

Determinants of Psychological Well-Being in Early Childhood: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Psychological well-being in early childhood is increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of long-term developmental outcomes. However, existing reviews often focus on specific variables or contexts, leaving a need for a more integrative synthesis. This study aims to systematically map the theoretical foundations, contextual patterns, methodological trends, and key determinants of psychological well-being in early childhood. A systematic literature review following PRISMA guidelines was conducted. Fifty-eight peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus (2016–2026) were selected and synthesized using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics within the Theory–Context–Characteristics–Methodology (TCCM) framework. Results indicate that research in this field is dominated by quantitative designs, particularly regression analysis and structural equation modelling. The most frequently examined determinants include parental influence, socioeconomic status, and children's screen time exposure, with parenting style, family mental health, and digital media use consistently shaping psychological well-being. Research output is largely concentrated in developed countries, notably the United States and China, while studies from developing regions remain limited. The review highlights the need for longitudinal, mixed-methods, and culturally responsive research to advance theoretical development and support more effective early childhood well-being policies and interventions.

Keywords: *Preschool Children, Family Environment, Mental Health, Child Welfare, Literature Reviews.*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood represents a critical developmental stage that shapes individuals' long-term psychological adjustment, learning engagement, and social functioning. Within this period, psychological well-being (PWB) has become an increasingly important construct in developmental and educational psychology. Rooted in hedonic and eudaimonic traditions, PWB encompasses dimensions such as positive affect, life satisfaction, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011). Over the past two decades, scholarly attention to early childhood PWB has expanded

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significantly, driven by global transformations including digitalization, changing family structures, increasing socioeconomic disparities, and the psychosocial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Guedria et al., 2023). Empirical studies have identified multiple determinants—parenting styles, attachment security, socioeconomic status, early education quality, and screen exposure—underscoring that PWB is multidimensional and shaped by contextual influences (Liu et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2021).

Despite increasing empirical volume, the field remains theoretically and methodologically fragmented. Existing reviews focus on specific aspects—intervention effectiveness, mental health outcomes, or socio-emotional competencies—rather than providing a comprehensive synthesis. Moreover, previous syntheses rarely integrate research profiling dimensions (publication trends, geographical distribution, dominant methodologies) with thematic conceptual analysis. Consequently, cumulative knowledge on early childhood PWB lacks a structured synthesis clarifying how the field has evolved conceptually, theoretically, and methodologically.

Given the growing global emphasis on early childhood development as a foundation for lifelong well-being, a comprehensive synthesis is essential. To address this gap, this study adopts an integrative systematic literature review approach, mapping the intellectual structure of early childhood PWB research over 2016–2026 by combining bibliographic profiling with thematic synthesis. Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) map the intellectual structure of PWB research in early childhood; (2) identify dominant and emerging research trends; and (3) propose directions for future research.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesize empirical evidence on psychological well-being in early childhood, following the PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and replicability (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages is presented in Figure 1.

