



# Promoting Emotional Development of Early Childhood on Buddhist Psychology Principles

**Nyanadaza**

International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU), Yangon, 11061, Myanmar  
✉: Nyanadaza@gmail.com (Corresponding Email)

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**Abstract:** Early childhood is a critical period for foundational emotional development that significantly impacts lifelong growth. Buddhist psychology, a wisdom tradition accumulated over 2,500 years since the Buddha's time, contains principles and concepts that can be effectively applied to promote emotional development in early childhood. This academic article aims to study and analyze Buddhist psychology concepts related to early childhood emotional development, synthesize relevant research and theories, and propose an integrated model for promoting emotional development based on Buddhist psychology. This study employs documentary analysis and synthesis of concepts from diverse secondary sources, including academic research, religious documents, and reports from international organizations published between 2020-2024, totaling 52 documents. The research findings reveal that Buddhist psychology principles applicable to promoting emotional development in early childhood comprise four main dimensions: mindfulness, loving-kindness, wisdom, and concentration. Integrating these principles into age-appropriate learning activities promotes the development of emotional management skills, self and others' emotional awareness, positive relationship building, and social adaptation. This article proposes a Five-Dimensional Integrated Model for promoting emotional development in early childhood, covering dimensions of self-awareness development, loving-kindness and compassion development, emotional intelligence development, mindfulness and concentration practice, and positive environment creation. This model can be applied in educational and family contexts to sustainably promote emotional development in early childhood.

**Keywords:** Buddhist psychology, emotional development, early childhood, early childhood education, emotional management, mindfulness

## 1. Introduction

Emotional development during early childhood (ages 0-6) is a crucial foundation affecting children's development in all other areas including social, cognitive, and physical domains. Many scholars and developmental psychologists emphasize that early childhood is a critical period for developing emotional skills because children's brains during this period are highly plastic and ready for learning (Courbet et al., 2024). Good emotional skill development in early childhood enables children to manage stress, control behavior, build good relationships with others, and be ready for learning (Slot et al., 2017). However, in today's world filled with haste, pressure, and rapid change, early childhood children are facing increasing emotional challenges. Statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that mental health

problems in children and youth are continuously increasing, particularly problems related to emotional control, anxiety, and depression (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021). If these problems are not properly addressed in childhood, they may impact long-term development and quality of life in adulthood.

Buddhist psychology is a knowledge system rooted in the Buddha's teachings that emphasizes understanding the human mind and the path to peace. Buddhist psychology principles are not merely religious philosophy but also a science of the mind that is universal and can be applied to various contexts. In recent decades, Western scholars and psychologists have shown great interest in Buddhist psychology, particularly the application of mindfulness principles in therapy and mental health promotion (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Much research has shown that mindfulness practice can help reduce stress, increase emotional control, and develop loving-kindness and compassion effectively (Fredrickson et al., 2008). In the context of early childhood education, applying Buddhist psychology principles to promote children's emotional development is interesting and highly promising. Recent research has shown that mindfulness practice and activities rooted in Buddhist psychology principles can help develop emotional control skills, empathy, and positive behaviors in early childhood children (Bockmann & Yu, 2023; Kander et al., 2024).

Yanissaro (2023) studied the application of Buddhist psychology in promoting early childhood emotional development and found that important principles that can be applied include mindfulness, emotional awareness, positive adaptation, and loving-kindness. Applying these principles in age-appropriate activities affects the development of emotional management skills, self-understanding, and building good relationships with others. Additionally, integrating Buddhist psychology with early childhood education helps promote mental balance, reduce aggressive behavior, and increase children's adaptability. In Thailand, which has Buddhist culture as its foundation, integrating Buddhist psychology principles with early childhood education is appropriate and highly feasible. The importance of this study lies in synthesizing academic knowledge about applying Buddhist psychology to promote early childhood emotional development and proposing a concrete model that can be practically implemented in Thai educational and family contexts. This academic article therefore has the following objectives: 1) to study and analyze Buddhist psychology concepts related to early childhood emotional development, 2) to synthesize research and theories related to applying Buddhist psychology in early childhood education, 3) to analyze mechanisms and processes by which Buddhist psychology promotes emotional development, and 4) to propose an integrated model for promoting early childhood emotional development based on Buddhist psychology that can be practically applied.

