



An Analysis of My Neighbor Totoro from a Developmental Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the developmental themes represented in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) from a child development perspective and to interpret these themes in relation to contemporary developmental literature. The study was designed as a qualitative document analysis. Hayao Miyazaki's animated film *My Neighbor Totoro* was treated as the primary document, and selected scenes were analyzed through content analysis. The film was viewed repeatedly, scene-based transcripts were prepared with time codes, and the data were coded through pre-coding, open coding, and axial coding procedures. As a result of the analysis, four main themes were identified: imaginary companions and coping, sibling relationships and emotional support, nature, play, and learning, and parental sensitivity and secure attachment. The findings indicated that the character of Totoro functions as a symbolic resource that supports children's coping with anxiety, uncertainty, and stress. In addition, the sibling relationship between Satsuki and Mei was found to represent an important source of emotional support and resilience. The film also highlights the developmental value of nature-based play, creativity, and exploration, while the father figure reflects a sensitive parenting model that validates children's subjective experiences and supports secure attachment. Overall, the study suggests that *My Neighbor Totoro* is not merely an entertainment product but also a rich cultural text that reflects children's emotional, social, and cognitive developmental processes. These findings underline the importance of evaluating high-quality animated films as meaningful tools for emotional literacy, media literacy, and child development research.

KEYWORDS

Child development; animated films; imaginary companions; sibling relationships; secure attachment; nature-based play; document analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Development is a continuous process of change that individuals experience in cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral domains from birth to the end of life. This process is not merely a result of biological maturation; rather, it is shaped through the interaction of the child's social environment, cultural context, and technological opportunities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Child development unfolds within ecological systems ranging from the microsystem to the macrosystem, in which the family, school, peer groups, and media increasingly assume influential roles. The Bioecological Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1977) emphasizes that children develop not only within the family context but also through their interactions with multiple layers of society. This perspective highlights that, in the modern era, media and cultural content have become integral components of children's developmental environments (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

In contemporary societies, childhood is being redefined under the pervasive influence of digital technologies. Beyond their direct interactions with parents and peers, children make sense of the world through media tools such as animated programs, stories, games, and films. These media forms exert a direct influence on children's cognitive and emotional processes, shaping how they think, feel, and relate to others (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Animated films, in particular, possess a unique capacity to concretize abstract developmental themes and to appeal simultaneously to both children and adults. Through this capacity, they provide a rich research context for examining children's understanding of social roles, emotion regulation, and the construction of a positive self-concept (Anderson & Subrahmanyam, 2017; Calvert, 2021).

The literature indicates that media content can have both supportive and risk-inducing effects on children's language, social, and emotional development. High-quality educational content has been shown to enhance children's vocabulary and problem-solving skills (Bergelson et al., 2019; Linebarger & Vaala, 2010). and to support their ability to recognize and express emotions. In contrast, exposure to developmentally inappropriate content may lead to negative outcomes such as fear, aggression, and attention problems (Coyne et al., 2018). The direction and magnitude of media effects vary depending on multiple factors, including the child's age, developmental level, parental mediation practices, and duration of exposure (Nikken & Schols, 2015; Üstündağ, 2020). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, increased screen time has further amplified the significance of media influences on child development (Rideout, 2022).

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), provides an important framework for understanding these influences. According to Bandura, individuals learn by observing, modeling, and imitating behaviors displayed in their environment. Children observe media characters, mentally encode their behaviors, and later reproduce them in similar situations. Behaviors that are portrayed as rewarded, particularly during childhood, are more likely to be imitated (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). Accordingly, media characters emerge as salient symbolic models that shape children's value systems and patterns of social behavior.

Media content exposes children to both prosocial and antisocial behavioral models. Prosocial content promotes empathy, cooperation, and helping behaviors (Mares & Woodard, 2012; Calvert, 2021), whereas content containing violence or fear may increase aggressive tendencies and anxiety responses (Huesmann et al., 2019; Coyne et al., 2018). Therefore, parental guidance through mediation and discussion, as well as the early development of critical media literacy skills, is of critical importance (Potter, 2021; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Skills such as critical thinking, analyzing media messages, questioning underlying intentions, and recognizing emotional impacts enable children to become more conscious and reflective media users.

