



Perceived Parenting Styles as a Moderator Between Childhood Fantasy Play and Creativity in Early Adulthood

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Abstract

Creativity is a crucial skill for adapting to the demands of the modern world, and early experiences may play a vital role in its development. This study investigated the relationship between childhood fantasy play and creativity in early adulthood, as well as the moderating role of perceived parenting styles. A non-experimental quantitative design was employed using purposive sampling. Participants were 387 individuals aged 18 to 25 who had lived with their parents between the ages of 2 and 7. Data were collected through an online questionnaire and analyzed using Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP). Results revealed a significant positive correlation between childhood fantasy play and adult creativity ($r = 0.413$, $p < 0.001$). However, perceived parenting styles, both paternal and maternal, did not significantly moderate this relationship. These findings indicate that engaging in imaginative play during childhood contributes meaningfully to creativity in adulthood, and this influence remains consistent regardless of how parenting is later recalled. The study adds to the understanding of how early life experiences shape long-term personal development.

Keywords: childhood fantasy play, creativity, perceived parenting styles, early adulthood

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1. Introduction

Creativity is increasingly recognized as a crucial ability for adapting to the demands of the modern world, as mentioned by academics and professionals [1], [2]. Governments worldwide have also increasingly prioritized creativity as a driver of progress. For instance, Nigeria highlights creativity and innovation as engines of economic growth [3], while China has integrated creativity development into its education system to support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. Innovative teaching methods have been adopted to foster creative thinking and collaboration skills among students [4].

In the professional sphere, creativity is also recognized as a core competency. The Creativity in Education Report 2024 by Canva [5] notes that 66% of managers rank creativity among the top three workplace skills, alongside problem-solving and communication. Similarly, 77% of university graduates view creativity as critical for career advancement. However, gaps remain between perception and reality. While 64% of graduates report feeling work-ready, only 34% of educators and 44% of managers agree. This aligns with [6] findings that 75% of graduates still lack adequate creative, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills.

In Indonesia, these challenges are reflected in global benchmarks. The country ranked 115th out of 139 nations in the 2015's Global Creativity Index and 85th

out of 131 in innovation skills according to the 2020's Global Innovation Index [7]. Beyond these rankings, creativity has become an increasingly salient developmental and policy concern within the Indonesian context. The creative economy contributes substantially to national growth, accounting for more than 7% of Indonesia's gross domestic product and employing millions across sectors such as design, animation, media, and cultural industries [8]. Government initiatives, including the establishment of the Ministry of Creative Economy and the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Independent Learning) curriculum, emphasize creativity, innovation, and flexible thinking as core competencies for future generations [9].

Despite these efforts, international assessments continue to indicate persistent challenges in creative development. Indonesia remains relatively low in global indices of creativity and innovation, and substantial gaps persist between educational aspirations and creative skill acquisition [10]. These conditions highlight the importance of identifying early developmental factors, such as childhood fantasy play and family environments, that may contribute to creative capacities later in life. Examining these processes within the Indonesian context therefore offers both theoretical and practical relevance, particularly for informing family- and education-based interventions aimed at fostering creativity.

Scholars have long emphasized the role of early experiences in shaping later creative potential. One such experience is childhood fantasy play, which involves imaginative scenarios, role-taking, and symbolic use of objects [11], [12]. Fantasy play allows children to explore diverse perspectives, expand cognitive flexibility, and practice divergent thinking, all of which are fundamental components of creativity [11], [12], [13].

Fantasy play encompasses a wide range of activities, from realistic role enactments such as pretending to be a teacher or hosting a tea party, to highly imaginative scenarios like casting spells or embodying fantastical beings [11]. In this study, fantasy play is understood broadly, without narrowing to specific subtypes such as imaginary companions, which, although conceptually overlapping, are often examined with distinct measures [14].

A substantial body of research has linked childhood fantasy play to key developmental outcomes, including inhibitory control [15], Theory of Mind [16], emotional competence [17], language development [18], empathy [19], and executive functioning [20], [21]. Children with imaginary companions, a related form of fantasy play, have also been found to demonstrate higher creativity, stronger information processing, and better academic performance [22], as well as greater emotional awareness and interpersonal sensitivity [23].