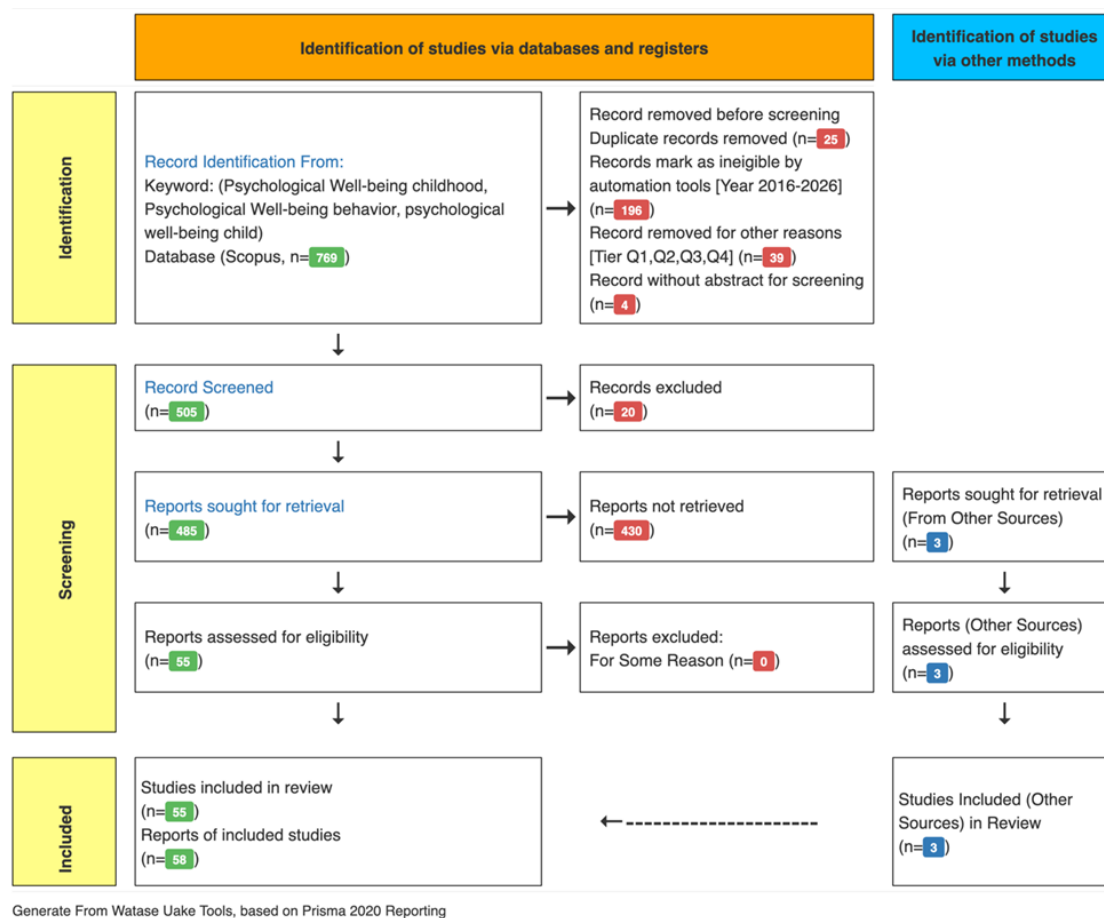


Figure 1 PRISMA Statement

Participants

In the context of this systematic literature review, the “participants” refer to the body of scientific articles included in the analysis rather than human subjects. The corpus consisted of 58 peer-reviewed journal articles focusing on psychological well-being in early childhood. These studies met predefined eligibility criteria: (1) an empirical focus on psychological well-being in early childhood; (2) publication within the 2016–2025 period; and (3) sufficient methodological detail to allow for quality appraisal and data extraction. The selected articles represent diverse geographical and socio-cultural contexts, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the field.

Instruments used in the study

No primary psychometric instruments were administered, as this study focused on synthesizing existing evidence. Data retrieval was conducted using the Scopus database, selected for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals and strict indexing standards (Lasda Bergman, 2012; Rocha et al., 2020; Hariningsih et al., 2024). For bibliometric mapping, the Watase Uake Tool was utilized to generate keyword co-occurrence networks (Wahyudi, 2024). Thematic synthesis was guided by the TCCM (Theory–Context–Characteristics–Methodology)

framework, while descriptive statistical analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel.

Procedure

The review followed the four phases of the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). In the identification phase, a systematic search in Scopus using the keywords "psychological well-being childhood," "psychological well-being behavior," and "psychological well-being child" yielded 769 records. In the screening phase, 25 duplicates were removed, followed by filtering: (a) publication period 2016–2026 (excluding 196); (b) Scimago Q1–Q4 journals (excluding 39); and (c) presence of an abstract (excluding 4), leaving 505 records. Title and abstract screening excluded 20 irrelevant articles, resulting in 485 records. In the eligibility phase, full-text retrieval was attempted; 430 articles were inaccessible. Three additional articles from reference tracking were added. All 58 articles (55 from primary search, 3 from additional sources) met inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. As this study constitutes a systematic literature review of publicly available articles, ethical approval was not required.

Data Analysis

Data were synthesized using multiple approaches within the TCCM framework. Bibliometric mapping was performed using WataSe Uake Tool (Wahyudi, 2024) to generate keyword co-occurrence networks (minimum occurrence threshold: 2). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006), coding data iteratively into theory, context, characteristics, and methodology categories. Coding was performed manually by the first author with cross-verification by the second author. Descriptive statistics and trend analysis were conducted using Microsoft Excel to map publication trends, citation counts, journal quartiles, and geographical distribution.

