

The Parenting Learning Process Among Mothers with Motherless Experiences Raising Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Mothers with motherless experiences face unique challenges in developing parenting competencies while raising children with special needs because the intergenerational transfer of parenting knowledge is disrupted. This study aimed to analyze the parenting learning process among mothers with motherless experiences. A qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted with eight purposively selected mothers who served as the primary caregivers of children with professionally diagnosed special needs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using IPA procedures. The findings indicate that mothers reconstructed parenting knowledge through direct caregiving experiences, reflective learning, interactions with professionals and parent communities, and the internalization of Islamic family education values. These processes developed through the experiential learning cycle, leading to adaptive parenting competencies and meaningful parenting practices. The study proposes the Motherless Parenting Learning Process as a conceptual model integrating Experiential Learning Theory and Islamic family education, contributing to family education research and parenting education programs.

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Introduction

Motherhood is a developmental process involving the continuous transformation of identity, social roles, and parenting competencies throughout an individual's life. From the perspective of family education, parenting is regarded as an informal educational process through which parents develop knowledge, skills, values, and parenting strategies through lived experiences, social interactions, reflection, and various learning resources within their environment (Brechan-Skjetne et al., 2026; Dewi et al., 2024). Consequently, parenting competence is not an innate ability but is continuously developed through lifelong learning

in response to children's developmental needs and changing family dynamics (Firdaus et al., 2025).

The parenting learning process becomes considerably more complex when mothers raise children with special needs. Previous studies have shown that mothers, as primary caregivers (Nursanti, 2024; Shahali et al., 2024), are required to understand their children's disabilities (Khotimah & Himsonadi, 2024; Mardiana et al., 2025), participate in therapeutic interventions, collaborate with healthcare and educational professionals, and manage the emotional, social, and economic challenges of everyday life (Alqrisyah et al., 2024). These demands encourage mothers to continuously acquire new knowledge and develop parenting competencies through direct experience and interaction with multiple learning resources, making parenting a dynamic and context-dependent learning process (Mundakir et al., 2024; Oliver et al., 2026).

However, parenting learning does not occur under identical circumstances for all mothers. Some women enter motherhood after experiencing the loss of their mothers (motherless) (Claudya et al., 2026), whether due to death, parental separation, or emotionally unsupportive relationships (Lisdayani et al., 2025). The absence of a maternal figure disrupts the intergenerational transmission of parenting knowledge, which traditionally serves as a primary mechanism for developing maternal identity and parenting practices. Consequently, mothers reconstruct parenting competencies through personal experiences, support from spouses and extended family, professional guidance, parent communities, and digital media as alternative sources of learning. Thus, motherless experiences represent not only emotional loss but also a fundamental shift in the mechanisms through which parenting knowledge is acquired (Rachmawan et al., 2022).

Previous studies have explored three relevant areas. First, research on parents of children with special needs has primarily focused on parenting stress, quality of life, coping strategies, and family adaptation (Delima et al., 2025). Second, studies on motherless motherhood have largely examined maternal identity formation and the psychological consequences of maternal loss (Mutuyimana & Wen, 2025). Third, research on parenting learning has emphasized that parenting competence develops through lived experiences and intergenerational learning processes (Liang & Van Leeuwen, 2025; Vitthal et al., 2026). Nevertheless, these three streams of research have largely evolved independently and have not adequately explained how motherless experiences shape parenting learning among mothers raising children with special needs (Hevesi & Theodore, 2024).