Recent work extends these findings into adulthood, showing that childhood fantasy play predicts socio-emotional competencies, such as empathy and perspective-taking. Adults with richer experiences of fantasy play in childhood often report higher prosociality and emotional intelligence later in life [14]. Despite these insights, researchers emphasize the importance of considering moderating factors, such as child temperament, peer interactions, and the functions of play, that may shape how these outcomes unfold [24], [25].

One factor of particular interest is parenting style. Parental socialization plays a central role in shaping children's opportunities for fantasy play. Parenting styles, first conceptualized by Baumrind [26] and later expanded into dimensional approaches [27], [28], influence socio-emotional, cognitive, and creative development. Retrospective measures such as the *Egna Minnen av Barndoms Uppfostran* (EMBU) [29], capture perceptions of parenting across key dimensions, including rejection, emotional warmth, and overprotection.

Beyond shaping children's immediate opportunities to engage in play, parenting styles also influence the broader motivational and emotional context in which fantasy play occurs. Drawing on motivational and attachment-based frameworks, parenting behaviors characterized by emotional warmth, rejection, and

overprotection may condition how children internalize and benefit from early imaginative experiences. According to Skinner et al.'s motivational model of parenting, emotional warmth supports children's basic psychological needs for relatedness and competence, fostering intrinsic motivation and openness to exploration, whereas parental rejection undermines emotional security and overprotection constrains autonomy and independent exploration [30]. From an attachment perspective, emotionally warm and responsive parenting provides a secure base that encourages exploratory behaviors, including fantasy play, whereas rejecting or overly controlling parenting may heighten anxiety and inhibit autonomous exploration [31].

These theoretical perspectives suggest that while fantasy play may contribute to creative development, its long-term impact may depend on the emotional and regulatory climate established by parents. Therefore, perceived parenting styles are conceptually positioned as a moderator, shaping the extent to which childhood fantasy play translates into creative outcomes in early adulthood.

Research shows that parental warmth and support encourage imaginative engagement, including fantasy play, which strengthens social and emotional skills [32], [33], [34]. In contrast, parental rejection or devaluation of play can constrain children's imaginative expression [33]. More broadly, parental warmth is positively linked to creativity, while rejection and overprotection predict lower creative outcomes [35], with effects varying by parent gender, child gender, and socioeconomic background.

Although childhood fantasy play has been associated with socio-emotional outcomes in adulthood [14] and parenting has been linked to creativity [36], [37], [35], it remains unclear whether fantasy play predicts creativity in early adulthood or whether parenting moderates this relationship. While the benefits of fantasy play are well documented in childhood, its long-term implications for creativity beyond this developmental period remain less explored.

The present study addresses this gap by first examining whether childhood experiences of fantasy play are associated with higher levels of creativity in early adulthood. Establishing this link is crucial for understanding how early imaginative activities contribute to enduring creative capacities across the life span.

Beyond examining the direct association between childhood fantasy play and creativity in early adulthood, the present study also investigates the moderating role of perceived parenting styles. Parenting not only structures children's play opportunities but also establishes the emotional and motivational climate in

which imaginative activities are experienced and internalized.

Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that perceived parenting styles moderate the relationship between childhood fantasy play and creativity in early adulthood, such that emotionally warm parenting strengthens the positive association between fantasy play and creativity, whereas higher levels of perceived rejection or overprotection weaken this association.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental correlational design to examine the relationship between childhood fantasy play (independent variable) and creativity (dependent variable), with perceived parenting style as a moderator.

2.2 Participants

A total of 389 participants were recruited through both online and offline channels. Inclusion criteria were: (a) age between 18 and 25 years, and (b) having lived with their parents before the age of seven. The age threshold was based on developmental theories highlighting early childhood as a critical period for imaginative play [38], [39]. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure data relevance to the study objectives.

