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Child Protection in Formal ECE: Regulatory Coherence and Service Readiness in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT
Child protection in formal early childhood education is rarely examined through the lens of regulatory coherence, even though safe provision depends on clear rules, procedures, and service coordination. This study analysed the coherence of the national legal and policy framework for child protection in formal ECE and interpreted its implications for service readiness. A qualitative policy analysis with directed document review was conducted on 22 sources published or adopted between 2005 and 2026. Data were extracted into an analytical matrix and coded against six service-readiness indicators. The review found a strong normative foundation and showed that the 2026 education regulations clarified prevention, reporting, complaint handling, referral, and institutional coordination, although workforce readiness and cross-service operational integration remained uneven. Child protection should therefore be positioned as a core component of quality assurance and governance in formal ECE.

Keywords: Child Protection; Early Childhood Education; Formal ECE; Policy Analysis; Service Readiness

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is expected to provide learning, care, safety, belonging, and developmental support from the earliest years of life (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). From a rights-based perspective, child protection is inseparable from educational provision because young children depend on adults, institutions, and public systems to recognise risk and respond appropriately when harm, neglect, or vulnerability is present (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011; Street, 2021; WHO, UNICEF, & World Bank Group, 2018). Violence, trauma, and chronic insecurity also affect children's participation, learning, and well-being, which makes protection a core educational concern rather than a peripheral welfare issue (Singh, 2024).

The social value of this study lies in the fact that early childhood settings are often the first structured environments in which warning signs of harm become visible. Young children frequently communicate distress indirectly through withdrawal, fear, aggression, bodily symptoms, regression, or altered participation rather than through direct verbal disclosure (Toros & Tiirik, 2016). Research further shows that the reporting of concerns is often hindered by uncertainty, low confidence, procedural doubt, and fear of consequences among education personnel (Alazri & Hanna, 2020; Brunborg et al., 2024; Cristescu, 2024; Feng et al., 2010; Glouchkow et al., 2023; Goebbels et al.,

2008; Kenny, 2001; McTavish et al., 2017). Studies on child-friendly provision, teacher responsiveness, health-related services, and safe routines in early childhood settings likewise suggest that safety depends not only on positive pedagogy, but also on clear procedures, referral links, and institutional coordination (Khoiriyah & Filasofa, 2024; Ramadhanty et al., 2025; Rohmadheny & Pramudyani, 2023; Zuhra et al., 2025).

The scientific value of the study lies in clarifying the gap between existing scholarship and the regulatory architecture that should support institutional action. Previous studies have examined child-friendly educational environments, violence prevention, teacher responsiveness, health and nutrition management, and barriers to reporting suspected maltreatment (Alazri & Hanna, 2020; Goebbels et al., 2008; McTavish et al., 2017; Rohmadheny & Pramudyani, 2023). However, most of this literature focuses on educator behaviour, programme implementation, or specific service domains. What remains less developed is a policy-focused analysis of whether the national legal and regulatory structure, taken as a whole, is sufficiently coherent to support institutionally actionable child protection in formal ECE. This study addresses that gap by combining legal-policy analysis with a service-readiness lens.

The conceptual framework of the study brings together three strands of literature. The first strand draws on child-rights guidance, especially the proposition that rights in early childhood require preventive and responsive institutional systems (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, 2011). The second strand concerns integrated early childhood systems in which education, care, protection, health, and social support are treated as interdependent rather than separate policy domains (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024; WHO, UNICEF, & World Bank Group, 2018). The third strand concerns service readiness in institutional child protection, particularly the importance of role clarity, professional confidence, reporting mechanisms, referral capacity, and organisational safeguarding support (Alazri & Hanna, 2020; Appleton, 2013; Brunborg et al., 2024; Street, 2021). Taken together, these strands support a governance-based understanding of child protection in formal ECE.

The novelty of this study lies in examining child protection in formal ECE not merely as a pedagogical concern, but as a question of regulatory coherence across rights, duties, procedures, and intersectoral coordination. Rather than focusing on a single programme or educator behaviour, the article analyses how the main legal and policy instruments jointly shape institutional service readiness. The study therefore offers a document-based synthesis that connects legal design with practical readiness expectations for formal ECE.