RESULT

Overview of Bibliometric and Thematic Mapping

This section synthesizes the 58 studies included through the PRISMA selection process, integrating bibliometric mapping and thematic synthesis to examine research trends, contextual patterns, and determinants of psychological well-being in early childhood. The findings are organized around three overarching themes emerging from the analysis: (1) conceptual structure and theoretical evolution; (2) temporal and geographic research patterns; and (3) key determinants and their multidimensional classification. Together, these themes address the study's research questions concerning conceptual evolution, dominant factors, and remaining gaps in the literature.

Temporal Trends and Geographic Concentration

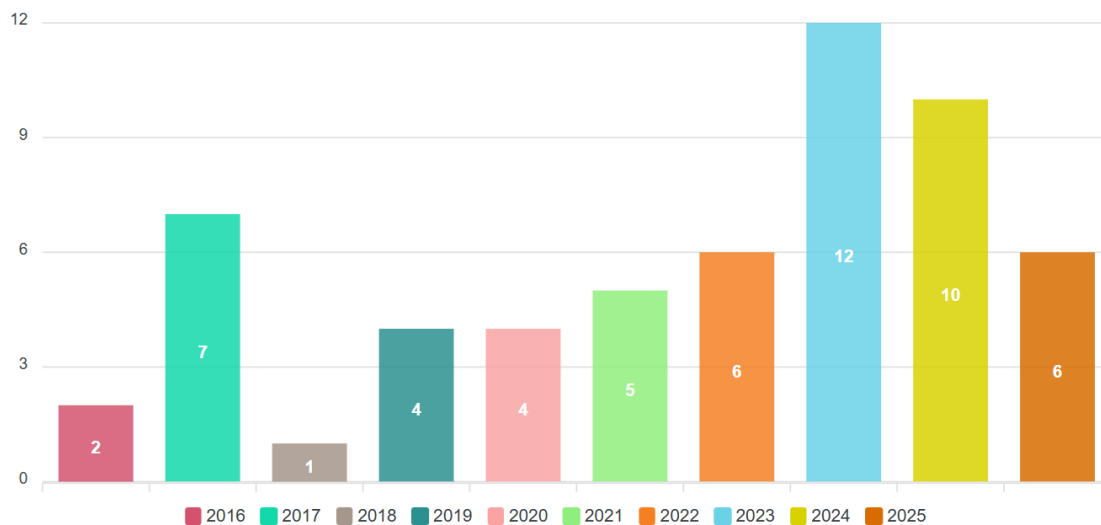


Figure 3 Annual Publication and Citation Trends (2016–2026)

Temporal analysis (Figure 3) shows a clear upward trajectory, with 2023 and 2024 recording the highest output (n = 10 each). Citation peaks occurred in 2021 (66 citations), driven by Xu et al. (2021) and Chen et al. (2021), coinciding with heightened concern over children's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020). Foundational studies continue to accumulate higher citations, with Greene and McGovern (2017) receiving 29 citations and Xu et al. (2021) receiving 20. These patterns suggest the field has progressed from conceptual validation (2017–2021) toward contextual diversification (2022–2026).

