

## Peer Mediation, Emotional Substitution, and the Ambivalence of Care: Informal Care Practices in Indonesian Child Welfare Institutions

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### Abstract:

This study examines peer mediation practices carried out by foster older siblings at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu as a response to the limitations of formal caregiving structures in addressing conflicts among children within an institutional care setting. Drawing on attachment theory, this research critically analyzes how informal caregiving mechanisms operate within the institution and generate ambivalent consequences. Using a qualitative approach and a phenomenological method, the researchers collected data through in-depth interviews with 18 informants (4 foster older siblings, 8 foster children, 1 foster mother, and 5 institutional administrators) and observation. The findings reveal three main results. First, peer mediation functions as a mechanism for restructuring children's social relations through behavioral modeling and moral guidance, so it not only resolves conflicts but also transforms them into spaces for social learning. Second, the emotional support provided by foster older siblings operates as a substitute attachment system that compensates for the limited emotional capacity within the formal caregiving structure. Third, although peer mediation effectively creates harmony and relational stability, it simultaneously produces ambivalence because it positions foster older siblings in a dual-burden role as both recipients and providers of psychological support. This study affirms that peer mediation within child welfare institutions represents the ambivalence of institutional caregiving in Indonesia: it provides practical solutions to everyday conflicts while simultaneously revealing structural gaps in the distribution of emotional labor and formal caregiving capacity. This study contributes to the development of the sociology of child welfare by offering a critical reading of informal caregiving practices as multidimensional processes layered with power relations and emotional dynamics within the child welfare system.

**Keywords:** Peer Mediation, Foster Older Siblings, Institutional Care, Emotional Labor, Sociology of Child Welfare.

### Abstrak:

Studi ini mengkaji praktik mediasi sebaya yang dijalankan oleh kakak asuh di LKSA Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu sebagai respons terhadap keterbatasan struktur pengasuhan formal dalam menangani konflik antar anak di lingkungan pengasuhan institusional. Berangkat dari perspektif teori kelekatan, penelitian ini secara kritis menelaah bagaimana mekanisme pengasuhan informal beroperasi di dalam institusi serta menghasilkan konsekuensi yang

*bersifat ambivalen. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode fenomenologis, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap 18 informan (4 kakak asuh, 8 anak asuh, 1 ibu asuh, dan 5 pengurus lembaga) dan observasi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan. Pertama, mediasi sebaya berfungsi sebagai mekanisme restrukturisasi relasi sosial anak melalui pemodelan perilaku dan bimbingan moral, sehingga konflik tidak hanya diselesaikan tetapi juga ditransformasikan menjadi ruang pembelajaran sosial. Kedua, dukungan emosional yang diberikan kakak asuh beroperasi sebagai sistem kelekatan substitutif yang mengompensasi keterbatasan kapasitas emosional dalam struktur pengasuhan formal. Ketiga, efektivitas mediasi sebaya dalam menciptakan harmoni dan stabilitas relasional sekaligus memproduksi ambivalensi, karena menempatkan kakak asuh pada posisi beban ganda sebagai penerima sekaligus penyedia dukungan psikologis. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa mediasi sebaya dalam lembaga kesejahteraan anak merepresentasikan ambivalensi pengasuhan institusional di Indonesia: menyediakan solusi praktis bagi konflik harian sekaligus menyingkap celah struktural dalam distribusi kerja emosional dan kapasitas pengasuhan formal. Studi ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan sosiologi kesejahteraan anak dengan menawarkan pembacaan kritis atas praktik pengasuhan informal sebagai proses multidimensional yang berlapis relasi kuasa dan dinamika emosional dalam sistem kesejahteraan anak.*

**Kata Kunci:** Mediasi Sebaya, Kakak Asuh, Pengasuhan Institusional, Kerja Emosional, Sosiologi Kesejahteraan Anak.

## INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal conflict in *Lembaga Kesejahteraan Sosial Anak/LKSA* (Child Welfare Institution, hereafter CWI), commonly referred to as orphanages, constitutes a complex and urgent social issue within Indonesia's child welfare system (Singgih, 2024). Orphaned and abandoned children not only experience the loss of nuclear family support but also face emotional pressures that often exceed their developmental stage. Data from the Ministry of Social Affairs indicate that the number of orphans in Indonesia exceeds 4 million, a figure that reflects the large-scale demand for institution-based alternative care (Setiawan, 2021). In this context, CWI functions as a social space that carries responsibility not only for providing basic needs but also for ensuring children's psychosocial security. However, collective life within institutions frequently generates conflicts among foster children, which increase anxiety, separation trauma, and social disharmony.

Scholars cannot reduce this phenomenon merely to issues of discipline or weak adult supervision. The 2022 Indonesian National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS) reports that 34.9% of Indonesian adolescents, equivalent to approximately 15.5 million individuals, experience at least one mental health problem (Winurini, 2025; Wirawan, 2024). This prevalence tends to be higher among children who live without nuclear family support and reside in institutional care. A study conducted in several CWIs in Bali even found a behavioral problem prevalence of 71.5%, dominated by internalizing symptoms such as sadness, anxiety, low self-esteem, and loneliness associated with the trauma of family loss and unstable caregiving patterns (Kayika et al., 2023). These data indicate that interpersonal conflict in CWI does not constitute an incidental phenomenon; rather, it reflects structural limitations within the formal caregiving system in providing an emotionally responsive environment.