Against this background, the study aimed to examine the coherence of the national legal and policy framework for child protection in formal ECE and to interpret its implications for service readiness. The objectives were threefold: first, to map the main national and international instruments relevant to child protection in formal ECE; secondly, to assess how these instruments distribute rights, responsibilities, procedures, and readiness expectations; and thirdly, to identify the implications of that regulatory pattern for formal ECE provision and governance.

2. METHODS

This study used a qualitative policy-analysis design with directed qualitative content analysis of documents. The design was selected because the research question concerned regulatory coherence rather than the behaviour of participants or the outcomes of a specific intervention. Document-based policy analysis made it possible to examine how child-protection obligations, procedural expectations, and service-readiness requirements were formulated across legal and policy texts relevant to formal ECE.

The study was situated within the national regulatory and policy environment governing formal early childhood education in Indonesia. Although the discussion recognised the wider early childhood education system, the most direct implications concerned formal ECE units because the 2026 education-sector regulations explicitly addressed early detection, safe learning environments, complaint channels, handling procedures, and referral mechanisms within educational settings.

The documentary corpus comprised sources relevant to child protection in early childhood education. The final corpus contained 22 documents published or adopted between 2005 and 2026: seven primary legal and normative instruments, two global policy frameworks, and 13 peer-reviewed journal articles. A purposive sampling strategy was used because the study required sources that

were substantively relevant rather than statistically representative. Primary instruments were included when they directly regulated, interpreted, or framed child protection, ECE governance, or intersectoral child-rights obligations. Journal articles were included when they contributed conceptual or empirical insight into educator responsiveness, safeguarding, reporting behaviour, child-friendly provision, or service readiness in early childhood contexts. Sources were excluded when they focused on other educational levels without transferable relevance, duplicated the same analytical contribution, or did not illuminate the relationship between regulatory design and institutional protection practice.

Additional literature was cited selectively to support conceptual framing and discussion, but it was not counted as part of the 22-document analytical corpus.

Data were collected through a targeted document search and structured extraction process. Primary legal and policy texts were retrieved from official repositories, while supporting journal literature was identified through Google Scholar, DOAJ, journal websites, backward reference tracing, and relevance screening. Each selected source was profiled and extracted into an analytical matrix covering rights recognition, institutional responsibility, implementation procedures, and service relevance for formal ECE. This procedure made it possible to compare the corpus systematically rather than descriptively.