Based on this review, three research gaps can be identified. First, studies concerning children with special needs have predominantly adopted psychological and health perspectives, while parenting learning as an informal educational process has received limited attention. Second, research on motherless motherhood has mainly emphasized psychological consequences rather than the reconstruction of parenting knowledge and competencies following maternal loss. Third, few studies have integrated motherless experiences, parenting learning, and the caregiving of children with special needs within a comprehensive conceptual framework. These gaps indicate the need for research that explains how maternal loss is transformed into a learning process that generates adaptive parenting competencies (Aiyuning, 2026; Cithambaram et al., 2024; Claudya et al., 2026; Gemala & Kusmawati, 2025).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the parenting learning process among mothers with motherless experiences while raising children with special needs (Febriyanti et al., 2025; Firdaus et al., 2025; Mundakir et al., 2024). Specifically, it seeks to explain how the experience of maternal loss is reconstructed into a source of learning that shapes parenting knowledge, skills, and strategies, thereby contributing to the advancement of family education and the development of parenting education programs for families of children

with special needs (Roman et al., 2025; Yang & Liu, 2024).

The study is grounded in Experiential Learning Theory proposed by Kolb (1984), which conceptualizes knowledge as the transformation of experience through four sequential stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Within this study, both the experience of maternal loss and the experience of raising children with special needs are viewed as learning experiences that foster new parenting competencies. This perspective is enriched by the concept of *tarbiyah* in Islamic family education, which regards parenting as a lifelong educational process that not only develops parenting competencies but also internalizes the values of *rahmah* (compassion), *amānah* (responsibility), *ṣabr* (patience), and *tawakkul* (trust in God) as moral and spiritual foundations for childrearing (Ilyasa et al., 2025). The integration of these two perspectives provides the conceptual basis for understanding the parenting learning process among mothers with motherless experiences.

This study offers a conceptual contribution by integrating motherless experiences, Experiential Learning Theory, and the perspective of Islamic family education to explain the development of parenting competencies among mothers raising children with special needs. This framework contributes to the advancement of family education scholarship while extending the application of experiential learning theory to the context of parenting within Muslim families.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the parenting learning experiences of mothers with motherless experiences while raising children with special needs. IPA was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of how individuals interpret and construct meaning from their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The study used primary data obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, supported by observations, field notes, and relevant documents. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria, namely mothers with motherless experiences who served as the primary caregivers of children with professionally diagnosed special needs (Creswell, 2017). Data collection continued until information power was achieved, indicating that the collected data were sufficiently rich to address the research objectives. The interview guide was developed based on Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) to explore participants' concrete experiences, reflective processes, conceptual development, and application of learning in parenting practices. Data were analyzed following the IPA procedures, including repeated reading of transcripts, initial noting, development of emergent themes, clustering themes into superordinate themes, cross-case analysis, and interpretative synthesis to identify the essence of participants' experiences. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through member checking, source triangulation, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail. Conclusions were drawn inductively through an iterative process of interpretation until a comprehensive understanding of parenting learning among mothers with motherless experiences was achieved.

Results and Discussion

1. Research findings

a. Participant Characteristics

The study involved eight mothers who met all participant criteria, namely having motherless experiences and serving as the primary caregivers of children with special needs. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 47 years and represented diverse educational backgrounds, occupations, and characteristics of children with special needs. This diversity

provided rich perspectives for understanding how the loss of a maternal figure influenced parenting learning throughout their lives.

Overall, all participants had experienced motherless for more than nine years, indicating that maternal loss had become an integral part of their journey in constructing their identities as mothers. The children represented various disability conditions, including Autism-Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Cerebral Palsy, and Intellectual Disability. These variations provided different caregiving contexts, enabling the study to capture the dynamics of parenting learning across diverse situations.