From a theoretical perspective, this condition generates significant conceptual tension. Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969), emphasizes the importance of secure attachment relationships with substitute figures as the foundation for emotional regulation and children's social development. However, in institutional caregiving practice, formal interventions by adult caregivers often prove less effective because of age distance, power relations, and limited understanding of peer psychological dynamics (Pratiwi et al., 2022). In this context, peer mediation emerges as a more contextual alternative. This approach utilizes age proximity, shared life experiences, and more fluid emotional bonds to facilitate dialogical and empathetic conflict resolution (Marlina, 2014).

One such practice operates at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu through a foster older sibling program implemented since the institution's establishment in 1979 (Arafah & Sahrul, 2024). Adolescents aged 17–19 act as mediators for younger children aged 9–16, while simultaneously serving as intermediary figures within the collective caregiving pattern. Research demonstrates that the presence of caregiver figures plays a significant role in shaping children's independence and behavior in orphanages (Tabi'in, 2020). Factors that shape attachment arise not only from internal individual aspects but also from the social environment in which children grow (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ikrima & Khoirunnisa, 2021). Children who feel accepted and understood tend to build empathy, cooperation, and healthy emotional regulation more easily (Arianda et al., 2022; Munawaroh, 2025).

However, the effectiveness of peer mediation presents a structural paradox. On the one hand, this practice creates relational harmony and reduces conflict tensions more adaptively than formal interventions. On the other

hand, its success reveals the limitations of the institutional caregiving system in comprehensively meeting children's emotional needs. When foster older siblings function as alternative secure bases, they simultaneously carry a dual burden as both recipients and providers of psychological support (Sinombor, 2025). The harmony that emerges may therefore operate in a substitutive manner, resolving the symptoms of conflict without addressing the structural roots embedded in a caregiving design that offers limited personalization.

The literature on institutional caregiving and child conflict resolution in CWI shows that previous studies remain fragmented into three clusters. First, one cluster positions CWI as institutions of empowerment and character formation, focusing on institutional functions, service quality, and their impact on child welfare (Kartikawati et al., 2025; Tjempaka & Christy, 2024). These studies provide insight into the importance of governance, accreditation, and quality assurance in improving children's health and development. However, they tend to operate at a structural-macro level and do not examine in depth the everyday interpersonal conflict dynamics among foster children. Second, a cluster of psychological studies highlights coping strategies, resilience, attachment, and adolescent happiness in orphanages (Mansoer et al., 2019; Putri et al., 2023; Suryaningsih et al., 2022). These studies show that attachment to significant figures and resilience capacity play important roles in reducing deviant behavior and increasing subjective well-being. However, they tend to treat conflict as an intrapersonal issue that individuals can address by strengthening personal capacities, without linking it to peer mediation mechanisms within collective caregiving structures. Third, a cluster of critical studies examines issues of child institutionalization, risks of violence, and the paradoxes of philanthropy and institution-based caregiving practices (Andrina et al., 2024; McLaren & Qonita, 2019; Sutinah & Aminah, 2018). These works demonstrate that institutional caregiving in Indonesia remains inseparable from problems of power relations, the commodification of benevolence, and the potential for neglect and hidden violence. However, these studies have not examined peer mediation as a social practice that emerges from within the foster children's own community. A gap therefore exists in analyzing peer mediation not merely as a conflict resolution technique, but as a relational practice operating within the limitations of formal structures, the distribution of emotional labor, and the ambivalence of institutional caregiving. This gap provides the foundation for the present study.

This study aims to examine the mechanisms and effectiveness of peer mediation conducted by foster older siblings in resolving conflicts at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu and to test the argument that the success of peer mediation not only reflects the effectiveness of a relational approach but also signals the structural limitations of the formal caregiving system and the potential emotional burden borne by foster older siblings. By employing attachment theory, this study positions peer mediation as a multidimensional informal caregiving practice that functions simultaneously as a pragmatic solution and as a mirror of the ambivalence of institutional caregiving within Indonesia's child welfare system.

## METHOD

This study focuses on peer mediation practices at *Lembaga Kesejahteraan Sosial Anak/LKSA* (Child Welfare Institution, hereafter CWI) Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu, with particular attention to the role of foster older siblings as mediators of conflicts among foster children within the institutional setting. The unit of analysis consists of the socio-psychological dynamics of peer mediation, including interactions between foster older siblings (aged 17–19) and younger foster children (aged 9–16), the conflict resolution strategies they employ, and their impact on emotional regulation, relational stability, and the prevention of separation trauma escalation within institutional caregiving.

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method because it seeks to understand the participants' lived experiences, both as mediators and as individuals being mediated. The researchers selected the phenomenological method to capture subjective meanings, emotional bonds, and the social logic underlying the effectiveness of peer mediation—dimensions that cannot be reduced solely to quantitative indicators (Lune & Berg, 2017; Schutz, 1970). This method allows the researchers to interpret how foster older siblings function as alternative attachment figures (secure base) within an institutional context.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary data. The researchers obtained primary data through interviews with 18 informants selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus. These informants include 4 foster older siblings who serve as primary mediators, 8 foster children who have experienced conflict, 1 foster mother who acts as a direct supervisor, and 5 CWI administrators who serve as administrative informants. The researchers selected the informants based on their active involvement in the institution's conflict mediation

dynamics. They conducted participant observation from September to October 2025 at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu. The researchers obtained secondary data from CWI internal archives, daily caregiving records, conflict incident reports, caregiving program documents, and relevant online media reports concerning orphanages in Indonesia.