Recent research in media and cultural studies has emphasized that films and animated narratives can be examined as cultural texts that communicate social meanings and developmental representations. Film analysis allows researchers to explore how visual narratives, character constructions, and symbolic elements convey social values, emotional experiences, and cultural understandings of childhood (Rose, 2016; Monaco, 2009). Within qualitative research traditions, films are frequently treated as visual documents that can be systematically analyzed through methods such as visual text analysis, narrative analysis, and thematic interpretation (Bowen, 2009; Rose, 2016). These approaches enable researchers to investigate how cultural products represent human experiences, relationships, and social processes.

From this perspective, animated films constitute particularly valuable materials for developmental interpretation because they combine symbolic storytelling, visual imagery, and emotional narratives in ways that resonate strongly with children's experiences. Scholars in media studies have argued that animation often constructs symbolic worlds through which childhood emotions, fears, and coping strategies are represented and negotiated (Napier, 2001; Cavallaro, 2015). Therefore, analyzing animated films as cultural texts can provide important insights into how childhood, family relationships, imagination, and emotional development are narratively constructed and culturally communicated.

Within this context, animated films offer a powerful domain for understanding child development from both theoretical and applied perspectives. Through visual symbols, narrative structures, music, and character relationships, animated films reflect children's inner worlds and provide insight into emotion regulation, identification processes, coping with challenges, and social learning. *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), directed by Hayao Miyazaki, represents a particularly compelling example in this regard. The film centers on the experiences of two young sisters as they cope with their mother's illness through their relationship with nature and imagination. The character Totoro symbolically represents themes of emotional security, anxiety management, and resilience, while themes such as family bonds, sibling relationships, and harmony with nature correspond to key dimensions of children's social and emotional development. For these reasons, *My Neighbor Totoro* can be considered a meaningful cultural

text that provides a valuable case for examining how childhood experiences, emotional coping processes, and family relationships are symbolically constructed within animated narratives.

In conclusion, media functions within children's developmental ecology not merely as a source of entertainment but as a fundamental context for social learning and identity construction. The aim of this study is to examine themes related to child development in *My Neighbor Totoro* using document analysis, a qualitative research method, and to interpret the findings in relation to contemporary child development literature in order to gain a deeper understanding of how cultural products influence children's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns.

Building on the theoretical and empirical literature discussed above, the present study aims to examine how key dimensions of child development are represented in the animated film *My Neighbor Totoro*. In particular, the study seeks to explore how the film portrays children's coping processes through imaginary companions, how sibling relationships function as sources of emotional support and social learning, how nature, play, and exploration are depicted as contexts that support children's cognitive and emotional development, and how parental sensitivity and secure attachment are reflected in parent-child interactions. Accordingly, the main research question guiding this study is: How are core themes related to child development represented in the film *My Neighbor Totoro*? By addressing this question through qualitative document analysis, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how cultural media products can symbolically reflect and communicate children's developmental experiences.

METHOD

Research Design

This study was conducted using document analysis, one of the qualitative research approaches. Document analysis is a qualitative method that aims to systematically examine existing written, visual, or digital materials and to derive meaningful themes from these sources (Bowen, 2009). This design is particularly effective for analyzing how cultural products—such as films, books, and media content—construct meanings related to a specific phenomenon. Within the scope of this study, Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) was treated as a document, and the scenes were thematically analyzed in relation to core domains of child development.

Data Source

The primary document of the study is the feature-length animated film *My Neighbor Totoro*, produced by Studio Ghibli and released in Japan in 1988. The film depicts the experiences of two young sisters, Satsuki and Mei, as they navigate life in a rural setting, cope with anxiety related to their mother's illness, and form a relationship with an imaginary creature named Totoro. The narrative incorporates themes of childhood, family, nature, and imagination. The film was selected due to its symbolic treatment of child development-related themes. The original Japanese version, the English-subtitled version, and academic commentaries focused on scene analysis were utilized in the analysis process.

Data Collection Process

During data collection, the film was carefully examined by the researcher across three separate viewing sessions. The first viewing aimed to identify overarching themes, while the second focused on systematically coding scene durations, character behaviors, and dialogues. The third viewing was conducted to confirm and compare preliminary themes. Each scene was transcribed with corresponding time codes (minutes/seconds) and supported by observational notes. The total runtime of the film is approximately 86 minutes, and 13 scenes were selected as the units of analysis. These scenes were chosen based on themes related to children's emotional responses, use of imagination, sibling relationships, parent–child interactions, and engagement with nature.