Partisipan	Usia (Tahun)	Pendidikan Terakhir	Pekerjaan	Lama Pengalaman Motherless (Tahun)	Jenis Kebutuhan Khusus Anak	Usia Anak (Tahun)	Status Perkawinan	Tipe Dukungan Utama
P1	30	S1	Ibu Rumah Tangga	11	Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	8	Menikah	Suami, Terapis, Komunitas Orang Tua
P2	33	S1	Wiraswasta	13	Down Syndrome	12	Menikah	Suami, Keluarga Besar, Sekolah
P3	35	D3	Guru	16	ADHD	10	Menikah	Suami, Guru, Komunitas Orang Tua
P4	37	S1	Karyawan Swasta	15	Cerebral Palsy	9	Menikah	Suami, Terapis, Keluarga Besar
P5	39	S1	Ibu Rumah Tangga	12	Tunagrahita	14	Menikah	Suami, Keluarga Besar, Sekolah
P6	41	S2	Dosen	18	Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	11	Menikah	Suami, Terapis, Komunitas Orang Tua
P7	44	SMA	Ibu Rumah Tangga	20	Down Syndrome	15	Menikah	Suami, Keluarga Besar, Sekolah
P8	47	S1	Wiraswasta	22	ADHD	13	Menikah	Suami, Komunitas Orang Tua, Guru

Figure 1. Mapping Participant

The diversity of participant characteristics indicates that parenting learning is influenced not only by the experience of maternal loss but also by the complexity of children's needs, occupational experiences, social support, and family environments. Therefore, the phenomenological interpretation in this study was not intended to produce generalizable findings but rather to understand the unique meanings embedded in each participant's lived experience.

b. Theme of Phenom

1) Theme 1. Maternal Loss as the Starting Point for Reconstructing Parenting Learning

The phenomenological analysis revealed that all participants perceived the loss of their mothers as a life-changing experience that fundamentally altered how they learned to become mothers. The absence of a maternal figure represented not only an emotional loss but also a disruption in the intergenerational transmission of parenting knowledge that typically occurs within family relationships. Consequently, participants were required to reconstruct parenting knowledge through independent learning processes.

One participant explained: "If my mother were still alive, I would probably ask her so many things. Now I have to learn everything by myself – from doctors, therapists, and even from my own failures (P3)."

This statement illustrates that participants perceived maternal loss as the disappearance of their "first teacher" in parenting. From an IPA perspective, the experience extended beyond grief and became the starting point of a meaning-making process. Participants reconstructed alternative parenting learning resources through lived experiences, social relationships, and continuous reflection on the challenges they encountered.

2) Theme 2. Raising Children with Special Needs as a Concrete Experience

All participants described everyday caregiving activities as the primary source of parenting learning. Experiences such as managing tantrums, overcoming communication difficulties, attending therapy sessions, and collaborating with schools generated practical knowledge that had never been acquired through formal education.

One participant stated: "Every day I learn something new. Sometimes I try a different approach and it works; sometimes it doesn't. That's how I learn what my child really needs (P5)." Within the framework of Experiential Learning Theory, these experiences represent concrete experience, the stage in which learning emerges through direct engagement with real-life situations (Kolb, 1984). Unlike formal education, parenting learning is highly contextual because every success and failure provides valuable information for improving future parenting practices.

These findings indicate that parenting competence develops progressively through everyday caregiving experiences rather than through theoretical knowledge alone.

3) Theme 3. Reflection as the Mechanism for Transforming Experience into Knowledge

The findings indicate that experience alone does not automatically produce learning. All participants engaged in reflective processes to evaluate both successful and unsuccessful caregiving experiences.

Reflection was carried out through several approaches, including: evaluating personal experiences; discussing challenges with spouses; consulting psychologists, physicians, or therapists; participating in parent support communities; and engaging in spiritual reflection through prayer and worship.

One participant explained: "Whenever my child has a tantrum, I always ask myself, 'What did I do wrong today?' Then I try a different approach the next day (P2)."

The phenomenological interpretation suggests that reflection serves as the central mechanism through which experiences are transformed into new knowledge. This stage corresponds to reflective observation in Experiential Learning Theory.

4) Theme 4. Transforming Experience into Parenting Competence

Cross-case analysis demonstrated that the learning process gradually evolved into more mature parenting competence. These competencies included: understanding children's developmental characteristics; regulating maternal emotions; developing more adaptive communication; making informed parenting decisions; and collaborating effectively with teachers, therapists, and healthcare professionals.

Interestingly, all participants emphasized that these competencies were not acquired through formal parenting training but developed through continuous learning embedded in everyday caregiving experiences.