The researchers conducted data collection over two months, from September to October 2025, within the CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu environment. They carried out participant observation to capture everyday conflict dynamics and mediation processes as they naturally unfolded in the collective lives of foster children. The researchers used field notes to record interactions, emotional expressions, and communication patterns that emerged during mediation processes. They conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews covering topics such as types of conflict, mediation strategies, the role of emotional closeness, and the impact of mediation on harmony and a sense of security within the orphanage environment. The researchers recorded all interviews with participants' consent and maintained confidentiality in accordance with social research ethics principles.

The data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2013), which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the reduction stage, the researchers coded interview transcripts, observation notes, and institutional documents based on major themes such as behavioral guidance, emotional support, and the transformation of conflict into learning moments. During the data display stage, they organized the data thematically to compare perspectives across informants and identify consistent relational patterns. During the conclusion-drawing stage, they linked empirical findings to attachment theory and peer mediation concepts, while applying source triangulation (interviews, observation, and documents) and member checking to ensure credibility and interpretive consistency.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Peer Mediation as a Mechanism for Restructuring Social Relations in Institutional Care

Interpersonal conflict at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu does not constitute an incidental, isolated event; rather, it forms part of the collective life dynamics of children who live within a shared caregiving environment. Various forms of conflict recur, ranging from disputes over the use of shared facilities, noncompliance with house rules (such as returning late or not making one's bed), teasing, to conflicts rooted in experiences of bullying at school. In several cases, conflicts escalate into heated arguments and nearly result in physical violence. The researcher's observation in September 2025 recorded a situation in which two foster children stared at each other with tense expressions after mocking one another; the atmosphere became intense and nearly turned into a physical fight. A foster older sibling quickly intervened by separating them and bringing them outside to talk calmly, which effectively de-escalated the emotional tension. This moment demonstrates that conflict at CWI does not merely involve rule violations; it reflects an intersection of emotional needs, experiences of loss, and peer relational dynamics.

Peer mediation functions as more than a conflict resolution technique. It operates as a mechanism for restructuring social relations within the institutional caregiving space. Unlike authoritative, top-down approaches to conflict (Keen, 2021; Lewis et al., 2018; Reed & Ceno, 2015), foster older siblings prioritize dialogical and relational patterns. One foster older sibling, JH (Interview, September 2025), explained:

"Usually I invite them to sit together after they fight. I tell them about my own experience when I used to get angry over small things when I was younger. Then we ask each other for forgiveness, and I remind them about the importance of patience as taught in our religion."

This strategy shows that the foster older siblings' legitimacy does not derive from a formal institutional position but from age proximity, shared life experiences, and the ability to build empathy. This closeness creates a safe space in which children understand conflict not as wrongdoing that requires punishment, but as a process of social learning.

Interviews with eight foster children reinforce the effectiveness of this approach. Several children stated that they feel more comfortable being mediated by foster older siblings than by the foster mother because the approach emphasizes dialogue rather than punishment. AJ (12 years old), who had experienced bullying at school, explained that the foster older sibling advised him not to respond with violence and instead to remain calm. Another foster child (AZ, Interview, September 2025) stated, "When I talk to the older siblings, it feels like talking to my own sibling. They understand without me having to explain everything in detail." The foster older siblings become the first figures the children seek when problems arise, even though they are still close in age. The children even expressed

concern about the possibility that these foster older siblings might eventually leave the orphanage. The relationship that develops remains horizontal and sibling-based, yet it exerts strong influence because the children respect it morally.

Statements from institutional administrators further emphasize the central role of foster older siblings in maintaining the orphanage's social stability. IP (Interview, October 2025) and AE (Interview, October 2025) stated that the dialogical approach of foster older siblings proves far more effective than formal punishment because children who previously resisted discipline become more willing to listen when someone speaks to them sincerely. The foster mother, RE (Interview, September 2025), even described the foster older siblings as an "emotional buffer" who sustains the orphanage's harmony. Although moments of resistance occur, during which some children occasionally refuse to listen to the foster older siblings, experience shows that conflicts left unmediated tend to develop into more complex problems. Over time, the children recognize the importance of the foster older siblings' role.

Peer mediation at this CWI demonstrates that maturity and moral authority do not always depend on biological age or formal position. Age proximity instead becomes a strong source of social legitimacy. Children perceive foster older siblings as individuals who "have been in the same position," so their advice does not feel judgmental. This pattern contrasts with various reported cases of conflict and violence among orphanage residents in Indonesia, such as the abuse case in Malang (Harian Kompas, 2022), alleged harassment in Tangerang (tvonenews, 2025), and a case of adolescent bullying in Surabaya (Kompas TV, 2025), which demonstrate that peer relations can become sources of risk when institutions fail to manage them dialogically and empathetically. In the context of CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu, peer relations instead function as a protective space that reduces the potential for conflict escalation.