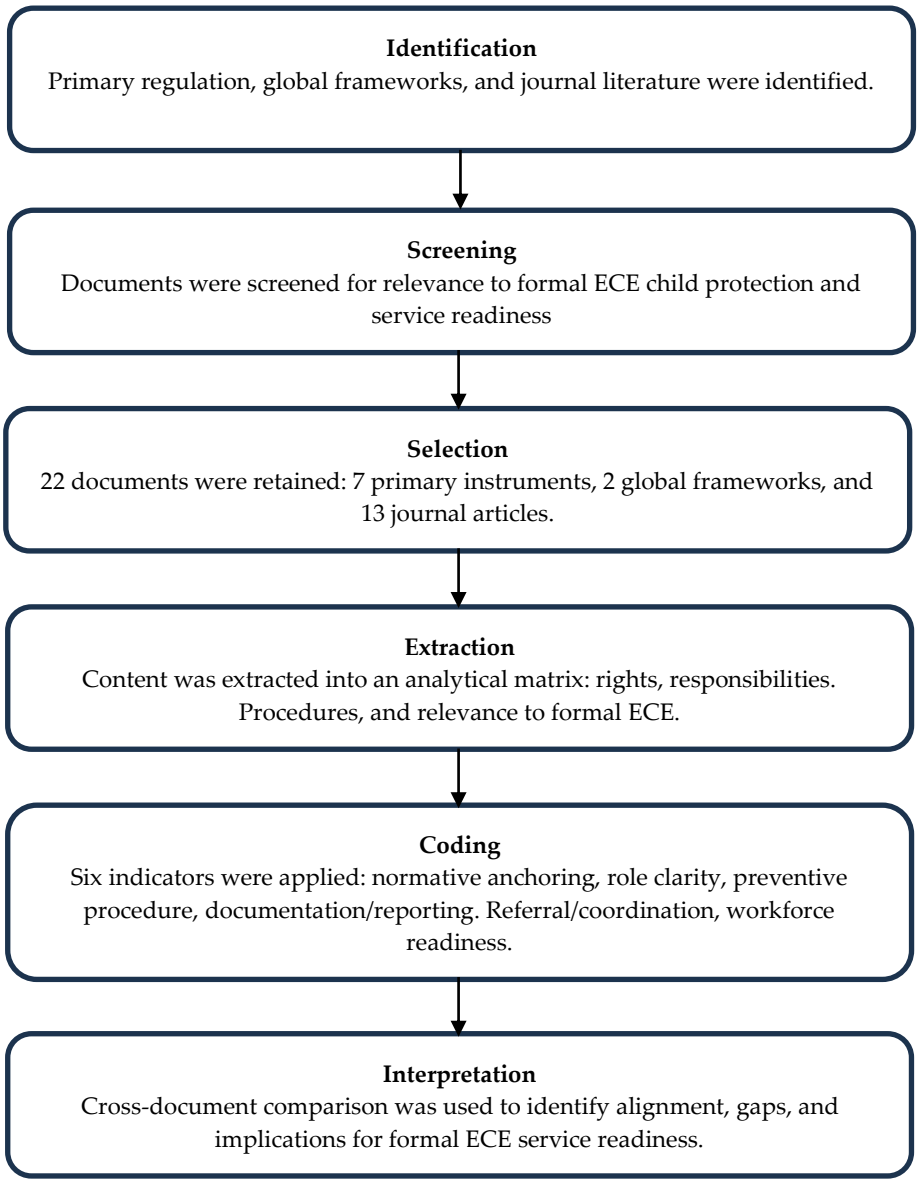


Figure. 1. Research Flow For The Document-Based Policy Analysis
Source: Developed by the author from the document review procedure used in this study.

Table 1. Analytical Matrix Used In The Policy Review

Dimension	Analytical focus	Relevance to formal ECE
Rights recognition	How the document defines children's rights, protection, safety, and non-violence	Establishes the normative basis for protecting young children
Institutional responsibility	Which actors are assigned duties, authority, and accountability	Clarifies the role of ECE units, educators, managers, and external agencies
Implementation procedures	Whether prevention, reporting, referral, and case-handling steps are specified	Shows whether institutions can act beyond broad policy statements
Service relevance for formal ECE	Whether the document speaks directly or indirectly to early childhood settings	Assesses whether formal ECE is treated as a practical protection environment

Source: Developed by the author based on the analytical framework derived from Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection, Presidential Regulation No. 60 of 2013 on Holistic-Integrative Early Childhood Development, Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Regulation No. 4 of 2024, Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 1 of 2026, Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 6 of 2026, and the child-rights framework in General Comment No. 7 and General Comment No. 13.

To reduce conceptual vagueness, service readiness was operationalised into six indicators: normative anchoring, role clarity, preventive procedure, documentation and reporting, referral and intersectoral coordination, and workforce readiness. These indicators were derived from child-rights guidance, global early childhood policy, reporting and safeguarding literature, trauma-informed school-service literature, and early childhood-oriented scholarship on responsive, child-friendly, and holistic-integrative provision (Alazri & Hanna, 2020; Brunborg et al., 2024; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Dorado et al., 2016; Khoiriyah & Filasofa, 2024; Kim et al., 2021; Ramadhanty et al., 2025; Rohmadheny & Pramudyani, 2023; Zuhra et al., 2025).

Table 2. Operational Indicators Of Service Readiness

Indicator	Operational definition	What it shows in ECE governance
Normative anchoring	Explicit recognition that children must be protected from violence, neglect, or harmful treatment	Whether child protection is treated as a formal duty rather than an optional value
Role clarity	Specification of responsibilities for institutions, educators, managers, families, or external agencies	Whether ECE actors can identify who is expected to act
Preventive procedure	Direction on prevention, supervision, safe environment, or violence-prevention measures	Whether protection is built into routine institutional practice
Documentation and reporting	Guidance on recording, reporting, escalation, or complaint mechanisms	Whether concerns can move from observation to accountable action
Referral and intersectoral coordination	Linkage with health, social, legal, or specialised protection services	Whether formal ECE can connect children to external support when needed
Workforce readiness	Expectation of training, competence, institutional support, or professional preparedness	Whether staff are expected to be capable of acting appropriately

Source: Developed by the author from the service-readiness coding framework used in this study.