## **2. Buddhist Psychology Concepts and Emotional Development**

### **2.1 Fundamental Principles of Buddhist Psychology and Connections with Modern Psychology**

Buddhist psychology is a knowledge system rooted in the Buddha's teachings that emphasizes understanding the nature of the human mind and the path to liberation from suffering. Although Buddhist teachings originated over 2,500 years ago, Buddhist psychology principles remain contemporary and consistent with modern psychology principles in many respects. Important Buddhist psychology principles comprise multiple dimensions. First, the principle of the threefold training (*trisikkhā*), which consists of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*), is a comprehensive path for mental development. Morality refers to controlling external behavior and building ethics, concentration is training the mind to be focused and calm, and wisdom is penetrative understanding of the nature of things. Second, the principle of loving-kindness and the four divine abodes (*brahmavihāra*) - loving-kindness

(mettā), compassion (karuṇā), empathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkhā) - are mental qualities to be developed for good mental health and good relationships with others (Neff, 2014). Third, the principle of the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna), which is establishing mindfulness in body, feelings, mind, and mental objects. Mindfulness practice helps create awareness and mindfulness of what is happening in the present moment without judgment or struggle (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Fourth, the concept of causality and the law of karma. Buddhist psychology believes that emotions and mental states arise from various causes and conditions and can change when causes and conditions change. This perspective aligns with cognitive psychology, which believes that emotions arise from interpretation and evaluation of situations (Beck, 2011). Fifth, the concept of non-attachment and letting go. Buddhist psychology teaches that most suffering arises from attachment to things. Learning to let go and not attach reduces mental suffering and increases emotional flexibility. This concept is consistent with the concept of psychological flexibility in modern psychology (Hayes et al., 2012).

In recent decades, scholars have found that Buddhist psychology principles are consistent with modern psychology principles in many respects, particularly in positive psychology, which emphasizes studying and promoting human well-being and potential. Mindfulness practice, an important principle in Buddhist psychology, has been developed into various therapeutic programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which have been scientifically proven effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression (Hofmann et al., 2010). Neuroscience research has also confirmed the effects of Buddhist psychology practice. fMRI studies found that people who practice mindfulness regularly show brain structure changes in areas related to emotional control and compassion (Hölzel et al., 2011). The connection between Buddhist psychology and self-regulation theory is another interesting point. Buddhist psychology principles, especially mindfulness and concentration, help develop self-regulation by increasing self-awareness, the ability to pause before responding, and the ability to choose appropriate responses (Blair & Dennis, 2010).

## 2.2 Buddhist Psychology Principles Related to Emotional Development

From synthesizing relevant literature and research, four main dimensions of important Buddhist psychology principles related to promoting emotional development can be identified: **Dimension 1: Mindfulness** Mindfulness is the heart of Buddhist practice, meaning awareness and attention to what is happening in the present moment without judgment. In the context of early childhood, developing mindfulness means helping children become aware of their feelings, thoughts, and body in the moment. Having mindfulness helps children pause before responding to situations, giving them a chance to choose appropriate responses instead of immediate reactive responses. **Dimension 2: Loving-kindness** Loving-kindness or love and well-wishing toward oneself and others is a fundamental virtue important for developing mental health and good relationships. For early childhood children, developing loving-kindness helps children learn to empathize with themselves and others, reduce aggression, and increase helping behaviors. Research shows that programs emphasizing loving-kindness help increase positive behaviors, reduce conflicts, and create better classroom atmospheres (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2016). **Dimension 3: Wisdom** Wisdom in Buddhism means penetrative understanding of the nature of things. In the context of early childhood, developing emotional wisdom means helping children understand that emotions are changeable, emotions have causes and can be managed, and everyone has diverse emotions. **Dimension 4: Concentration** Concentration is the ability to focus on one thing continuously. Good concentration helps children better control their thoughts and emotions. For early childhood children, developing concentration may start with short activities children are interested in, then gradually increase

duration and complexity. These four dimensions are interconnected and work together in promoting children's emotional development. Integrating these principles into learning activities and child-rearing will help promote children's emotional development effectively and sustainably.