However, this effectiveness does not exist without ambivalence. One foster older sibling admitted, "Sometimes I feel tired too, like I always have to be patient and set an example, but what else can I do? It is also my responsibility" (N, Interview, October 2025). This statement reveals the emotional burden accompanying the role. Peer mediation successfully reduces conflict and strengthens solidarity, yet it simultaneously positions foster older siblings as buffer figures who carry high moral and emotional expectations. Peer mediation at this CWI therefore constitutes not only a conflict resolution mechanism but also a social practice that restructures power relations and the distribution of emotional labor within the collective caregiving system.

Peer mediation functions as the foundation of social stability within institutional caregiving because it clearly shifts conflict resolution patterns from formal control to dialogical-relational approaches. In the context of institutional caregiving, formal control refers to disciplinary mechanisms based on written rules, administrative sanctions, official reprimands, activity restrictions, or collective punishment implemented by adult caregivers who hold structural authority. Many child care institutions, including orphanages in Indonesia, commonly use such disciplinary approaches to maintain collective order, especially when caregiver-to-child ratios remain unbalanced (McLaren & Qonita, 2019; Tegnan, 2018; Windari et al., 2021). Formal control generally positions children as objects of regulation who must be directed, reprimanded, or punished when they violate rules, thereby creating vertical, power-based relationships. In practice, formal control may take the form of summoning a child to the caregiver's office, assigning additional tasks as consequences, restricting access to play, or reprimanding a child in front of the group to reinforce discipline.

In contrast, the peer mediation conducted by foster older siblings at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu demonstrates a shift in this logic. The institution does not immediately bring conflict into the realm of institutional sanctions; instead, foster older siblings first process it through empathetic conversation, shared experiences, and mutual forgiveness guided by a figure who commands social respect but does not hold formal authority. Within a space marked by parental loss and psychosocial vulnerability, this dialogical approach allows children to preserve dignity and a sense of security without feeling stigmatized as "rule violators." This shift reflects a transformation from coercive social control to relational and attachment-based social control, in which emotional regulation grows from a sense of acceptance rather than fear of punishment (Bowlby, 1969; Mansoer et al., 2019). The effectiveness of peer mediation therefore extends beyond conflict reduction; it involves building social cohesion through moral legitimacy rooted in shared experience, a practice that simultaneously reveals the structural limits of formal caregiving in responding deeply to children's emotional needs.

### **Emotional Support and Substitute Attachment: Foster Older Siblings as Alternative *Secure Base***

Foster older siblings not only function as conflict mediators but also develop into substitute attachment figures who serve as alternative *secure base* within the institutional caregiving environment. For children who have experienced parental loss and psychosocial vulnerability, the need for stable, responsive, and consistent figures becomes crucial. Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969), asserts that when biological parents are absent, children still require substitute figures who can provide a sense of security (felt security) as the foundation for emotional regulation and social exploration. Such figures do not need biological ties; however, they must establish stable, empathetic, and trustworthy relationships. At CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu, foster older siblings clearly fulfill this function.

At CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu, age proximity serves as a key factor in forming a sense of security. Foster children do not perceive foster older siblings as formal authorities; instead, they view them as “biological older siblings” who directly understand their experiences. R (Interview, September 2025) stated that she feels happy because the foster older siblings act maturely despite the small age gap. This generational closeness creates a horizontal form of attachment distinct from the vertical relationship between children and adult caregivers. Ainsworth and Bell (1970) emphasize that the quality of attachment depends on caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness rather than status or biological age. In practice, foster older siblings demonstrate this sensitivity by opening spaces for personal sharing, listening without judgment, and offering advice grounded in similar life experiences.

Foster children repeatedly stated that they feel “understood” rather than “judged.” RC (19 years old, Interview, October 2025), as a foster older sibling, explained that his primary approach to conflict involves understanding the child as an individual who needs to be heard, rather than immediately reprimanding them. He developed this approach through reflection on his seven years living at the CWI. Narratives from foster children such as T (Interview, September 2025) and VO (Interview, September 2025) demonstrate the concrete impact of this approach. They admitted that they often argue over minor issues—competing for bathroom access or teasing one another—yet after mediation, they feel calmer and more accepting. The frequently repeated phrase by foster older siblings, “We are a family; there should be no hostility within a family,” symbolizes the internalization of togetherness values that strengthen social cohesion. This process shows that mediation does not end with momentary conflict resolution; instead, it builds long-term attachment that sustains relational stability in orphanage life.

The role of foster older siblings extends beyond conflict situations. The researcher’s observation in October 2025 revealed that everyday activities at the orphanage—such as eating together, studying together, and sharing stories before bedtime—serve as spaces for reproducing attachment and solidarity. In an orphanage inhabited by 15 children from diverse backgrounds, these collective activities function as mechanisms of social integration that prevent relational fragmentation. These shared routines reinforce mechanical solidarity in Durkheimian terms, rooted in shared life experiences and collective values. Psychosocially, this pattern aligns with findings by Suryaningsih et al. (2022), who demonstrate that internal social support within orphanages strengthens adolescents’ adaptive coping strategies, as well as with research by Putri and Mansoer (2023), who find that attachment to significant figures positively correlates with happiness and resilience among adolescents in orphanages.

Reflection from the foster mother, RE, clarifies the difference in impact between adult intervention and foster older sibling intervention. She emphasized that the administrators’ role does not lack importance; however, conflict resolution often proves more effective when foster older siblings intervene directly. Administrators tend to manage administrative and managerial aspects, whereas children’s emotional issues are more easily addressed through peer relational closeness. This study aligns with literature indicating that the quality of caregiving relationships constitutes a primary determinant of institutional success (McCall, 2013; van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). Dozier et al. (2012) further emphasize that institutions can minimize the negative impacts of institutionalization when children have consistent caregivers who provide ongoing security. Mansoer et al. (2019) also find that attachment to significant figures in orphanages correlates with lower delinquency and increased adolescent resilience.