Data analysis proceeded in four steps. First, all documents were profiled and entered into a structured matrix. Secondly, the primary normative corpus was coded against the six service-readiness indicators. Thirdly, each indicator was judged as explicit, partial, or limited/implicit depending on how clearly the document articulated an actionable expectation. Finally, the coded findings were compared across documents to identify patterns of alignment, gaps, fragmentation, and implications for formal ECE service readiness. The coding unit was the relevant provision, directive, or analytical passage within each document. Repeated reading, cross-checking, and matrix comparison were used to reduce coding drift and strengthen interpretive consistency.

This study used only publicly available documents and did not involve human participants, human tissue, or identifiable personal data. Under the relevant institutional procedure, formal ethics approval was therefore not required, and no ethics permit number was issued. The study was conducted in accordance with principles of research integrity, accurate source representation, and transparent analysis.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Regulatory foundation across sectors

The regulatory corpus showed a relatively strong normative basis for protecting children. The statutory and policy environment clearly recognised children's rights, the obligation to protect them from violence, and the need for state and institutional responsibility (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011; Republic of Indonesia, 2014). Law No. 35 of 2014 provided the broad legal commitment to child protection, while General Comment No. 7 and General Comment No. 13 reinforced the view that protection must begin in early childhood and include prevention, identification, reporting, and response. In addition, Presidential Regulation No. 60 of 2013 placed protection within a holistic-integrative framework, while the 2024 and 2026 ministerial regulations linked protection more directly with service organisation and school governance. Read together, these instruments suggest that Indonesia does not face a deficit of normative recognition, but rather a challenge of regulatory translation. The framework is layered across rights law, early childhood development policy, child-rights service management, and education-sector governance, which means that formal ECE institutions receive child-protection expectations from several policy levels at once. Such layering can strengthen legitimacy, yet it can also create ambiguity if broad legal duties are not matched by sufficiently clear procedures for documentation, reporting, referral, and follow-up at unit level (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, 2011; Republic of Indonesia, 2013, 2014, 2024, 2026a, 2026b; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024).

Table 3. Main Regulatory Instruments And Their Implications For Child Protection In Formal ECE

Regulation / instrument	Main protection orientation	Practical implication for formal ECE
Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection	Establishes the legal obligation to protect children from violence, neglect, discrimination, and harmful treatment	Provides the broad statutory basis for child-protection duties in formal ECE settings
Presidential Regulation No. 60 of 2013 on Holistic-Integrative Early Childhood Development	Promotes integrated early childhood services across education, health, nutrition, care, and protection	Supports intersectoral coordination and reinforces ECE as a multi-service environment
Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 1 of 2026	Requires learning processes to take place in environments that are safe, comfortable, and inclusive	Strengthens process standards relevant to preventive protection and inclusive learning conditions in formal ECE
Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 6 of 2026	Establishes safe and comfortable school culture through governance, early detection, complaint channels, response, and referral mechanisms	Becomes the main current education-sector instrument for formal ECE and other schools regarding prevention, handling, and institutional accountability
Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Regulation No. 4 of 2024	Reorganises child-rights fulfilment through service management, facilities, products, and service personnel	Expands the rights-based frame and replaces earlier PPPA policy instruments on child-friendly education services
General Comment No. 7 and General Comment No. 13	Clarify early childhood rights and the child's right to protection from all forms of violence	Provide the normative interpretation that protection in formal ECE must be preventive, responsive, and developmentally appropriate

Source: Developed by the author based on Republic of Indonesia (2013, 2014, 2024, 2026a, 2026b) and Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005, 2011).