2.3 Measures

Creativity. Creativity was measured using the Creativity Capability Scale (CCS) developed by Lin et al. [40]. The CCS is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). It captures two dimensions: originality and functional flexibility. Example item: “*I am able to distinguish results of different practices.*” The total score ranges from 12 to 60, with higher scores indicating greater creativity. The scale demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.80$) and strong construct validity through confirmatory factor analysis (factor loadings 0.51–0.88). Since no Indonesian adaptation existed, the instrument was translated into Bahasa Indonesia by the researchers and reviewed by two expert judges.

Childhood Fantasy Play. Childhood fantasy play was assessed using the Retrospective Childhood Fantasy Play Scale (RCFPS) [41]. The self-report instrument consists of 11 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Example item: “*I often engaged in fantasy play.*” The scale includes four dimensions: enjoyment of fantasy play, frequency, preference over other play types, and engagement in role-play or belief in fantasy entities. The total score ranges from 11 to 55, with higher scores reflecting greater involvement in fantasy play during childhood. The shortened version (11 items) has demonstrated

excellent reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$). This instrument was also translated into Bahasa Indonesia with expert review.

Perceived Parenting Styles. Parenting style was measured using the short form of the *Egna Minnen av Barndoms Uppfostran* inventory (s-EMBU-C) [42]. The 23-item self-report scale assesses three dimensions: rejection, emotional warmth, and overprotection. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = not true at all to 4 = very true). Example item: “*My parents praised me.*” Separate forms were used for mothers and fathers. Reported reliability across cultures ranges from 0.61 to 0.79, and construct validity has been supported through multiple group analyses. The instrument was translated into Bahasa Indonesia and reviewed by two experts.

2.4 Procedure

Data collection began after receiving ethical clearance from Universitas Tarumanagara on April 3, 2025. Participants were invited via social media platforms (Instagram, X, WhatsApp) and offline recruitment at campus settings. Interested individuals accessed a Google Form questionnaire that included: (a) study introduction and researcher information, (b) informed consent form, (c) CCS items, (d) RCFPS items, and (e) s-EMBU-C items. Only those who provided consent proceeded with the survey. Data collection was conducted between April and May 2025.

2.5 Data Analysis

All responses were analyzed using JASP. Descriptive statistics were first computed, followed by correlation analyses. To test the study hypotheses, regression models with moderation were performed, with perceived parenting styles (mother and father) included as potential moderators of the relationship between childhood fantasy play and creativity.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Key Finding 1

The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between childhood fantasy play and adult creativity ($r = 0.413, p < 0.001$).

Table 1
Correlation Between Variables

Variable	FP	C	PPS-F	PPS-M
Childhood fantasy play	-			
Creativity	0.413***	-		
Perceived parenting styles (father)	0.460***	0.339***	-	
Perceived parenting styles (mother)	0.507***	0.303***	0.737***	-

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, FP: Fantasy Play, C: Creativity, PPS-F: Perceived Parenting Styles - Father, PPS-M: Perceived Parenting Styles - Mother

The findings indicate a significant positive correlation between childhood fantasy play and adult creativity, aligning with prior evidence linking fantasy and creativity in children [43], [11]. Although research directly connecting childhood fantasy play to adult creativity remains scarce, earlier studies highlight its role in fostering cognitive and affective processes that support creativity [44], [12]. Consistent with Vygotsky's developmental framework [45], fantasy play in childhood provides the imaginative foundation that, combined with abstract thinking in adolescence, contributes to functional creativity in adulthood. Thus, this study extends existing literature by providing early empirical support for the long-term contribution of childhood fantasy play to adult creative outcomes.

3.2 Key Finding 2

Interestingly, perceived parenting styles did not significantly moderate this relationship, either for fathers ($B = 0.004$, $p = 0.412$) or mothers ($B = 0.005$, $p = 0.299$).

Table 2
Moderated Regression Analysis (MRA)

Model	Unstandardized	SE	Standardized	t	p
FP*PPS-F	0.004	0.005	0.367	0.821	0.412
FP*PPS-M	0.413***	0.005	0.474	1.040	0.299

Despite the absence of a statistically significant moderation effect, theoretical and empirical literature offers a clear basis for expecting such moderation. Parenting styles characterized by emotional warmth, rejection, and overprotection shape children's motivational orientations, emotional security, and autonomy; processes fundamental to creative development. Motivational models of parenting suggest that emotional warmth supports basic psychological needs for relatedness and competence, whereas rejection undermines emotional security and overprotection constrains autonomy and independent exploration [46]. These dimensions have been consistently associated with curiosity, intrinsic motivation, and openness to experience, which are core components of creativity [35].