**Table 1. The Role of Foster Older Siblings as Alternative Secure Base in Institutional Care**

| Aspect of Role                           | Form of Practice  | Impact   |
|--|---|--|
| Substitute attachment figure             | Providing a space for personal sharing, listening without judgment, offering advice based on similar life experiences                 | Children feel understood, safe, and accepted                           |
| Conflict mediator                        | Facilitating dialogue during disputes (competing for bathroom use, teasing one another), emphasizing the value that “we are a family” | More stable emotional regulation, reduced conflict, increased cohesion |
| Generational closeness                   | Horizontal peer relationship, perceived as “biological older siblings” rather than formal authorities                                 | Sense of security formed through empathy and equality of experience    |
| Daily reproduction of attachment         | Eating together, studying together, sharing stories before bedtime  | Increased collective solidarity and social integration                 |
| Consistent emotional support             | Providing rapid responses to children’s personal problems   | Increased resilience and happiness                                     |
| Role differentiation from administrators | Administrators focus on administrative matters, foster older siblings focus on relational-emotional aspects                           | Psychologically more effective conflict resolution                     |

However, the role as an alternative *secure base* does not remain free from emotional burden. Foster older siblings such as JH and EW (Interview, October 2025) acknowledged that children often approach them as the primary confidants, including regarding trauma related to parental loss. They recognize that failure to de-escalate conflict could affect the orphanage’s reputation and stability, which generates a strong sense of responsibility to maintain a conducive environment. Although they feel proud and useful, the pressure to consistently act mature and patient reflects a significant distribution of emotional labor. Here, the ambivalence of institutional caregiving becomes evident: the effectiveness of substitute attachment built by foster older siblings simultaneously reveals the limitations of formal structures in comprehensively fulfilling children’s emotional needs.

Foster older siblings at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu deserve recognition as alternative secure base figures in the Bowlbian sense. They provide security, serve as sources of emotional regulation, and build long-term social cohesion through consistent empathetic relationships. The success of caregiving institutions strongly depends on the quality of relationships between caregivers and children (McCall, 2013; Tjempaka & Christy, 2024). In this study, researchers do not measure caregiving quality solely by facility completeness or administrative governance; instead, they assess it by the institution’s ability to provide significant figures who relationally replace the attachment functions of lost parents. However, this effectiveness simultaneously raises further questions about the boundary between strengthening relational capacity and imposing emotional burdens on senior children—an ambivalent dynamic that the following section will further elaborate.

### **Ambivalent Harmony: The Effectiveness of Mediation and the Dual Burden of Emotional Labor**

Peer mediation at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu has proven effective in reducing conflict and maintaining the orphanage’s social stability. Internal conflicts—whether involving competition over shared facilities, teasing, minor rule violations, or tensions arising from school-related problems—are resolved relatively quickly because fellow residents who share emotional closeness handle them directly. Foster older siblings act as the first buffer in nearly every interpersonal issue. They separate the conflicting parties, open space for dialogue, and conclude the process with moral agreements grounded in family values. This stability creates a conducive environment in which conflicts rarely escalate into prolonged disputes. The children acknowledge that without the presence of foster older siblings, minor issues could grow larger and trigger group divisions.

However, this effectiveness simultaneously reveals the limitations of the formal caregiving structure. Administrators and the foster mother acknowledge the limited number of caregivers compared to the 15 children residing in the orphanage. The formal structure manages administrative, logistical, and internal policy needs, yet it does not always effectively reach children’s everyday emotional dynamics. As a result, the distribution of emotional labor shifts significantly to the four foster older siblings, who are themselves residents of the orphanage. They carry relational responsibilities that ideally should be distributed within a broader caregiving system. The literature has

shown that the success of caregiving institutions largely depends on the ratio and quality of caregiver–child relationships (McCall, 2013; van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). When formal structures remain limited, informal relationships assume regulatory and protective functions.

This dual burden becomes evident in the narratives of the foster older siblings. JH admitted that he frequently resolves recurring minor conflicts, such as disputes over bathroom use before school. He sometimes chooses to give in to maintain a peaceful atmosphere. Another foster older sibling, EW, acknowledged that they must continuously maintain a moral image as role models, even though their age and life experience do not yet reflect full maturity. They suppress their personal emotions to avoid provoking resistance from younger children. In private moments, feelings of fatigue and boredom emerge due to repetitive minor conflicts—teasing, playful disturbances, or small misunderstandings that basic maturity could resolve. This burden extends beyond practical demands to psychological strain. They think about the orphanage’s future and worry about eventually leaving younger children who still depend on them emotionally. This situation reflects an intensive form of emotional labor that occurs without formal recognition as a structural position.