Taken together, these instruments indicate that the national framework does not lack recognition of child protection as a rights-based obligation. The more important question is how far that recognition is translated into operational duties, institutional processes, and intersectoral routines that can actually be used by formal ECE units. This distinction is analytically important because declaratory commitment and operational readiness are not the same. A regulation may clearly prohibit violence or affirm children's rights, yet still leave frontline institutions uncertain about who should record concerns, how complaints should be escalated, when referral should occur, and what follow-up responsibilities remain with the ECE unit. The regulatory issue is therefore not simply whether protection is acknowledged, but whether the architecture supplies a usable chain from recognition to action (Alazri & Hanna, 2020; Brunborg et al., 2024; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, 2011; Republic of Indonesia, 2013, 2014, 2024, 2026a, 2026b).

Service-Readiness Pattern Across The Primary Corpus

The analysis of the seven primary legal and normative instruments against the six service-readiness indicators showed uneven distribution across the corpus. Normative anchoring was explicit in most key instruments, and the 2026 education regulations substantially improved the policy architecture for prevention, documentation, reporting, referral, and coordination in formal ECE. However, workforce readiness remained less consistently specified across the wider framework. This pattern indicates that the framework is stronger in establishing child protection as a formal obligation than in specifying the institutional capacities needed to enact that obligation in daily practice. In particular, the corpus still distributes operational expectations unevenly across instruments, with the clearest procedural direction concentrated in sector-specific regulations rather than embedded consistently across the broader framework.

Table 4. Coverage of service-readiness indicators across the primary normative corpus

Instrument	Normative anchoring	Role clarity	Preventive procedure	Documentation & reporting	Referral & coordination	Workforce readiness
Law No. 35 of 2014	Explicit	Partial	Partial	Limited/implicit	Partial	Limited/implicit
Presidential Regulation No. 60 of 2013	Partial	Partial	Partial	Limited/implicit	Explicit	Limited/implicit
Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 1 of 2026	Partial	Partial	Explicit	Limited/implicit	Partial	Partial
Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 6 of 2026	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit
Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Regulation No. 4 of 2024	Explicit	Partial	Partial	Partial	Explicit	Limited/implicit
General Comment No. 7	Explicit	Partial	Explicit	Limited/implicit	Partial	Partial
General Comment No. 13	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Partial	Explicit	Partial

Source: Developed by the author from the coding of the seven primary legal and normative instruments used in this study.
Note: Explicit indicates that the indicator is directly articulated in the document; partial indicates that it is present but not fully operationalised for formal ECE settings; limited/implicit indicates that it is only indirectly suggested or left largely unspecified.

The pattern shown in Table 4 suggests three points. First, child protection is normatively present across the corpus. Secondly, operational detail becomes stronger when the framework moves closer to sector-specific governance, especially within the 2026 education regulations. Thirdly, the framework still does not fully resolve how everyday safeguarding should be supported through staff preparation, documentation practice, and follow-up routines at the level of formal ECE institutions. In analytical terms, this means that the architecture is not weak in principle, but uneven in implementability. The concentration of explicit provisions in Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 6 of 2026 is particularly important because it shows that actionable governance emerges most clearly when legal obligation is translated into institutional procedure. This finding is consistent with research showing that effective child protection depends not only on awareness of maltreatment, but also on role clarity, reporting confidence, procedural knowledge, and organisational support (Alazri & Hanna, 2020; Brunborg et al., 2024; Cristescu, 2024; Feng et al., 2010; Glouchkow et al., 2023; Goebbels et al., 2008; Kenny, 2001; McTavish et al., 2017). The weaker coverage of workforce readiness across the corpus is therefore consequential, because uncertainty among education personnel is one of the recurrent barriers to translating concern into accountable action (Toros & Toros & Tiirik, 2016; Murray et al., 2025).

Textual Evidence Supporting The Coding Decisions

To make the coding decisions traceable, the analysis also examined selected textual evidence from the primary corpus. Article 54(1) of Law No. 35 of 2014 clearly anchored protection in educational settings, but it did not provide formal ECE-specific documentation or referral procedures.

Presidential Regulation No. 60 of 2013 was strong on cross-sectoral design, yet remained less specific about reporting pathways at unit level. Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 6 of 2026 was more operational because it mandated early detection, complaint channels, collaborative handling, referral, and district-level working groups. What emerges from this comparison is not simple inconsistency, but asymmetry of contribution. Some documents primarily establish legal legitimacy, some organise service systems, and others provide the most direct procedural guidance for institutions. The regulatory architecture is therefore cumulative, but it is not fully integrated at the level of operational instruction for formal ECE (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, 2011; Republic of Indonesia, 2013, 2014, 2024, 2026b).