To clarify the unit of analysis, a scene was operationally defined as a continuous segment of the film characterized by temporal continuity, a coherent action sequence, and stable spatial context. Scene boundaries were determined based on changes in narrative action, shifts in location, or clear transitions in the film's visual structure (Monaco, 2009; Rose, 2016). Following this definition, the film was divided into a set of potential scenes during the second viewing phase. From this set, ten scenes were purposefully selected using a theoretical sampling strategy (Patton, 2015). The selection criteria included scenes that prominently represented themes relevant to child development, such as emotional coping, imaginary companions, sibling interaction, parent–child communication, and engagement with nature. This strategy allowed the analysis to focus on scenes that contained the most conceptually rich developmental interactions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed content analysis, a qualitative analytic technique (Krippendorff, 2018). Initially, film scenes were transcribed and converted into textual data, which were then analyzed using open coding. The coding process consisted of three stages:

- Pre-coding: The film was viewed once, and potential themes were noted in alignment with the research questions and theoretical framework.
- Open Coding: During the second viewing, scenes were systematically recorded and assigned thematic codes. For example, the scene depicting “Mei sleeping next to Totoro” was coded as *imaginary companion–coping*.
- Axial Coding: Codes were grouped under four main themes, with subthemes created when necessary (e.g., under the theme of nature: *exploration, learning through play, emotional relief*). Codes were organized into thematic categories based on recurring behavioral patterns, emotional expressions, and environmental interactions.

At the conclusion of the coding process, four overarching themes were identified:

1. Imaginary companions and coping,
2. Sibling relationships and emotional support,
3. Nature, play, and learning,
4. Parental sensitivity and secure attachment.

These themes were interpreted in relation to child development theories and media-based research. Coding was conducted by the researcher and subsequently reviewed by two experts in the field of child development, with consensus reached on the thematic structure.

Although the analysis focused on ten scenes, the entire film was viewed multiple times to ensure contextual understanding of the narrative structure. The selected scenes were distributed across different parts of the film (beginning, middle, and conclusion) in order to capture key developmental interactions occurring throughout the narrative. This approach ensured that the selected scenes were not isolated events but representative moments that reflected the broader thematic structure of the film. Consequently, the selected scenes functioned as analytically meaningful segments through which recurring developmental patterns in the narrative could be examined.

Trustworthiness

Coding reliability was assessed through inter-expert agreement. Two independent experts in child development reviewed the coding framework and thematic categorization. Agreement between the researcher and the experts was calculated using percentage agreement, which resulted in an agreement rate of 90% across the coded scenes. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus to ensure conceptual clarity in the final thematic structure.

Reflexivity was also considered in the research process. As film analysis involves interpretive judgment, the researcher acknowledged the potential influence of their disciplinary background in child development on the analytical process. To reduce subjective bias, the coding process was conducted iteratively, scene interpretations were supported with detailed observational notes and time codes, and thematic categorizations were reviewed by external experts. This process aimed to enhance methodological transparency and ensure that interpretations were grounded in observable elements of the film.

Ethical Considerations

As this study involves the analysis of an openly accessible cultural product, ethical committee approval was not required. Nevertheless, academic ethical principles were adhered to throughout the research process. The film was analyzed strictly within the scope of non-commercial scholarly inquiry.

RESULTS

My Neighbor Totoro, written and directed by Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki and released in 1988 as a Studio Ghibli production, centers on the experiences of two young sisters, Satsuki and Mei, who move with their father to a rural village due to their mother's prolonged hospitalization. As the sisters attempt to adapt to their new environment, they encounter a mysterious creature named Totoro in the nearby forest. Totoro is portrayed as a large, gentle forest spirit symbolizing nature and the purity of childhood imagination. Throughout the film, Totoro assists the sisters in coping with feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and uncertainty, while supporting their emotional resilience through nature, play, and imagination. In this respect, the

film offers not only a fantastical children's story but also a symbolic narrative that deeply engages with themes of childhood, attachment, sibling relationships, parental sensitivity, and harmony with nature (Napier, 2001; Cavallaro, 2015). Descriptive information about the film is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Production Details of My Neighbor Totoro

Item	Information
Film Title (Original / Turkish)	<i>My Neighbor Totoro (Komşum Totoro)</i>
Director	Hayao Miyazaki
Production Company	Studio Ghibli
Screenwriter	Hayao Miyazaki
Country	Japan
Year of Production	1988
Genre	Animation, Fantasy, Family, Drama
Duration	86 minutes
Language	Japanese
Music	Joe Hisaishi
Awards	1989 Mainichi Film Award: Best Film 1988 Blue Ribbon Award: Special Award 2008 Anime Grand Prix: Best Animation of All Time