Children’s emotional dependence on foster older siblings further intensifies this ambivalence. The children feel safer, more comfortable, and more understood by foster older siblings than by formal administrators. This pattern strengthens relational stability but may also create new vulnerabilities if these foster older siblings are no longer present. Ainsworth and Bell (1970) emphasize that strong attachment builds a sense of security but requires consistency from caregiving figures. Mansoer et al. (2019) show that attachment to significant figures in orphanages increases resilience and reduces juvenile delinquency. Putri and Mansoer (2023) and Suryaningsih et al. (2022) confirm that internal emotional support predicts psychological well-being among orphanage children. The same pattern appears at this CWI. The quality of interpersonal relationships serves as the primary foundation of institutional harmony, rather than administrative governance alone (Kartikawati et al., 2025; Tjempaka & Christy, 2024).

The harmony created remains substitutive rather than structural. Foster older siblings perform substitute parental functions within relational spaces, yet they do not hold formal authority as primary decision-makers. This role grows from shared fate and collective life experience rather than from a professionally designed system. Literature on child institutionalization in Indonesia shows that caregiving quality often depends on internal initiative and individual relational capacity rather than on established and standardized systems (McLaren & Qonita, 2019; Sutinah & Aminah, 2018). In the context of child protection, weak formal structures can create risks if caregiving relationships are not managed properly (Windari et al., 2021). At CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu, these relationships function effectively because of strong internal solidarity. Nevertheless, this effectiveness rests upon the emotional burdens borne by senior children who themselves remain in the process of identity formation.

**Table 2. The Dual Burden of Foster Older Siblings in Institutional Care**

| Dimension of Burden            | Form   | Impact   | Institutional Consequence   |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Conflict Mediation Burden      | Resolving recurring conflicts (competition for bathroom use, teasing, minor rule violations) | Physical fatigue, lack of rest                             | Orphanage social stability remains maintained                       |
| Emotional Burden               | Suppressing personal emotions, maintaining a moral image as role models                      | Psychological pressure, boredom, excessive self-regulation | Children feel safe and conflicts de-escalate quickly                |
| Relational Burden              | Becoming a confidant and first buffer for interpersonal problems                             | Emotional dependence from younger children                 | Relational harmony becomes substitutive                             |
| Moral Burden                   | Serving as role models despite limited age and maturity                                      | Early demands for maturity                                 | Family-value cohesion remains strong                                |
| Long-Term Psychological Burden | Worrying about leaving younger children in the future  | Anxiety and role ambivalence                               | Vulnerability if foster older sibling figures are no longer present |
| Structural Burden              | Filling formal functional gaps due to limited caregiver staff                                | Responsibilities not formally recognized                   | The system depends on informal relationships                        |

This ambivalence forms the paradox of institutional caregiving. Peer mediation creates social stability, strengthens attachment, and maintains collective cohesion. At the same time, the system depends significantly on the emotional capacities of four adolescents who remain in the process of identity formation (Table 2). Harmony exists, yet it emerges through an uneven distribution of responsibility. This dynamic constitutes the core ambivalence of institutional caregiving: relational success born from emotional closeness simultaneously exposes structural limitations in sustaining children's overall well-being.

### **Peer Mediation as an Informal Caregiving Practice within Indonesia's Child Welfare Structure**

The practice of peer mediation at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu did not emerge as a formal program designed through a curriculum or professional training. Instead, it developed since the establishment of the orphanage as an internal collective agreement to maintain harmony and a conducive living environment. The institution does not provide specialized training modules, certification, or structured supervisory schedules. Four foster older siblings carry out this role autodidactically through lived experience, emotional closeness, and collectively reproduced habits. The ratio of four foster older siblings to the orphanage residents indicates that relational caregiving functions rely more heavily on informal mechanisms than on formal structures. Administrators acknowledge limitations in daily caregiving capacity; consequently, the presence of foster older siblings serves as an adaptive strategy that maintains the orphanage's social stability.

At the national structural level, this practice can be interpreted as a response to pressures within Indonesia's child welfare system. Data from Statistics Indonesia project that the population of children aged 0–19 will reach 88.81 million in 2025 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). Toddlers experience the highest poverty rate within the poor population structure, reaching 12.93% in March 2022, exceeding the national average of 9.54%. Indonesia records 67,368 abandoned children and approximately 2.15 million children who do not live with their biological parents, with around 500,000 of them residing in more than 6,000 CWIs across the country (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). These figures position caregiving institutions as critical components of the social protection system operating under limited resources. Informal caregiving mechanisms such as peer mediation emerge as forms of informal caregiving structure that fill the gap between children's emotional needs and formal institutional capacity (Bond, 1992; Roth, 2020; Vos et al., 2022).

The literature demonstrates that the quality of caregiving relationships determines institutional success more than administrative completeness. McCall (2013) emphasizes that institutions can reduce the negative impacts of institutionalization when they provide consistent figures who build stable personal relationships. Van IJzendoorn et al. (2011) and Dozier et al. (2012) assert that children in institutional care can still demonstrate resilience when they have responsive significant figures. Mansoer et al. (2019) and Putri and Mansoer (2023) show that attachment to significant figures in orphanages correlates with increased resilience and adolescent psychological well-being. Suryaningsih et al. (2022) also stress the importance of internal social support in shaping adaptive coping strategies. Research at this CWI aligns with this literature: harmony and social resilience grow from relationships rather than from sanctions or formal procedures.