Geographic Distribution of Studies

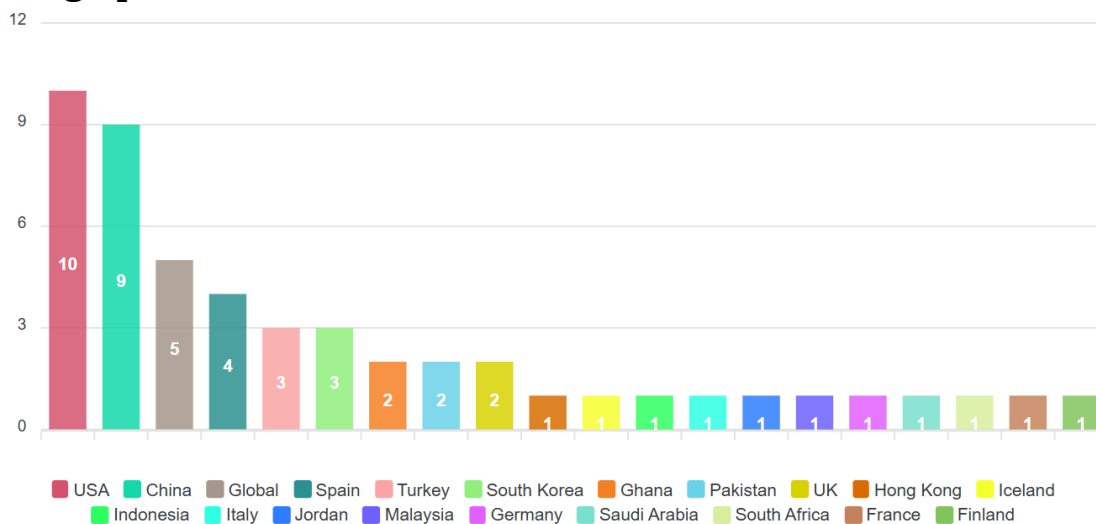


Figure 4 Geographic Distribution of Studies and Citation Density

Geographic distribution (Figure 4) reveals pronounced concentration, with the United States (8 studies) and China (7 studies) dominating the literature. Figure 5 shows that among categorized studies, 34 were conducted in developed countries compared to 20 in developing nations. Research from developed contexts prioritizes digital

exposure and parenting styles, whereas studies from developing regions emphasize structural determinants such as migration (Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2017) and poverty (Din et al., 2025), raising concerns about cross-cultural applicability (Moreta-Herrera et al., 2025).

Journal Positioning and Thematic Diversity

The academic positioning of this research field is reflected in journal distribution and citation impact. The 58 reviewed articles were published across 54 journals, predominantly within Q1–Q3 Scimago quartiles, indicating strong representation in high-impact outlets. The predominance of Q1 journals affirms that early childhood psychological well-being has become an established research topic within developmental and educational psychology. However, citation patterns reveal that scholarly impact is driven more by theoretical contribution and methodological rigor than by publication venue alone. Foundational studies such as Greene and McGovern (2017) and Huang et al. (2021) continue to accumulate citations, while recent publications (2023–2025) show lower counts due to recency rather than limited relevance.

The theoretical frameworks employed across studies are relatively diverse, with recurring applications of Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being, resilience theory, self-determination theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Collectively, these frameworks emphasize interactions between individual capacities, social relationships, and environmental contexts.