When Table 2 is examined, it is evident that the scenes included in the analysis of *My Neighbor Totoro* are systematically classified in accordance with the requirements of qualitative document analysis. The table provides a comprehensive framework by presenting the start and end time codes of each scene, a brief summary of the main event occurring in the scene, and the developmental theme with which the event is associated. This structure transparently demonstrates the observational data on which the thematic analysis of the film's narrative components is grounded. In particular, it enables an analytic tracing of how developmental processes such as emotion regulation, sibling relationships, the use of imagination, and parental sensitivity are represented throughout the film. Furthermore, by making visible the relationship between the chronological sequence of scenes and thematic coding, the table supports the methodological validity of the interpretations presented in the Results section and clearly illustrates how developmental indicators in the film are integrated with the theoretical framework.

The scenes presented in Table 2 were treated as the primary *units of analysis* within the qualitative content analysis process, and each scene was coded in terms of both manifest content (e.g., dialogues, observable behaviors, and environmental elements) and latent content (e.g., emotional tone, symbolic meanings, and relational indicators). As a result of this multi-layered coding process, developmental patterns within the film were identified and organized under four overarching themes. These themes were directly linked to the behaviors, emotional

interactions, and symbolic elements observed in the scenes, and each theme was constructed based on the scenes presented in the table. Accordingly:

Table 2.

Scenes Analyzed in My Neighbor Totoro

Scene No.	Scene Start and End Time	Scene Summary	Themes
1	07:12–09:00	Satsuki and Mei explore their surroundings and the natural environment while moving into their new home.	Interaction with nature, curiosity, learning through play
2	10:45–12:15	The sisters encounter “soot sprites” inside the house.	Symbolic play, coping with fear, exploration
3	18:22–20:03	Mei encounters Totoro for the first time in the forest.	Imaginary companion, coping with anxiety, creating a safe space
4	21:05–22:47	Mei falls asleep in Totoro’s arms.	Need for attachment, emotional comfort
5	30:11–32:58	Satsuki explains their mother’s illness to her younger sister, Mei.	Sibling support, empathy, emotional resilience
6	38:03–41:10	The family spends the evening talking together at home.	Parental sensitivity, secure attachment
7	45:24–48:02	Totoro appears at the bus stop during a rainstorm.	Imaginary companion, emotion regulation, secure presence
8	53:33–55:17	Totoro appears together with the giant Catbus.	Imagination, fantasy, cognitive flexibility
9	59:42–61:03	The girls excitedly tell their father about Totoro.	Parental responsiveness to the child’s experience
10	66:27–70:20	Mei and Satsuki plant seeds and imagine them growing.	Nature, creativity, symbolic play
11	74:05–76:11	The girls write letters to their mother.	Family bonds, hope, emotional expression
12	80:12–82:47	Mei runs away to visit her mother and becomes lost.	Sibling relationships, fear, attachment anxiety
13	83:18–85:22	Totoro helps locate Mei with the Catbus.	Protective function of the imaginary companion, resilience

The theme Imaginary Companions and Coping encompasses the child’s relationship with imaginary figures as a means of coping with stress, uncertainty, and anxiety. This theme is concretely represented in Scenes 3, 4, 7, and 13.

1. The theme Sibling Relationships and Emotional Support refers to the social and emotional support that children provide to one another during challenging life events and is represented in Scenes 5 and 12.
2. The theme Nature, Play, and Learning comprises children's interactions with their environment, processes of exploration, and symbolic play behaviors. Scenes 1, 2, and 10 correspond to this theme.
3. The theme Parental Sensitivity and Secure Attachment involves the trust-based relationship children establish with their parents, parental emotional availability, and responsiveness to the child's experiences. Scenes 6, 9, and 11 were evaluated within the scope of this theme.

Theme 1: Imaginary Companions and Coping

Subtheme 1.1: Coping with Anxiety

One of the scenes that illustrates children's use of imagination in coping with emotional uncertainty occurs when Mei encounters Totoro for the first time in the forest (Scene 3). In this scene, Mei becomes separated from her sister while exploring the surrounding natural environment and wanders deeper into the forest. During this exploration, she discovers Totoro sleeping among the trees. Rather than reacting with fear, Mei approaches the creature with curiosity and eventually falls asleep beside him. The visual atmosphere of the scene is calm and quiet, emphasizing safety and emotional comfort despite the unfamiliar environment.