The practice of peer mediation does not reflect total institutional failure. Administrators, the foster mother, and foster older siblings perceive it as a cultural adaptation consistent with Indonesian family values. A culture of collectivism and seniority grants moral legitimacy to older children to guide younger ones (Beazley, 2003; Nilan & Demartoto, 2012; Wiryomartono, 2020). This mechanism resembles a bottom-up mediation model, which conflict literature considers more effective than authoritative top-down approaches in community contexts (Reed & Ceno, 2015). However, this adaptation retains ambivalence. The system depends on individuals' relational capacity rather than on standardized formal policy design. When caregiving relies excessively on informal figures, sustainability risks arise if those figures exit the system.

The ambivalence of institutional caregiving manifests in two simultaneous dimensions. On one hand, peer mediation provides foster older siblings with opportunities to learn maturity. They develop skills in emotional management, conflict resolution, and early social responsibility. This process strengthens resilience capacity and moral leadership that can support independence after leaving the orphanage. On the other hand, the system's dependence on informal relationships indicates that formal structures have not fully met children's emotional needs comprehensively. Literature on institutional caregiving in Indonesia notes that institutional quality largely depends on internal relational capacity and caregiving management (Kartikawati et al., 2025; Tjempaka & Christy, 2024). McLaren and Qonita (2019) and Aminah (2018) show that weak caregiving relationships increase the risk of

violence and neglect. CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu demonstrates the opposite direction: strong relationships maintain stability, even though they rest upon informal mechanisms.

Peer mediation functions as a bridge between children's psychosocial needs and the limitations of the formal welfare system. It emerges from structural gaps yet operates as a pragmatic solution that strengthens internal cohesion. The resulting harmony does not stem from formal policy design; instead, it reflects the reproduction of collective habits grounded in emotional closeness and shared solidarity. This practice illustrates the distinctive character of institutional caregiving in Indonesia: adaptive, relational, and rooted in collectivist culture. Ambivalence persists because relational success coexists with structural limitations that have not yet been fully institutionalized within the national child welfare policy framework.

## DISCUSSION

This study identifies four interrelated processes in the practice of peer mediation at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu. First, peer mediation establishes a pattern of conflict resolution that restructures foster children's social relations from a logic of vertical discipline toward relational negotiation grounded in age proximity and shared life experiences. Second, this practice functions as emotional support that generates substitute attachment, as foster older siblings provide security, recognition, and spaces for personal sharing that formal caregiver-child relationships rarely achieve. Third, the effectiveness of peer mediation produces ambivalence within institutional caregiving, because orphanage harmony depends on the emotional labor of adolescents who are themselves residents. Fourth, peer mediation appears as an informal caregiving practice that develops from internal institutional adaptation and from structural pressures within Indonesia's child welfare system, which operates with limited capacity.

The findings on the shift from formal control to dialogical-relational approaches clarify how peer mediation operates as a mechanism of social regulation. Formal control in institutional caregiving typically operates through written rules, official reprimands, activity restrictions, and administrative sanctions enforced by adult authorities. Literature on caregiving institutions and disciplinary governance shows that such mechanisms often maintain order under conditions of imbalanced caregiver-child ratios and limited caregiving resources (McLaren & Qonita, 2019; Tegan, 2018; Windari et al., 2021). Field findings reveal a different pattern. Foster older siblings shift conflict from the arena of sanctions to the arena of dialogue, empathy, and relational reconstruction. This pattern aligns with bottom-up mediation arguments that emphasize social legitimacy and community proximity as keys to effective conflict resolution, in contrast to top-down approaches that often generate resistance (Keen, 2021; Lewis et al., 2018; Reed & Ceno, 2015).

An attachment theory perspective reinforces the position of foster older siblings as significant figures. Bowlby argues that substitute figures provide a prerequisite sense of security when biological parental relationships are unavailable, as long as the relationship remains stable and responsive (Bowlby, 1969, 1979). Field data show that foster children interpret foster older siblings as "biological older siblings" who understand them without judgment. Age proximity reduces power distance and strengthens trust, enabling foster older siblings to function as secure base figures who calm children after conflict and guide emotional regulation. This argument aligns with Ainsworth and Bell's assertion that caregiver sensitivity produces security, rather than formal or biological status alone (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Findings in Jakarta demonstrate that attachment to significant figures in orphanages correlates with higher resilience and lower deviant behavior (Mansoer et al., 2019) and associates with adolescent happiness in institutional settings (Putri et al., 2023). This study extends that evidence by showing that substitute attachment does not merely exist as a psychological condition; it operates through daily mediation practices that manage conflict, restore relationships, and sustain group cohesion.

This discussion also positions peer mediation as a process that exceeds episodic conflict resolution. Shared practices—such as eating together, studying together, and storytelling—create relational rhythms that reinforce internal solidarity and suppress tension escalation. This pattern explains why children recover more quickly after conflict and why the orphanage rarely experiences prolonged fractures. Institutional caregiving psychology literature affirms the role of internal social support as a source of adaptive coping (Suryaningsih et al., 2022). The findings of this study indicate that such internal social support does not exist as generalized support; rather, it is informally organized through seniority structures and stable peer caregiving practices.

Ambivalence emerges when relational effectiveness depends heavily on the emotional labor of foster older siblings. These adolescents occupy dual positions as recipients of institutional support and providers of psychological support for younger children. This burden manifests in the repetition of minor conflicts, the obligation to serve as moral role models, and anxiety regarding the continuity of orphanage harmony when they exit the

system. Literature on institutional caregiving suggests that institutions improve when caregiving relationships remain consistent, yet it also emphasizes institutional risk when relational support depends on individual capacity without adequate systemic buffers (Dozier et al., 2012; McCall, 2013; van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). The findings reveal a subtle form of institutional dependence: the orphanage appears stable, but that stability rests upon the emotional labor of adolescents who have not yet completed their own developmental processes.