### **3. Emotional Development in Early Childhood**

#### **3.1 Meaning, Importance, and Stages of Emotional Development**

Emotional development refers to the process by which children learn to recognize, understand, express, and manage their own emotions, as well as understand and respond to others' emotions. This development is part of social-emotional development that is important for children's overall growth. Good emotional development is a crucial foundation for school success, building good relationships with others, and lifelong well-being (Thompson, 2014). During early childhood, emotional development occurs rapidly and intensely. Newborns have basic emotions such as happiness, anger, and fear. As they grow, children develop more complex emotions such as pride, shame, and empathy (Denham et al., 2015). Developmental psychologists have divided emotional development into several stages: **Stage 1: Infancy (0-12 months)** Infants begin showing basic emotions through facial expressions and crying. Caregivers are important in helping infants regulate emotions by providing warmth, safety, and consistent response to needs. Good attachment formation during this period is a crucial foundation for future emotional development (Bowlby, 1988). **Stage 2: Toddlerhood (1-3 years)** Children begin having more complex emotions. Children begin learning vocabulary about emotions and start using words instead of behaviors to express emotions. However, children at this age still have limited ability to control emotions, often experiencing the "terrible twos" with intense emotions (Eisenberg et al., 2010). **Stage 3: Preschool age (3-6 years)** Children have better language and thought development, enabling better understanding and management of emotions. Children begin understanding that others have different thoughts and feelings from themselves (theory of mind), which is the foundation of empathy. Children can use simple strategies to manage emotions. This age period is very suitable for teaching emotional skills directly (Cole et al., 2009).

#### **3.2 Influencing Factors and Challenges in Emotional Development**

Children's emotional development is influenced by multiple factors. Individual factors include temperament and brain development, particularly the development of the prefrontal cortex related to self-control and analytical thinking (Calkins & Fox, 2002). Family factors The family is the first and most important context for children's emotional development. Parenting style greatly affects emotional development. Authoritative parenting that combines warmth with clear boundaries best promotes emotional development (Morris et al., 2007). School and teacher factors Educational institutions are important contexts where early childhood children spend much time. Early childhood teachers play important roles in promoting emotional development through creating emotionally safe environments, being good role models, and teaching emotional skills directly (Denham & Brown, 2010). Cultural and social factors Culture influences beliefs about emotions, appropriate emotional expression, and methods of managing emotions. In Thai context with Buddhist culture, emotional control, calmness, and kindness are important values consistent with Buddhist psychology principles (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992).

Children today face new challenges affecting emotional development. Changes in family structure, heavier parental work, and reduced time for family activities result in decreased quality of parent-child interaction. Access to technology and digital media from a young age may negatively affect emotional and social development (Radesky et al., 2015). Additionally, values and lifestyles in modern society emphasizing success, competition, and

materialism create pressure on children from early on and may cause children to lack opportunities to develop important emotional skills. The increase in mental health problems in children and youth worldwide, including in Thailand, reflects the urgent need to seriously promote children's emotional development (World Health Organization, 2020). These challenges point to the need to develop new approaches to promoting children's emotional development that are consistent with contemporary context while maintaining important fundamental values. Integrating Buddhist psychology emphasizing mindfulness, loving-kindness, and inner peace with modern early childhood education is therefore a potentially effective approach to addressing these challenges.

## **4. Applying Buddhist Psychology to Promote Early Childhood Emotional Development**

### **4.1 Applying Mindfulness and Loving-kindness Principles in Early Childhood Activities**

Mindfulness practice is one of the most popular Buddhist psychology applications with strong scientific evidence. For early childhood children, mindfulness practice must be adapted age-appropriately using short, fun, and concrete activities. Research shows that mindfulness programs designed for early childhood children can help develop self-regulation skills, reduce aggressive behavior, and significantly increase positive behaviors (Flook et al., 2015; Viglas & Perlman, 2018). Mindfulness activities for early childhood children may include breath observation, which is a basic activity helping children become aware of their body and present moment, body scan helping children become aware of different body parts, mindfulness practice through movement such as children's yoga, mindfulness practice through five senses such as using mystery boxes or mindful eating, and mindful listening using bells or singing bowls. These activities should be done for short periods such as 1-3 minutes and gradually increase duration as children become familiar. Integrating mindfulness practice into daily routines is also an effective method, such as having children take 3 deep breaths before starting activities. Consistency in practice is important for children to develop skills and apply them in various situations.

