children were more willing to communicate when they expected to be noticed, listened to, supported, and guided without immediate judgement.

The cases also showed that similar relational outcomes could be achieved through different family practices. Some families relied on bedtime conversations, while others used meals, study, recreation, or shared work. Some children communicated primarily with one parent, while others approached both. Despite these variations, a consistent conclusion emerged: parent-child closeness developed through repeated experiences in which communication remained emotionally safe, responsive, and relationally meaningful.

2. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that parent-child closeness in the participating rural Muslim families was not simply the result of frequent conversation. Closeness developed through a relational process in which children assessed emotional safety, parents recognised behavioural and emotional cues, disclosure was invited or initiated, and children's experiences were met with listening, guidance, and practical support. Children's participation in family decisions and the presence of recurring family routines further strengthened this process. The discussion integrates these patterns into five broader issues: emotional safety in child disclosure, responsive parenting, children's voice within parental authority, everyday routines as communication infrastructure, and an integrated process of parent-child closeness.

Emotional Safety as the Foundation of Child Disclosure

The patterns of selective openness, parent-initiated disclosure, and empathic listening indicate that children's willingness to communicate was grounded in their expectations of how parents would respond. Children did not disclose all experiences equally to both parents, even when both parents were physically available and involved in family life. Instead, they selected a parent according to the topic, previous interactional experiences, and the emotional response they anticipated. Selective openness should therefore not be interpreted simply as a lack of communication. It represented children's active management of emotionally sensitive information.

This interpretation is consistent with the reconceptualisation of parental monitoring proposed by (Kerr & Stattin, 2000) Their study showed that parental knowledge was derived more strongly from children's voluntary disclosure than from active surveillance or parental questioning. This shifts attention from how effectively parents obtain information to the relational conditions that make children willing to provide it. The present findings extend this argument by showing that disclosure was also parent-specific. A child could remain open within the family while directing emotional experiences to one parent and practical concerns to another.

The findings also support the importance of the broader emotional climate surrounding parent-child communication. (Kapetanovic & Skoog, 2021) found that communication practices operated more positively when the family emotional climate was characterised by closeness and lower feelings of excessive control. Their findings suggest that the effectiveness of parental solicitation cannot be separated from the relational context in which questions are asked. In the present study, parental initiation encouraged disclosure when it communicated attention and concern, but it could discourage communication when children anticipated anger, blame, or immediate correction.

This distinction helps explain why some children disclosed only after parents noticed silence, sadness, or behavioural change. Parent-initiated disclosure did not necessarily indicate that communication was weak. For younger children, beginning a conversation about an emotionally difficult experience may require a clear signal that the parent has noticed the problem and is ready to listen. The critical issue was not whether parents asked questions, but whether the invitation preserved children's sense of control over the pace and content of disclosure. Research on parental solicitation similarly indicates that questioning is interpreted more constructively when it occurs within an autonomy-supportive rather than controlling parenting context (Baudat et al., 2020).

The importance of emotionally meaningful disclosure is also supported by recent experimental evidence. (Brummelman et al., 2024) found that reciprocal self-disclosure made children aged 8-13 feel more loved by their parents during the interaction than did ordinary small talk. Notably, the effect was associated with conversations that were more emotionally meaningful rather than merely longer or more positive. (L. S. Nowell et al., 2017) found that greater perceived value in sharing intimate information with mothers was associated with better well-being and fewer internalising symptoms among adolescent girls. These studies reinforce the argument that closeness depends on the emotional meaning and reception of disclosure rather than on the volume of conversation alone.

The contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating how these processes were expressed among children aged 6-12 in rural families. Emotional safety was not an abstract perception but was built through repeated parental responses. Children remembered whether a parent listened patiently, became angry, asked too many questions, or allowed the story to unfold gradually. Each interaction therefore influenced the likelihood and direction of future disclosure. Selective openness was

both an outcome of previous communication and a mechanism through which children protected their emotional security.