Empirical research further indicates that parenting styles can function as moderators by amplifying or buffering the effects of early experiences on later development. Supportive and autonomy-granting parenting has been shown to strengthen positive developmental influences, whereas controlling or rejecting parenting may exacerbate developmental risks [47], [48]. In creativity research, parental emotional warmth is positively associated with creative performance and self-efficacy, while rejection and overprotection are linked to lower or maladaptive creative outcomes [35], [49], [50].

Accordingly, perceived parenting styles were theoretically positioned as moderators in the present study, as they may condition how early fantasy play is internalized and translated into later creative capacities. Warm and autonomy-supportive parenting may facilitate confidence, flexibility, and creative risk-taking, whereas rejecting or overprotective parenting may limit these processes by restricting autonomy and exploration [49].

One explanation relates to the autonomous nature of fantasy play. From an early age, children often generate pretend scenarios independently, such as creating imaginary companions or personifying objects [51], [14], [22]. These activities serve adaptive psychological functions and are largely sustained by internal motivation [23], [52]. While parental support remains valuable, the inherently self-directed qualities of fantasy play may lessen the extent to which parenting behaviors directly shape its long-term outcomes, such as creativity.

Another explanation concerns changing family dynamics and parental availability. In contemporary contexts, parents often balance multiple responsibilities, which may reduce their influence on the quality of children's imaginative activities [32]. Although research has shown that low emotional support, overcontrol, or unresponsive parenting can undermine children's overall development [53], these factors may not substantially interfere with children's intrinsic drive to engage in fantasy play. The findings here align with prior evidence suggesting that the link between fantasy play and creativity is strong and relatively stable, often developing independently of parenting variations [54], [43], [11], [12].

Methodological factors may also have contributed to the non-significant results. Retrospective measures such as the s-EMBU are vulnerable to recall biases, particularly in structural parenting dimensions like overprotection [55]. Furthermore, the homogeneity of the sample, largely university students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, may have restricted variability in perceived parenting styles and childhood experiences of fantasy play, thereby limiting the detection of moderation effects [56].

3.3 Limitations and Future Work

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of retrospective measures, such as the s-EMBU, poses challenges in validity, as individuals tend to recall emotional experiences (e.g., warmth or conflict) more accurately than structural aspects such as control or expectations. This may have influenced the accuracy of perceived parenting data. Second, the characteristics of the participants, most of whom were university students, created a relatively homogeneous sample in terms of age and socioeconomic background, limiting generalizability to broader populations. Third, participant fatigue during questionnaire completion may have affected the quality of responses.

Future studies are encouraged to address these limitations by employing more diverse samples, refining measurement tools to reduce cognitive load, and considering prospective or multi-method approaches. Moreover, future research could explore specific types of fantasy play that have stronger associations with particular developmental outcomes in adulthood, such as creativity, cognitive flexibility, or empathy. These directions would not only strengthen theoretical contributions but also offer more practical insights for parents, educators, and professionals in child development.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between childhood fantasy play and creativity in early adulthood, as well as the moderating role of perceived parenting styles. The findings demonstrate a significant positive association between fantasy play in childhood and creative capacities in early adulthood, underscoring the enduring developmental value of imaginative play. However, perceived parenting styles, both maternal and paternal, did not moderate this relationship.

These results suggest that the link between childhood fantasy play and adult creativity may be relatively stable and robust, operating independently of variations in how parenting is retrospectively perceived. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of providing children with opportunities, time, and psychological space for imaginative play, while future research should further explore contextual and cultural factors that may shape the long-term pathways from early play to creative development.

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Ethical Approval

The research involving human participants was conducted in accordance with institutional and national

research ethics standards. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Komisi Etik Penelitian Terkait Manusia Unit Fakultas Psikologi Universitas Tarumanagara (KEPTM Unit F.Psi Untar).

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.












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