From the IPA perspective, maternal loss contributed to the emergence of a new identity as a lifelong learner, reflecting mothers' continuous commitment to learning throughout their parenting journey.

5) Theme 5. Internalization of Islamic Family Education Values as a Source of Meaning

The findings demonstrate that Islamic values function not merely as spiritual support but also as a framework through which participants interpreted their life experiences.

The values most frequently identified included: *ṣabr* (patience); *tawakkul* (trust in God); *ikhtiar* (continuous effort); *raḥmah* (compassion); and *amānah* (responsibility).

One participant stated: "I believe Allah entrusted this child to me because He believes I am capable of caring for them. Therefore, I must continue learning so that I can fulfill this responsibility (P7)."

The IPA interpretation indicates that both motherless experiences and raising children

with special needs underwent a process of reframing, transforming experiences initially perceived as loss into spiritually meaningful experiences characterized by wisdom, responsibility, and personal growth.

These findings suggest that parenting learning in Muslim families develops not only through empirical experiences but also through the internalization of Islamic educational values, including *tarbiyah*, *rahmah*, and *amanah*. Consequently, parenting competence evolves alongside spiritual maturity.

c. Conceptual Model of the Parenting Learning Process Among Mothers with Motherless Experiences Raising Children with Special Needs

Based on the synthesis of all themes, this study proposes a conceptual model of the Parenting Learning Process Among Mothers with Motherless Experiences Raising Children with Special Needs. The model demonstrates that maternal loss serves as the starting point for transforming parenting learning from an intergenerational knowledge transfer process into an experiential learning process. Direct caregiving experiences while raising children with special needs stimulate reflective processes that generate new parenting knowledge, which is subsequently applied in parenting practices to develop increasingly adaptive parenting competencies.

Unlike Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which concludes with the learning cycle, the findings of this study indicate that within the context of Muslim families, the learning process is further enriched by the internalization of Islamic family education values. This integration ultimately leads to meaningful parenting, characterized not only by technical competence but also by spiritual significance and moral responsibility.