Responsive Parenting Beyond Emotional Support

The findings further show that parental responsiveness involved more than listening to children's emotions. Across the families, listening was commonly followed by advice, correction, encouragement, or practical assistance. This sequence is important because it challenges the assumption that responsive communication requires parents to avoid authority or guidance. In the participating families, guidance remained a central parental responsibility, but children responded more positively when it followed rather than preceded attentive listening.

Empathic listening created a temporary space in which children could explain their interpretation of an event. Guidance then helped them evaluate the experience and consider an appropriate response. When parents reversed this order by correcting children before hearing the complete account, children experienced the interaction as judgement rather than support. The findings therefore suggest that the relational meaning of parental advice depends partly on timing. The same advice may be received as care when preceded by recognition, but as rejection when it interrupts or displaces the child's voice.

This interpretation is consistent with evidence that the emotional climate influences how children experience parental communication and control. (Kapetanovic & Skoog, 2021) showed that parental strategies had more favourable associations with adolescent functioning when the family climate was positive. Autonomy-supportive parenting has likewise been shown to shape how parental requests for information are interpreted and how adolescents manage information (Baudat et al., 2020). These studies support the conclusion that parental guidance cannot be evaluated independently from the quality of the relationship in which it is delivered.

Practical parental support added another dimension to responsiveness. Children recognised care through assistance with schoolwork, encouragement after disappointing results, support for aspirations, and parental involvement in solving everyday difficulties. Such actions made parental availability observable. Verbal reassurance communicated affection, but practical assistance demonstrated that parents were prepared to invest time and effort in the child's concerns.

The relationship between disclosure and support was reciprocal. Children disclosed problems because they expected assistance, while responsive assistance strengthened their confidence in future disclosure. This feedback process resembles the reciprocal quality of closeness identified by Brummelman et al., (2024), whose experimental study showed that meaningful two-way disclosure could increase children's immediate feelings of being loved. In the present study, reciprocity did not always involve parents revealing equally intimate personal information. It was more often expressed through attentive listening, relevant advice, emotional reassurance, and concrete help.

Importantly, practical support did not mean granting every child's request. Parents evaluated children's preferences according to perceived benefit, safety, affordability, and age appropriateness. Responsiveness therefore differed from permissiveness. Parents could refuse a request while maintaining closeness when the decision was accompanied by explanation, alternatives, and evidence that the child's perspective had been considered.

This finding is particularly relevant to the cultural setting of the study. Parental authority remained visible and was generally accepted as a legitimate feature of family life. However, authority was relationally strengthened when exercised through calm guidance and practical responsibility. The findings suggest that the central tension was not between authority and closeness, but between responsive and unresponsive forms of authority. Guidance supported closeness when children experienced it as informed by their account and directed towards their welfare.

Negotiating Children's Voice Within Family Authority

The pattern of age-bounded voice shows that children's participation in family life was neither absent nor unrestricted. Children were most commonly invited to express opinions on matters that directly affected them, such as school choice, extracurricular activities, clothing, recreation, and everyday preferences. Parents retained final responsibility, particularly for financial, marital, and wider household matters.

This pattern corresponds with Richter & Zartler, (2011) qualitative study of children's participation in family decision-making. Their research found that participation varied across areas of family life and was strongly influenced by children's actual and ascribed competence. Children's involvement was therefore not simply determined by whether parents supported participation in principle, but by whether children were considered capable of contributing to a particular decision.

The present study adds the concept of age-bounded voice to describe this negotiated arrangement. Voice refers to more than the child being present during a discussion. It includes an opportunity to state a preference, evidence that parents have considered the preference, and, in some cases, influence over the final outcome. The term bounded recognises that this influence remained limited by age, perceived competence, family resources, and parental responsibility.

Being consulted did not always mean that children's preferred option was selected. Nevertheless, children appeared more able to accept an unfavourable outcome when parents explained the reason for the decision. Explanation communicated that the child's view had entered the decision-making process even when it did not determine the result. This distinction is important because participation should not be reduced to children obtaining what they request. Meaningful participation can also occur when children understand how and why a decision has been reached.