Developing loving-kindness and compassion in early childhood children is another important approach from Buddhist psychology. The Kindness Curriculum developed by researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison is an example of applying loving-kindness principles in early childhood education. Research results found that children participating in the program showed increased helping behaviors, better social skills, and better academic performance compared to control groups (Flook et al., 2015). Adapting this curriculum for use in various contexts including France found good results in promoting mental well-being and social-emotional skills in early childhood children (Courbet et al., 2024). Loving-kindness development activities for early childhood children may include telling and creating stories about loving-kindness such as Jataka tales teaching loving-kindness and compassion, sharing and helping activities such as sharing toys and helping friends with problems, loving-kindness meditation practice for children by having children think of loved ones and send well-wishes, and creating classroom atmospheres emphasizing loving-kindness where teachers model loving-kindness and create classroom rules emphasizing mutual care.

### **4.2 Developing Emotional Intelligence and Creating Supportive Environments**

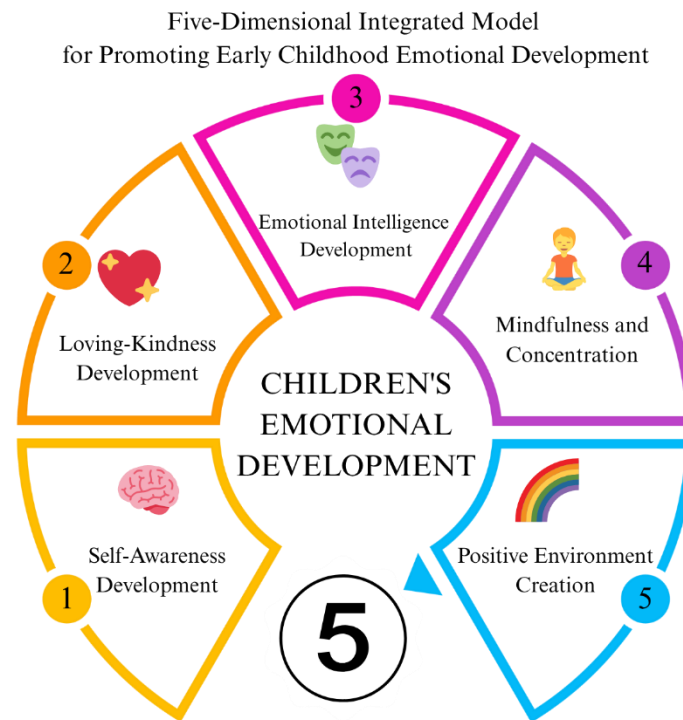
Developing emotional intelligence in early childhood children from a Buddhist psychology perspective emphasizes helping children understand the nature of emotions, knowing that emotions are changeable and manageable. Teaching emotional vocabulary is the first important step. Children need vocabulary to identify and describe their own emotions. Teachers and parents should help children name emotions that occur. Teaching about causes

of emotions helps children understand that emotions don't occur without reason. Teaching emotional management strategies is an important skill. Early childhood children can learn simple strategies such as deep breathing, counting from one to ten, going to quiet places, using "calming corners" in classrooms with equipment to help children calm emotions. Teaching empathy through pretend play is an effective method for early childhood children. Using emotion coaching techniques developed by John Gottman is consistent with Buddhist psychology principles. This technique consists of 5 steps: being aware of children's emotions, seeing emotions as opportunities for teaching, listening and validating children's feelings, helping children name emotions, and setting limits and problem-solving together (Gottman et al., 1996).

Creating both physical and psychological environments that promote emotional development is important. From a Buddhist psychology perspective, environments should promote calmness, safety, and opportunities to practice emotional skills. Physical space design should consider children's emotional needs. Spaces should have both activity areas and quiet areas, reading corners and quiet corners where children can rest and manage emotions. Creating consistent and predictable routines helps children feel safe and reduces anxiety. Building good relationships between teachers and children is a crucial foundation for emotional development. Children must feel that teachers understand and accept them unconditionally. Creating classroom cultures emphasizing emotional safety enables children to express themselves and try and fail. Being role models by teachers and parents is the most important factor. Children learn emotional management from observing adults around them. Promoting children's emotional development is most effective when there is continuity between school and home. Educating parents about Buddhist psychology principles and methods of application at home is important (Morris et al., 2007).