Key Determinants and Multidimensional Classification

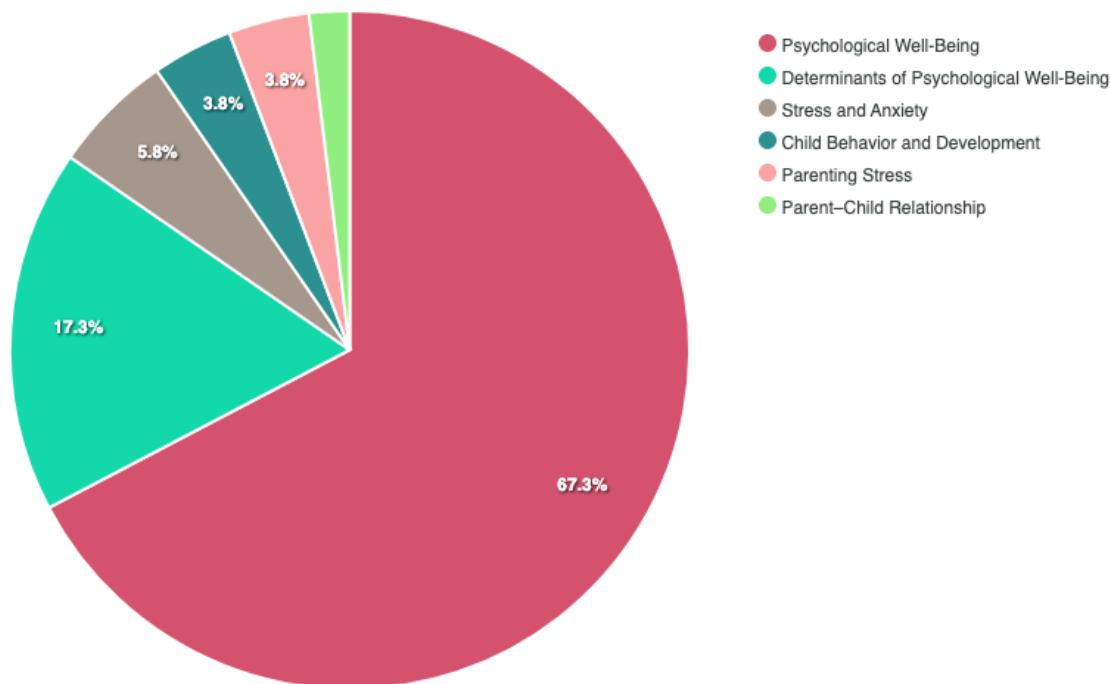


Figure 5 Variables Studied and Conceptual Dominance

The variable classification (Figure 5) reveals that psychological well-being is most commonly examined in relation to parenting practices,

socioeconomic status, mental health, social relationships, and digital media exposure. This concentration around family and individual characteristics reflects the multidimensional nature of children's well-being but also indicates limited exploration of broader structural influences such as community-level resources or environmental stressors.

To move beyond isolated variable analysis, Table 1 synthesizes determinants into three integrated domains. Individual determinants include emotional regulation, resilience, and behavioral adjustment. Family determinants primarily involve parenting style, parental mental health, and family socioeconomic status. Environmental determinants encompass educational quality, digital media exposure, and broader social conditions.

Table 1 Determinants Influencing Early Childhood Psychological Well-Being

Determinants	Count	Country	Authors
Parental Influence	31	Belgium, China, Finland, Ghana, Global, Italy, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, USA	Seigfried-Spellar, 2017; Mazzucato and Cebotari, 2017; Leustek and Theiss, 2017; Du et al., 2017; Van Der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017; Greene and McGovern, 2017; Iacopetti et al., 2018; Tam et al., 2019; Masood et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Oh and Kim, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Koç et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022; Raturi and Cebotari, 2022; Del Toro et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Kong et al., 2023; Wang, 2023; Guedria et al., 2023; Kiliç et al., 2024; Yam and Korkmaz, 2024; Al et al., 2024; Vekara et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Melero and Sánchez-Sandoval, 2025; Sepúlveda et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025
Socioeconomic Factors	13	France, Germany, Global, Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, USA	Skeen et al., 2016; Betawi, 2017; Calderon et al., 2019; Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Pellenq et al., 2021; Courbet et al., 2022; Borualogo and Casas, 2022; Liu and Green, 2023; Oriol and Miranda, 2023; Savahl et al., 2023; Essler et al., 2023; Din et al., 2025; Moreta-Herrera et al., 2025

Screen Time Impact	8	China, Hong Kong, Iceland, Malaysia, South Korea, USA	Kim, 2016; Khasmohammadi et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Meng et al., 2023; Kwon et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024; Belaire et al., 2024
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Notably, the determinants appearing most frequently across studies—parental influence (31 studies), socioeconomic factors (13 studies), and screen time (8 studies)—align with the keyword clusters identified in Figure 2. This convergence across analytical approaches strengthens the validity of these findings. For instance, the prominence of parental influence across studies (Iacopetti et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2023) corroborates the keyword network’s emphasis on parenting, while the consistent appearance of screen time (Kwon et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024) validates concerns regarding digital exposure as a critical determinant. The structured classification in Table 1 supports the integrative perspective that children’s psychological well-being emerges from interactions between personal capacities, family environments, and broader social contexts—a framework that directly addresses the fragmentation noted in earlier reviews.

DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review synthesizes findings from 58 empirical studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of research trends in early childhood psychological well-being, interpreting results in relation to theoretical developments, contextual variations, and methodological patterns.

Consolidation of Psychological Well-Being as a Core Construct

The results confirm that psychological well-being has emerged as a central construct in early childhood development research. Keyword analysis indicates strong associations with resilience, parenting, mental health, and socio-emotional development, reflecting a broader shift from deficit-oriented perspectives toward strength-based approaches that emphasize protective factors and adaptive capacities (Tam et al., 2019; Savahl et al., 2023). Earlier research primarily focused on adverse childhood experiences and vulnerability (Skeen et al., 2016), whereas recent studies increasingly emphasize supportive relationships and environmental resources.