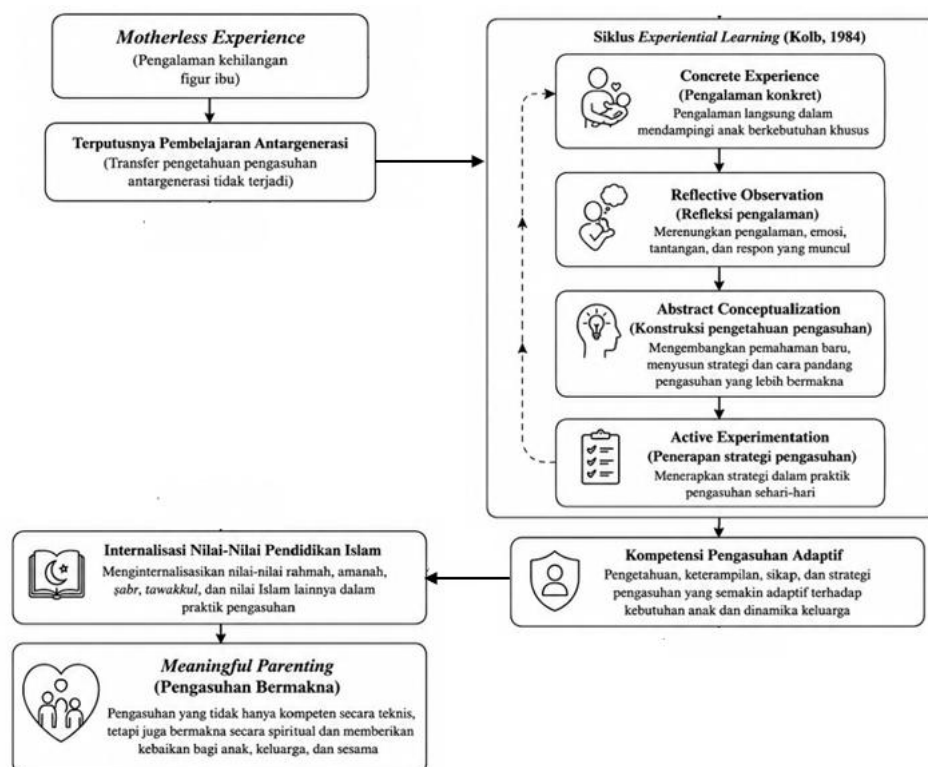


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Parenting Learning Process Among Mothers with Motherless Experiences Raising Children with Special Needs

This conceptual model represents the principal theoretical contribution of the study by

integrating motherless experiences, Experiential Learning Theory, and Islamic family education into a unified framework for understanding how parenting competencies are developed among mothers raising children with special needs.

2. Discussions

a. Motherless Experience as the Starting Point for Transforming Parenting Learning

The findings indicate that motherless experiences involve not only emotional loss but also a transformation in the mechanisms through which parenting knowledge is acquired. In the absence of a maternal figure, participants entered motherhood without the primary source of guidance for understanding parenting practices, addressing children's developmental challenges, and making decisions related to raising children with special needs. Consequently, parenting learning was no longer grounded in intergenerational knowledge transmission but was reconstructed through active knowledge seeking, reflection on lived experiences, interactions with professionals, and support from parent communities. These findings suggest that maternal loss should not merely be understood as an experience of grief but as the starting point for reconstructing parenting learning and developing new parenting competencies.

These findings extend the work of Por et al., (2026), who argued that parenting practices are generally acquired through intergenerational learning. In contrast, this study demonstrates that when intergenerational knowledge transfer is disrupted by motherless experiences, mothers do not lose their capacity to learn. Instead, they develop more independent, reflective, and experience-based learning pathways (Naufal & Rahmandani, 2020; Nurhayati et al., 2023). Thus, motherless experiences should not be viewed solely as a source of psychological vulnerability but also as a context that stimulates alternative mechanisms of parenting learning (Shpigelman & Karlinski Argi, 2024).

From the perspective of Experiential Learning Theory, maternal loss represents a concrete experience that initiates knowledge transformation through reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation with parenting strategies (Kolb, 1984). These findings demonstrate that disruptive life experiences can become valuable learning resources when individuals actively construct meaning from them. Accordingly, this study extends the application of Experiential Learning Theory by showing that experiences of loss contribute not only to psychological adaptation but also to the development of parenting competencies.

b. Raising Children with Special Needs as a Lifelong Learning Process

The findings demonstrate that raising children with special needs is a dynamic and lifelong learning process (Rahayu & Yudiati, 2022). Parenting competence is not acquired through a single experience but develops continuously as mothers respond to changing developmental needs, evaluate the effectiveness of their parenting strategies, and modify their practices based on previous experiences. Every caregiving challenge therefore becomes an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and refine parenting skills.

These findings are consistent with Mundakir et al., (2024), who reported that parents of children with special needs develop caregiving competencies through everyday experiences and interactions with healthcare professionals, teachers, and support communities. However, this study contributes a new perspective by demonstrating that motherless experiences strengthen the reflective nature of this learning process (Sugitanata & Aqila, 2024). Participants learned not only how to respond to their children's needs but also how to reconstruct their identities as mothers without maternal support. In other words, they simultaneously learned how to care for their children and how to become

mothers.

The findings also support Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which suggests that disorienting dilemmas can fundamentally transform individuals' frames of reference. In this study, maternal loss and the experience of raising children with special needs interacted as two disruptive experiences that reshaped participants' understanding of motherhood, responsibility, and learning. Consequently, parenting learning resulted not only in improved technical skills but also in profound transformations in maternal identity.

c. Reflection as the Mechanism for Transforming Experience into Parenting Competence

The phenomenological analysis revealed that reflection serves as the central mechanism connecting experience with the development of parenting competence. Concrete experiences did not automatically generate learning; rather, participants actively reflected on their actions, identified the causes of successes and failures, and developed more appropriate parenting strategies. Therefore, the quality of learning depended not on the quantity of experience but on the individual's capacity to interpret and derive meaning from those experiences (Jasmine et al., 2025).