## **5. Five-Dimensional Integrated Model for Promoting Early Childhood Emotional Development**

From synthesizing theoretical concepts and relevant research findings, the author proposes a Five-Dimensional Integrated Model for promoting early childhood emotional development based on Buddhist psychology concepts. This model comprises five interconnected and mutually supportive main dimensions: 1) self-awareness development, 2) loving-kindness and compassion development, 3) emotional intelligence development, 4) mindfulness and concentration practice, and 5) positive environment creation. This model is systematic in nature, integrating with children's emotional development as the central focus. Different dimensions are interconnected and mutually supportive. Development in one dimension affects development in other dimensions, creating holistic and sustainable development. This model is flexible and can be adapted to suit each educational institution's and family's context while maintaining important principles. Implementation should begin with current situation assessment, goal setting, selecting appropriate activities, and continuous monitoring and evaluation.



**Figure 1:** Five-Dimensional Integrated Model for Promoting Early Childhood Emotional Development

**Dimension 1: Self-Awareness Development** The first dimension emphasizes helping children know and understand themselves, including their emotions, thoughts, and body. Having self-awareness is a crucial foundation for emotional development. Activities in this dimension include: 1) observing and recording emotions, having children learn names of various emotions through picture cards, books, and mirrors, 2) using "feeling journals" where children draw pictures or stick stickers showing daily feelings, 3) "what my body tells me" activities helping children become aware of how each emotion affects the body, and 4) playing "guess the emotion" games where children show facial expressions and friends guess. Success indicators include: children can identify at least 5 basic emotions, children can explain reasons for occurring emotions, children are aware of physical signals linked to various emotions, and children dare to appropriately express their emotions.

**Dimension 2: Loving-kindness and Compassion Development** The second dimension emphasizes developing loving-kindness and compassion toward oneself and others. This principle comes from the four divine abodes in Buddhism. Activities in this dimension include: 1) simple loving-kindness meditation practice for children, 2) "kindness box" activities where children write or draw good things done for others, 3) "buddy system" projects pairing children to help and care for each other, 4) storytelling and discussion about loving-kindness and compassion, 5) sharing and helping others activities, and 6) practicing "warm words." Success indicators include: children show increased helping behaviors, conflicts between children decrease, children can speak words of praise and encouragement to others, children show compassion when friends have problems, and children have positive attitudes toward themselves and others.

**Dimension 3: Emotional Intelligence Development** The third dimension emphasizes developing understanding about emotions and managing emotions wisely. Activities in this dimension include: 1) teaching connections between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, 2) "emotional management tools" activities teaching various strategies, 3) creating personal

"emotional toolboxes," 4) using "emotional traffic lights" to teach pausing before responding, 5) social problem-solving activities, and 6) using "emotion and problem-solving journals." Success indicators include: children can explain causes of emotions, children use at least 2-3 emotional management strategies, children can pause before responding in intense emotional situations, children have better social problem-solving skills, and aggressive behavior decreases.

**Dimension 4: Mindfulness and Concentration Practice** The fourth dimension emphasizes practicing mindfulness and concentration, which is the heart of Buddhist practice. Activities in this dimension include: 1) practicing various forms of breath observation, 2) children's yoga activities, 3) mindfulness practice through 5 senses, 4) "mindful walking" activities, 5) using bells or singing bowls to practice concentration, 6) short "brain breaks" activities, and 7) integrating mindfulness into daily routines. Success indicators include: children can sit still and listen attentively longer, children use breathing techniques to manage emotions, children have increased attention and concentration in learning activities, children can do activities mindfully, and impulsive behavior decreases.

**Dimension 5: Positive Environment Creation** The fifth dimension emphasizes creating both physical and social environments that promote emotional development. Components in this dimension include: 1) Physical environment: having quiet corners, diverse activity spaces, appropriate lighting and sound, 2) Consistent routines: clear schedules, calm beginning and ending rituals, 3) Warm relationships: teachers build close relationships with children, promote friendships, 4) Classroom culture: emphasizing emotional safety, accepting differences, 5) Family involvement: regular communication, workshops, and 6) Teacher and caregiver development: training, mental health support. Success indicators include: classroom atmosphere is warm, children feel confident expressing themselves, conflicts decrease, parents have knowledge and skills, and teachers have confidence in promoting emotional development.