This paradigmatic shift is theoretically significant. The prominence of resilience theory (Wang, 2023) and self-determination theory (Sigmundsson, 2025) in the reviewed literature suggests that the field is moving toward frameworks that prioritize agency, competence, and relatedness as core mechanisms of well-being. However, the continued fragmentation of determinants—with parental influence (Iacopetti et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2023), socioeconomic conditions (Essler et al., 2023; Moreta-Herrera et al., 2025), and digital media exposure (Kwon et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024) analyzed separately—reveals a critical gap. This

analytical isolation limits the field's ability to capture how these factors interact in real-world contexts. For instance, the effects of screen time on well-being may be moderated by parenting styles or socioeconomic resources, yet such interactions remain underexplored. The findings therefore extend existing well-being frameworks by demonstrating that family dynamics, technological environments, and structural inequalities must be examined as interconnected systems rather than isolated predictors.

Intellectual Growth and Post-Pandemic Research Acceleration

The temporal distribution demonstrates a notable increase in research output between 2021 and 2024, with a citation peak in 2021 coinciding with global concern regarding children's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2021; Gassman-Pines et al., 2020). This surge reflects not only increased scholarly attention but also a responsive turn in the field, where researchers mobilized to address immediate psychosocial crises. However, this responsiveness came with methodological trade-offs.

Most pandemic-related studies relied on cross-sectional survey designs—a pragmatic choice during periods of social disruption but one that limits the ability to capture long-term developmental trajectories. This methodological pattern raises an important question: has the field prioritized immediacy over durability? While regression analysis and structural equation modeling continue to dominate empirical research (Liu et al., 2023; Essler et al., 2023), their predominance may inadvertently marginalize alternative approaches that could illuminate children's subjective experiences. Qualitative studies, for example, could reveal how children themselves perceive and navigate well-being challenges, yet such work remains scarce. This methodological concentration thus represents not merely a technical preference but a potential epistemological constraint on the kinds of knowledge the field can generate.

Geographic Concentration and Contextual Variations

A notable pattern is the geographic concentration of studies in developed countries, particularly the United States and China. This distribution reflects global research production patterns in child development (Kwon et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023) but also raises concerns regarding contextual bias. Critically, this is not merely a matter of unequal representation; it carries substantive implications for theoretical validity.

Research conducted in developed contexts tends to focus on digital exposure, parenting styles, and individual psychological adjustment—constructs that align with individualistic cultural values. In contrast, studies from developing countries more frequently emphasize socioeconomic vulnerability, migration, and structural inequality (Din et al., 2025; Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2017). This divergence suggests that the determinants prioritized in the literature are not universal but are

shaped by the socioeconomic conditions of the research context. The implication is that widely used theoretical frameworks—such as Ryff's multidimensional model (Ryff, 1989) or Self-Determination Theory—may implicitly embed assumptions about autonomy and individual agency that do not translate seamlessly across cultural contexts. Without systematic cross-cultural validation (Moreta-Herrera et al., 2025), there is a risk that well-being interventions derived from these models may be culturally misaligned or ineffective when applied in diverse settings.

Methodological Patterns and Research Limitations

The methodological dominance of quantitative approaches warrants critical examination. Most studies rely on regression-based analysis or structural equation modeling, often using standardized self-report instruments completed by parents rather than children themselves. This reliance on parent-reported data introduces potential reporting bias, as parents may not fully capture children's internal experiences of well-being. Moreover, the privileging of statistical generalization may come at the cost of contextual specificity.

The field's methodological homogeneity can be understood as a consequence of disciplinary norms within developmental psychology, where quantitative methods are often equated with rigor. However, this equation overlooks the value of qualitative approaches in capturing the lived experiences of young children, whose capacities for self-report are still developing. Mixed-methods studies, which could triangulate quantitative findings with rich contextual data, remain rare. This methodological imbalance thus limits the field's ability to address the very questions it has identified as important: how children experience well-being in their daily lives, how contextual factors interact over time, and how interventions can be tailored to diverse settings.