The findings also suggest that age-bounded voice may contribute indirectly to openness. Children who experience their views as legitimate in everyday decisions may develop greater confidence that their emotional experiences will also be taken

seriously. Conversely, when children are routinely excluded from decisions affecting them, they may learn that speaking has little relational value. Autonomy-supportive communication is relevant here because it combines parental structure with acknowledgement of the child's perspective rather than treating structure and autonomy as opposites (Baudat et al., 2020).

Within the participating rural Muslim families, child voice did not replace intergenerational hierarchy. Parents remained responsible for direction, protection, and moral judgement. The contribution of the findings is therefore not an argument for equal decisional authority between adults and children. Instead, they demonstrate that hierarchy can incorporate dialogue. Children's participation became meaningful when parents differentiated between matters that required adult responsibility and matters in which children possessed relevant experience or preferences.

This interpretation avoids framing culturally embedded parental authority as inherently incompatible with child agency. The more analytically useful question is how authority is communicated and negotiated. Authority that silences children may restrict closeness, whereas authority that listens, explains, and permits age-appropriate influence can preserve both parental responsibility and children's sense of recognition.

Everyday Interaction as Communication Infrastructure

Shared routines emerged as the setting in which the other communication processes became possible. After-school conversations, meals, studying, household tasks, recreation, television viewing, and bedtime interactions created recurring opportunities for parents to notice changes and for children to speak. These routines were not simply background activities. They functioned as the infrastructure of family communication.

Earlier research has described family routines as providing both predictable behavioural structure and an emotional climate that supports development. Spagnola & Fiese, (2007) argued that naturally occurring routines and meaningful rituals are related to family coherence, parental efficacy, and several areas of children's development. A more recent systematic review by (Selman & Dilworth-Bart, 2024) similarly found that routines were generally associated with positive cognitive, self-regulatory, socio-emotional, academic, and health-related outcomes.

The present findings extend this literature by specifying a communication mechanism through which routines may contribute to closeness. Routines increased the availability of low-pressure interaction. Children did not always need to request a formal conversation because familiar activities created predictable moments in which stories could emerge. A child who avoided direct questioning might disclose while gardening, eating, travelling, or completing homework.

This low-pressure quality is important. Formal invitations to discuss a problem can signal care, but they can also make children feel that they are being examined. Activity-based conversations reduce the intensity of direct observation and allow disclosure to develop gradually. Routines therefore supported communication not

merely through repetition, but by shaping the interpersonal conditions under which speaking felt natural.

Predictability also enabled parents to recognise subtle emotional cues. When parents and children interacted regularly during particular activities, deviations from the child's usual behaviour became more visible. A quiet response during a normally lively meal or a lack of interest during a familiar activity could alert parents that something was wrong. Shared routines therefore connected parental observation with parent-initiated disclosure.

Not every routine automatically produced closeness. The relational effect depended on how family members used the interaction. A meal dominated by correction, digital distraction, or one-directional instruction may provide physical proximity without emotional connection. By contrast, even a brief routine could become meaningful when it included attention, humour, questions, and reciprocal response. The findings consequently support distinguishing the existence of routines from their communicative quality.

In the study context, ordinary routines were particularly significant because closeness was not expressed primarily through formally scheduled emotional conversations. It was embedded in daily family life. This suggests that family communication interventions should not only teach isolated conversational techniques. They should also help families identify recurring activities that can be protected and developed as opportunities for attentive interaction.

Towards an Integrated Communication Process of Parent-Child Closeness

Taken together, the findings support an integrated process model in which parent-child closeness develops recursively rather than through a single communication behaviour. The process begins with shared routines that create repeated opportunities for interaction. Within these routines, parents recognise emotional or behavioural cues and may invite the child to speak. Children then evaluate whether the parent, topic, timing, and anticipated response make disclosure sufficiently safe.

When disclosure occurs, empathic listening communicates recognition. Guidance and practical support subsequently demonstrate parental responsibility and availability. Age-bounded voice extends this responsiveness into family decision-making by showing children that their views can influence matters relevant to their lives. Positive experiences at each stage increase the likelihood of future disclosure, while anger, premature judgement, or unexplained exclusion may redirect disclosure towards another parent or reduce it altogether.