All five dimensions don't work separately but are interconnected and mutually supportive. Mindfulness and concentration (dimension 4) are the foundation helping children become self-aware (dimension 1). When children know themselves, they can develop loving-kindness toward themselves and others (dimension 2). Loving-kindness helps children have positive attitudes toward learning and developing emotional intelligence (dimension 3), and good environments (dimension 5) are the context enabling all development to occur effectively. Implementing this model should begin with assessing the current situation of educational institutions and children, then planning implementation appropriate to context. The success of this model depends on commitment, continuity, and participation of all parties involved, especially teachers and parents.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Summary of Key Points

This academic article has presented the integration of Buddhist psychology concepts with promoting early childhood emotional development. From synthesizing relevant literature and research, Buddhist psychology principles are found to be consistent with and complement developmental psychology and modern early childhood education principles. Four important principle dimensions - mindfulness, loving-kindness, wisdom, and concentration - are foundations that can be developed into activities and methods appropriate for early childhood children. Research reviewed in this article demonstrates the effectiveness of applying Buddhist psychology in early childhood education contexts, particularly mindfulness practice and loving-kindness development, which help increase self-regulation skills, reduce aggressive behavior, increase helping behaviors, and develop better social relationships. Applying these concepts in Thai context with Buddhist cultural foundation is appropriate and likely to be easily

accepted. The five-dimensional integrated model proposed in this article is comprehensive and balanced, considering both developing children's specific skills and creating supportive contexts. Connections between dimensions enable holistic and sustainable development to occur. An important finding is that promoting early childhood emotional development based on Buddhist psychology is not merely teaching skills but cultivating lifestyle and attitudes that create balance between inner peace and good interaction with others.

### **6.2 Recommendations for Implementation**

For teachers and early childhood institutions: Should begin by studying and understanding basic Buddhist psychology principles and practicing themselves before teaching children. Start with small, simple activities such as taking 3 deep breaths before starting activities. Integrate with existing activities rather than adding new activities. Create specific spaces for emotional management and mindfulness practice in classrooms. Communicate and work closely with parents. Record and observe children's changes regularly, and exchange learning with other teachers. For parents: Study basic principles of Buddhist psychology and emotional development. Practice mindfulness and loving-kindness themselves to model for children. Create warm and emotionally safe home atmospheres. Spend quality time with children and discuss emotions and feelings. Support practice children receive from school. Reduce digital media use and increase face-to-face activity time, and connect with community and temples. For scholars and researchers: Should conduct experimental research to test the proposed model's effectiveness in Thai contexts. Develop and test appropriate measurement tools. Study factors affecting success. Study long-term effects. Develop concrete curricula and manuals, and create practitioner and researcher communities. For policymakers: Include promoting emotional development based on Buddhist psychology in early childhood education curricula. Allocate supporting budgets. Support continuous research and development. Create cooperation networks, develop supervision and monitoring systems, and disseminate best practices.

### **6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This academic article has some limitations to be cautious about in implementation. First, it is documentary research synthesizing from existing literature and research, not yet systematically testing the model in practice. Second, most referenced research is from foreign countries. Although universal, there may be differences in cultural and social contexts. Third, measuring emotional development particularly dimensions related to Buddhist psychology is still challenging. Future research directions should focus on: 1) experimental research to test effectiveness, 2) comparative studies of different approach effectiveness, 3) studying long-term effects, 4) developing teacher training curricula, 5) studying processes and factors affecting success, 6) developing measurement and evaluation tools, and 7) studying technology's role in promoting learning. Finally, promoting early childhood emotional development based on Buddhist psychology is a high-potential approach to creating strong foundations for Thai children in a challenging world. Blending long-accumulated Buddhist wisdom with modern scientific knowledge will help Thai children grow into adults with good mental health, loving-kindness and compassion, and skills for living happily and peacefully, benefiting not only children themselves but also creating better society and world for the future.

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