These results address gaps across three previously fragmented clusters of literature. The cluster emphasizing governance, accreditation, and quality assurance provides important insights into service quality and child welfare outcomes but insufficiently captures daily conflict dynamics as sites of social relation production and emotional labor (Kartikawati et al., 2025; Tjempaka & Christy, 2024). The psychological cluster successfully demonstrates the contributions of attachment, resilience, coping, and happiness, yet it tends to frame conflict as an intrapersonal issue resolved through strengthening individual capacity, rather than as a social practice operating within collective caregiving structures ((Mansoer et al., 2019; Putri et al., 2023; Suryaningsih et al., 2022). The critical cluster highlights risks of violence, philanthropic paradoxes, and power relations within institutionalization, yet it has not examined internal child-community mechanisms that produce peer-based relational protection (Andrina et al., 2024; McLaren & Qonita, 2019; Sutinah & Aminah, 2018). This study integrates these three clusters by interpreting peer mediation as an effective yet ambivalent relational practice that reduces conflict, builds security, and simultaneously shifts emotional caregiving burdens to senior children.

At the structural level, this discussion clarifies the status of peer mediation as an informal caregiving structure within Indonesia's child welfare system. The practice has developed since the orphanage's establishment without formal training, curriculum, or structured supervision schedules. The ratio of four foster older siblings to 15 children illustrates why informal mechanisms remain crucial for maintaining relational order. Indonesia's child welfare structure positions CWIs as important caregiving spaces under significant challenges, including child poverty, abandonment, and the large number of children who do not reside with biological parents. These conditions increase the need for adaptive, low-cost caregiving strategies embedded in the institution's daily rhythms. The practice at this CWI demonstrates an internal adaptation rooted in collectivist culture and seniority norms that grant moral legitimacy to older children to guide younger ones. This adaptation reduces conflict escalation risk but introduces another risk when institutions rely excessively on informal figures without transition mechanisms and psychosocial support for foster older siblings.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in strengthening dialogue between attachment theory and institutional caregiving studies by positioning peer mediation as a process that produces a secure base through relational labor rather than as merely an individual psychological condition. The empirical contribution emerges from a micro-level reading of how conflict is processed through conversation, empathy, and reconciliation rituals led by foster older siblings. Practical implications point to the need for system reinforcement that protects foster older siblings as informal caregiving actors. Orphanages require emotional supervision mechanisms, clear role boundaries, and regeneration schemes for foster older siblings so that institutional stability does not depend on four specific individuals. Institutions must design caregiving systems that recognize the effectiveness of peer mediation while preventing excessive emotional burden on adolescents who remain in developmental transition phases.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that peer mediation at CWI Aisyiyah Kasih Ibu Bengkulu represents a complex and ambivalent process of institutional caregiving. Peer mediation functions not only as a conflict resolution technique but also as a mechanism for restructuring social relations that shifts control patterns from formal disciplinary approaches toward relationally based regulation. This practice creates empathetic dialogical spaces, strengthens group cohesion, and prevents conflict escalation that could undermine the orphanage's collective stability.

The findings also confirm that foster older siblings function as substitute attachment figures who provide security, emotional support, and moral legitimacy for children who have experienced parental loss. Age proximity and shared life experiences enable the formation of an alternative secure base that strengthens emotional regulation and long-term solidarity. The orphanage's social stability rests primarily on the quality of interpersonal relationships rather than solely on formal rules or administrative governance.

However, this effectiveness generates structural ambivalence. The relational harmony that emerges depends on a significant distribution of emotional labor to four foster older siblings who remain in the developmental phase of adolescence. The system's reliance on individual relational capacity indicates limitations within the formal

structure in guaranteeing systematically institutionalized emotional support. Peer mediation serves as an effective adaptive solution, yet it simultaneously exposes gaps in the design of institutional caregiving that have not been fully integrated in a professionalized manner.

The main contribution of this study lies in its critical interpretation of peer mediation as a multidimensional relational practice within Indonesia's child welfare system. This research connects attachment theory with the micro-dynamics of orphanage life and demonstrates that institutional stability develops through daily interactions imbued with emotional meaning. Peer mediation appears as an informal mechanism capable of maintaining social cohesion while simultaneously revealing the structural limits of formal caregiving.

This study has several limitations. It focuses on a single CWI; therefore, generalizing the findings to the broader context of institutional caregiving in Indonesia requires caution. The researchers collected data over a two-month period, which does not capture long-term dynamics, including potential relational changes when foster older siblings exit the system. The analysis does not yet incorporate perspectives from biological parents or regional-level policymakers. Future research should develop longitudinal studies to assess the sustainability of substitute attachment after foster older siblings leave the orphanage. Comparative research across CWIs with different management characteristics could reveal variations in peer mediation patterns and emotional labor distribution. Studies that integrate child welfare policy analysis, caregiver training design, and the mental health of foster older siblings could strengthen practical recommendations for reforming institutional caregiving systems. A multidisciplinary approach remains necessary to ensure that strengthening empathetic relationships within orphanages proceeds alongside psychosocial protection for all caregiving actors.

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