Table 5. Selected textual evidence supporting the coding decisions

Instrument	Indicator illustrated	Textual basis for coding	Coding implication
Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection	Normative anchoring	Article 54(1) states that children in and around educational units must receive protection from physical violence, psychological violence, sexual crimes, and other crimes committed by educators, education personnel, fellow students, and/or other parties	Child-protection duty in education settings is explicit, but formal ECE-specific procedures are not fully specified
Presidential Regulation No. 60 of 2013	Referral and coordination	Article 1(2) defines holistic-integrative early childhood development as meeting children's essential and interrelated needs in a simultaneous, systematic, and integrated manner; Article 4(1) directs policy towards access, quality, and cross-sectoral coordination	Intersectoral coordination is explicit, but reporting detail remains limited
Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Regulation No. 4 of 2024	Rights fulfilment / service relevance	Article 3(1)–(4) organises child-rights fulfilment through service domains and requires monitoring, evaluation, and reporting; Article 4 repeals earlier PPPA policy instruments on child-friendly education	Rights obligations are explicit, with stronger service-management implications than the previous PPPA framework
Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 1 of 2026	Preventive learning environment	Article 9(2) requires learning to be conducted through an environment that is safe, comfortable, and inclusive; Article 12(4) defines the learning environment as physical, virtual, and social conditions supporting such an atmosphere	Preventive and inclusive expectations are explicit, but reporting and referral remain outside the regulation's main scope
Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 6 of 2026	Governance / reporting / referral	Article 12(2)(e) requires complaint and aspiration channels that are accessible, confidential, and linked to the headteacher or designated teacher; Article 24 regulates referral for violations of laws; Article 31 assigns working-group functions for reports, verification, coordination, referral, and monitoring	The current education-sector framework is explicit on governance, complaint channels, response, and referral in formal ECE and other schools
General Comment No. 7	Preventive procedure	The document frames state responsibility around implementing child rights in early childhood through laws, institutions, and practical measures that are developmentally appropriate	Prevention and early-childhood sensitivity are explicit
General Comment No. 13	Reporting / referral	The document links freedom from all forms of violence with prevention, identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment, and follow-up	The child-protection system is conceptually explicit, though national translation varies

Source: Developed by the author from the primary legal and normative corpus used in this study.

The textual evidence confirms that the framework has moved beyond broad rights language, but not all documents contribute equally to operational readiness. The most actionable provisions are concentrated in instruments that directly govern education-sector processes and service management. This helps explain why formal ECE units may operate in a context of partial readiness: the legal basis is already strong, but the practical chain linking recognition, reporting, referral, and follow-up is assembled across multiple instruments rather than delivered through a single

safeguarding framework. From a governance perspective, such fragmentation can produce uneven implementation, especially where local institutions have limited technical support or limited familiarity with intersectoral child-protection procedures (Appleton, 2013; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024; WHO, UNICEF, & World Bank Group, 2018).

Implications for formal ECE governance

Three main findings emerge from the analysis. First, child protection is normatively well anchored across the corpus, particularly in Law No. 35 of 2014, General Comment No. 13, and Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 6 of 2026. Secondly, role clarity and preventive procedures are more fully articulated in the education sector than before. Thirdly, the framework still does not fully resolve how formal ECE-specific professional preparedness, safeguarding documentation, and cross-service follow-up should operate in everyday institutional settings. These findings matter because they show that the main governance issue is no longer the absence of protective language, but the uneven conversion of protective language into routinised institutional practice. In other words, the regulatory architecture has moved further towards actionable protection, but it has not yet produced fully even readiness across the system (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011; Republic of Indonesia, 2014, 2026b).