The proposed process makes three conceptual contributions. First, it treats closeness as an accumulated relational achievement rather than a stable family characteristic. Families may describe themselves as close, but closeness is continually confirmed or weakened through everyday responses. Second, it treats selective openness as meaningful relational information. A child's preference for one parent is not merely an individual tendency; it may reveal how emotional safety is distributed

within the family. Third, the model shows that child voice and parental authority can be mutually supportive when authority is exercised responsively.

The model also connects research on disclosure with research on family routines and child participation. Disclosure studies have demonstrated that children and adolescents actively regulate what parents know, and that emotionally meaningful disclosure is associated with stronger feelings of connection and well-being (Stattin & Kerr, 2000; C. Nowell et al., 2023; Brummelman et al., 2024). Research on routines has shown the developmental value of predictable family practices, while participation research has demonstrated that children's involvement varies according to topic and perceived competence (Richter & Zartler, 2011; Selman & Dilworth-Bart, 2024). The present study integrates these strands by showing how they operate together within everyday family communication.

The rural Muslim setting further clarifies that relational responsiveness does not require removing parental hierarchy. Closeness was not based on unrestricted disclosure, equal power, or parental approval of every preference. It was based on children's confidence that speaking would lead to attention, explanation, proportionate guidance, and support. The model therefore offers a context-sensitive alternative to approaches that implicitly equate closeness with highly individualised or egalitarian family interaction.

Practically, the findings suggest that strengthening family closeness may begin with small changes in recurring interaction. Parents can increase emotional accessibility by listening before advising, responding calmly to initial disclosure, explaining decisions, and using everyday routines as opportunities for conversation. Particular attention should be given to children who consistently disclose only to one parent, as this pattern may indicate differences in perceived emotional safety rather than simple personal preference.

The proposed model should nevertheless be interpreted as context-bound. It was derived from ten families in one rural community and is intended to explain a relational process rather than establish a universal sequence. Family structure, child age, gender, economic demands, parental availability, and local cultural expectations may alter how the process operates. Future research could examine whether the sequence is reproduced across urban families, different religious communities, single-parent households, and families with older adolescents. Longitudinal and observational designs would also help determine how repeated interactions gradually strengthen or weaken children's willingness to communicate.

Overall, the findings suggest that parent-child closeness is sustained not by openness alone, but by a dependable communication environment. Children become willing to speak when everyday experience teaches them that their emotions will be recognised, their accounts will be heard, and parental authority will be exercised through explanation and support. In this sense, closeness is produced through the repeated relational assurance that communication remains safe, meaningful, and consequential.

Limitations and Future Research

This study involved ten families from one rural Muslim community, so the findings are context-specific and should not be generalised to all families. The data were also based mainly on interviews and limited observations, which may have been influenced by socially desirable responses. In addition, each family was represented by only one parent and one child, while differences across children aged 6–12 years were not examined in detail. Future studies should involve more diverse family settings, additional family members, narrower age groups, and longitudinal or extended observational designs to further examine the proposed communication process.

IV. CONCLUSION

Closeness between parents and children in the five Sukamulya families was built through everyday communication rather than complete openness or equal authority. Children were more willing to share their experiences when parents responded calmly, listened attentively, and showed concern before offering advice. Mothers were more often chosen as trusted listeners, while fear of anger sometimes made children reluctant to speak to fathers. Shared routines, including conversations after school, learning assistance, family activities, and bedtime talks, also provided natural opportunities for families to maintain emotional closeness.

The main contribution of this study is the concept of age bounded voice. Children were given opportunities to express their views on matters that directly affected them, but parents continued to hold final responsibility for family decisions. This finding shows that listening to children does not require parents to give up their authority. Guidance can strengthen family relationships when it is offered after the child has been heard and when it responds appropriately to the child's needs.

Family education programmes should therefore focus not only on encouraging parents and children to talk more often, but also on creating a safe atmosphere for children to speak. Parents, particularly fathers who were approached less frequently, need to develop responses that make children feel heard and accepted. Further research should involve more diverse families, interview children separately, observe communication over a longer period, and examine how children's involvement in family decisions changes as they grow older.

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