This review contributes to theoretical development by integrating fragmented findings across multiple domains. The synthesis demonstrates that children's psychological well-being is shaped by interactions between family processes, socioeconomic structures, and digital environments—a configuration that existing frameworks have not fully captured. While Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides a valuable macro-level framework, it was developed prior to the digital revolution and does not explicitly account for how virtual environments (e.g., screen time, social media) intersect with microsystems such as the family. Similarly, resilience theory has traditionally focused on individual coping mechanisms, with less attention to how structural factors enable or constrain adaptive capacities.

By synthesizing evidence across diverse contexts, this review highlights the need for more integrative theoretical models that combine ecological perspectives with contemporary influences such as digital technology and global social change. Such integrative frameworks would better reflect the reality that children's well-being is shaped not by

isolated factors but by the dynamic interplay between personal capacities, family environments, and broader societal structures.

The findings underscore the importance of multi-level interventions that address both individual and environmental determinants of children's well-being. Family-centered programs that strengthen parenting practices and parental mental health may play a critical role in supporting children's emotional development (Iacopetti et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness of such programs likely depends on the broader socioeconomic context; in resource-constrained settings, parenting interventions alone may be insufficient without concurrent efforts to address poverty and structural inequality.

In educational contexts, schools can implement resilience-oriented and mindfulness-based programs that support socio-emotional skills and coping capacities (Tam et al., 2019; Courbet et al., 2022). Yet the geographic concentration of such interventions in developed countries raises questions about their transferability. Culturally responsive adaptations—where program content, language, and delivery methods are tailored to local values and conditions—are essential rather than optional.

At the policy level, addressing socioeconomic inequalities and promoting healthy digital media use are essential strategies. Notably, the clustering of screen time with mental health outcomes in the keyword network suggests that digital exposure has become a central concern, yet policy responses have lagged behind research evidence. Effective policy will require not only guidelines on screen time limits but also investments in digital literacy programs for parents and children.

This review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on Scopus as the sole database may have excluded relevant studies indexed elsewhere, such as PsycINFO or Web of Science. Second, the limited accessibility of full-text articles (430 articles were inaccessible) may have introduced selection bias, though the final sample of 58 articles still provides a substantial basis for synthesis. Third, the focus on peer-reviewed journal articles excludes gray literature, conference proceedings, and book chapters, which may contain relevant findings.

Several directions for future research emerge from these limitations and the substantive findings. First, longitudinal studies are critically needed to examine how psychological well-being evolves across developmental stages and to capture the long-term effects of environmental influences, particularly following major disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, cross-cultural research involving diverse sociocultural contexts would enhance the global applicability of existing well-being models; such research should prioritize participatory approaches that involve local communities in defining well-being constructs.

Future studies should also prioritize methodological diversity, including qualitative and mixed-method approaches, to better understand children's lived experiences and contextual realities.

Specifically, research that directly engages young children as informants—through child-friendly methods such as drawing, storytelling, or play-based interviews—could provide insights that parent-reported surveys cannot capture. Finally, emerging societal factors such as digitalization, technological change, and global crises should be incorporated into future theoretical and empirical models, moving beyond the current focus on family-level determinants.

CONCLUSIONS

This systematic literature review synthesized 58 peer-reviewed studies to provide an integrative overview of research on psychological well-being in early childhood. Using the TCCM framework, the review demonstrates that scholarly attention to this topic has increased substantially in recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the literature, children's psychological well-being is consistently conceptualized as a multidimensional construct shaped by interactions between individual characteristics, family relationships, and broader environmental contexts. Parental influence, socioeconomic conditions, and digital media exposure—particularly screen time—emerge as the most frequently examined determinants.

Despite this growing body of research, several structural patterns characterize the field. Empirical studies are predominantly based on quantitative cross-sectional designs, providing limited insight into developmental processes and contextual dynamics over time. The geographic concentration of research in developed countries raises concerns about the cross-cultural applicability of existing frameworks. Theoretically, while many studies draw on resilience and well-being models, integrative ecological perspectives and culturally grounded approaches remain underutilized.

This review contributes to the literature by integrating fragmented empirical findings into a structured framework that organizes determinants across individual, familial, and environmental domains. It highlights contextual imbalances in geographical distribution and identifies methodological concentration within quantitative approaches, revealing opportunities for greater methodological diversity. Advancing more integrative, context-sensitive, and methodologically diverse research will be essential for developing evidence-based strategies that support children's long-term psychological and developmental outcomes.

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