These findings align with previous research suggesting that institutional child protection depends on more than declaratory legal obligation. Reporting behaviour, confidence, role clarity, knowledge, organisational support, and trauma-informed preparation all influence whether concerns are translated into action (Alazri & Hanna, 2020; Brunborg et al., 2024; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cristescu, 2024; Dorado et al., 2016; Goebbels et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2021; McTavish et al., 2017). The pattern observed here is therefore consistent with international arguments that legal recognition alone does not guarantee effective institutional practice when roles, procedures, and referral pathways remain dispersed (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024; WHO, UNICEF, & World Bank Group, 2018). For formal ECE, this is especially important because young children often communicate distress indirectly and depend heavily on adults to interpret signs of risk appropriately (Toros & Toros & Tiirik, 2016). A framework that is normatively strong but procedurally uneven may therefore leave educators with responsibility in principle, while still leaving them uncertain in practice.

The analysis also supports the view that formal ECE should be understood not only as a pedagogical environment, but also as a service environment. This interpretation is consistent with holistic-integrative early childhood development and with wider international frameworks that link early learning with protection, health, care, and intersectoral support (Republic of Indonesia, 2013; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024; WHO, UNICEF, & World Bank Group, 2018). In this sense, the study extends existing early childhood scholarship by showing that safety, dignity, reporting readiness, and institutional accountability are central to educational quality rather than peripheral to it. This reading also resonates with studies on child-friendly schools, responsive teaching, and health-related provision in Indonesian early childhood settings, which show that a safe environment depends not only on relational warmth, but also on clear routines, supervision, and service linkage (Khoiriyah & Filasofa, 2024; Ramadhanty et al., 2025; Rohmadheny & Pramudyani, 2023; Zuhra et al., 2025).

The findings further highlight the limits of symbolic compliance. Child-friendly language may encourage safer and more respectful educational environments, but it does not in itself ensure the existence of documentation systems, complaint pathways, referral directories, or review mechanisms (Jailani et al., 2025). Institutions may therefore appear child-friendly while remaining procedurally weak. This distinction helps explain why regulatory coherence matters for ECE governance. The point is not that child-friendly discourse is unimportant, but that rights-based discourse becomes institutionally meaningful only when it is translated into responsibilities, records, escalation channels, and intersectoral follow-up. Without those elements, protection remains aspirational rather than fully operational (Khoiriyah & Filasofa, 2024; Ramadhanty et al., 2025; Rohmadheny & Pramudyani, 2023; Zuhra et al., 2025).

A strength of this study lies in the integration of legal, policy, and scholarly sources within a single analytical framework. The use of document profiling, rule-based coding, service-readiness indicators, and article-level textual evidence improves analytical transparency and makes the interpretation easier to follow. At the same time, the study has limitations. Because it is document-

based, it does not examine how teachers, heads of institutions, or local officials interpret regulation in everyday practice. It also does not compare implementation across local jurisdictions or test the relationship between regulatory coherence and institutional performance. The findings should therefore be read as an analysis of regulatory design rather than implementation outcomes. Even so, that focus remains valuable because regulatory design shapes the conditions under which implementation becomes more or less feasible.

The findings suggest several implications for policy and practice. First, child protection should be embedded explicitly as a core domain of ECE quality assurance. Secondly, ECE-specific safeguarding guidance should be developed for developmentally appropriate recognition of harm, communication, documentation, and referral. Thirdly, workforce readiness should be strengthened through both pre-service and in-service preparation. Fourthly, local referral pathways should institutionalise links between ECE units and health, social, legal, and child-protection services. Such strengthening is also consistent with trauma-informed school models that emphasise staff capability, referral routines, and safe organisational climate (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Dorado et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2021). Finally, future research should examine how regulatory coherence is enacted in practice, especially in relation to reporting confidence, referral performance, and institutional safeguarding culture. These implications follow directly from the central finding of the study: formal ECE does not only need a strong legal mandate to protect children, but also a coherent operational infrastructure that enables institutions to act consistently, confidently, and accountably.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the national framework already provides a substantial normative and policy basis for protecting young children in formal ECE, but that the regulatory architecture remains uneven in operational terms. The 2026 policy shift strengthens the procedural architecture of protection, particularly through clearer provisions on prevention, reporting, complaint handling, referral, and coordination. Even so, clearer operational guidance, stronger workforce competence, and more consistent intersectoral linkage remain necessary. Child protection should therefore be treated as a core component of formal ECE governance and quality assurance rather than as an external or secondary concern.

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