Reflection also emerged as a social process. Participants constructed parenting knowledge not only through individual evaluation but also through dialogue with spouses, teachers, therapists, healthcare professionals, and parent support communities. These interactions broadened their perspectives, introduced alternative problem-solving strategies, and strengthened their confidence in parenting decisions. Thus, parenting learning can be understood as a socially constructed process arising from the interaction between individual experiences and supportive social environments (Arief & Hakim, 2016; Swandi et al., 2022).

Within Experiential Learning Theory, reflection corresponds to the stage of reflective observation, through which concrete experiences are transformed into abstract conceptualization before being applied through active experimentation. Accordingly, this study provides empirical evidence that reflection is the key mechanism explaining how motherless experiences and caregiving experiences evolve into adaptive parenting competencies. These findings also broaden the application of Kolb's theory beyond formal education and professional development into the domain of family education.

d. Internalization of Islamic Family Education Values as a Framework for Meaning-Making

The findings indicate that Islamic family education values function as an interpretive framework through which participants made sense of maternal loss and caregiving challenges. The values of *amānah* (responsibility), *rahmah* (compassion), *ṣabr* (patience), *ikhtiar* (continuous effort), and *tawakkul* (trust in God) were not merely understood as religious principles but were internalized as foundations for decision-making, emotional regulation, and relationships with their children (Ilyasa et al., 2025). Consequently, parenting learning developed not only technical competence but also spiritual resilience and moral commitment.

The findings further demonstrate that motherless experiences underwent a process of meaning-making through the internalization of Islamic values. Maternal loss and the challenges of raising children with special needs were no longer interpreted solely as burdens but as a divine trust containing wisdom and opportunities for personal growth. In this context, religiosity functioned not only as a coping strategy but also as a source of learning that shaped participants' interpretations of their lived experiences.

A major contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that Experiential Learning

Theory and the concept of tarbiyah in Islamic family education complement one another in explaining parenting learning (Wahyuni & Ulfah, 2021). Whereas Kolb (1984) emphasizes the transformation of experience into knowledge through reflection, Islamic educational philosophy adds moral and spiritual dimensions that guide this transformation toward character development, responsibility, and meaningful parenting. Integrating these perspectives resulted in a conceptual model explaining that parenting competence among mothers with motherless experiences develops through the interaction of lived experiences, reflective learning, social support, and the internalization of Islamic values. Consequently, this study contributes not only to the literature on motherless motherhood and parenting children with special needs but also to the broader field of family education by positioning lived experience as a source of learning and spiritual meaning.

Conclusion

This study addresses its research objective by demonstrating that motherless experiences shape a distinctive parenting learning process among mothers raising children with special needs. The absence of a maternal figure disrupts the intergenerational transmission of parenting knowledge, leading mothers to construct alternative learning mechanisms through direct caregiving experiences, reflective practices, interactions with professionals and parent communities, and the internalization of Islamic family education values. This learning process unfolds through the stages of concrete experience, reflection, knowledge construction, and the application of adaptive parenting strategies, ultimately resulting in meaningful parenting competence.

The findings further demonstrate that maternal loss should not be viewed solely as a source of vulnerability but can be transformed into a valuable learning resource that strengthens mothers' parenting competencies. Based on these findings, this study proposes the Motherless Parenting Learning Process as a conceptual model explaining how motherless experiences evolve into adaptive parenting competence through experiential learning enriched by Islamic family education values. This model extends the application of Experiential Learning Theory within the field of family education and provides practical implications for developing parenting education programs that are responsive to the needs of mothers with motherless experiences by strengthening reflective learning, social support, and the internalization of Islamic values.

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