This scene can be interpreted as reflecting children's tendency to create a "protected space" through imaginary figures when faced with intense emotional burdens. While the mother's hospitalization generates an underlying atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty throughout the film, Totoro's calm, slow, and gentle body language functions as a regulatory counterbalance for the child. Taylor's (1999) comprehensive review of imaginary companions demonstrates that such figures serve not only play-related functions but also play a crucial role in emotional coping, particularly in experiences of loneliness, fear, and perceived loss of control. Similarly, Gleason's studies (2002, 2017) reveal that children's relationships with imaginary companions often include experiences of closeness, sharing, and support comparable to those found in real friendships; in some cases, imaginary companions may even become a "preferred relational object" for children under stress.

Within this framework, Mei's solitary discovery of Totoro in the forest can be interpreted as a scene in which the child externalizes her internal anxiety and reprocesses it through a relationally accessible figure. Research by Giménez-Dasí, Pons, and Bender (2016) indicates that children who have imaginary companion experiences tend to demonstrate more advanced emotion understanding and theory of mind skills. Accordingly, Mei's interaction with Totoro may be understood as enabling her to process complex emotional experiences in a more nuanced manner. In a similar vein, Davis et al. (2022) emphasize that imaginary companions serve as important tools for regulating children's inner speech and cognitively restructuring stressful experiences.

From this perspective, Mei's repeated attempts to seek out and reconnect with Totoro can be interpreted as an effort to construct a continuous "secure figure" in response to emotionally challenging experiences. Vygotsky's (1978) conceptualization of play and imagination as processes that expand the child's zone of proximal development and allow difficult emotions to be symbolically reconstructed further supports this interpretation. Totoro enables the child to re-experience feelings of anxiety and loss—unresolved in the real world—within a playful, controllable, and emotionally safe context.

In conclusion, this subtheme suggests that Totoro functions as a symbolic coping strategy developed by Mei and Satsuki in response to developmental stressors such as illness, relocation, and uncertainty. This interpretation aligns closely with international literature on the functions of imaginary companions in children's emotional regulation and coping processes. These observations from the scene illustrate how the narrative visually constructs imagination as a coping mechanism within the child's emotional experience.

Subtheme 1.2: Emotion Regulation

One of the most memorable scenes illustrating children's emotional responses occurs at the bus stop during a rainy evening (Scene 7). In this scene, Satsuki and Mei wait for their father while holding an umbrella in the dark and rainy environment. The atmosphere of the scene initially conveys uncertainty and tension, as the children stand quietly in the rain while listening to the sounds of raindrops and passing vehicles. Shortly after, Totoro suddenly appears beside them and silently waits at the bus stop. As the children observe Totoro's curiosity about the umbrella and the sound of raindrops hitting its surface, the emotional tone of the scene gradually shifts from anxiety to amusement and curiosity.

The bus stop scene in the rain can be considered one of the most powerful examples in the film demonstrating how an imaginary figure becomes integrated into children's emotion regulation capacities. While Satsuki and Mei experience heightened arousal due to both the uncertainty surrounding their mother's return and the dark, rainy atmosphere, Totoro's sudden appearance fundamentally alters the emotional tone of the scene. As the children listen to the sound of raindrops on the umbrella and laugh together with Totoro, fear and anxiety give way to enjoyment and curiosity, indicating that their emotional states can be rapidly reorganized.

The concept of emotion regulation emphasizes the role of both internal strategies (self-regulation) and external regulators (caregivers, peers, or symbolic figures) in children's management of emotional experiences (Eisenberg, 2010; Gross, 2015). Within this context, imaginary companions may function as *symbolic external regulators*, helping children reduce the intensity of challenging emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness to more tolerable levels. Gleason's (2017) review highlights that play involving imaginary companions provides children with a risk-free context in which different emotional states can be rehearsed and emotional reactions can be processed indirectly.

In the bus stop scene, Totoro's calm waiting, playful experimentation with the umbrella, and joyful reactions to the sounds of the rain demonstrate to the children that emotional

experiences can be reframed. The same situation—waiting under conditions of uncertainty—is transformed from a frightening experience into an enjoyable one. As described in Gross’s (2015) process model of emotion regulation, strategies such as attentional redeployment and cognitive reappraisal appear to be intuitively activated at the level of the children’s internal processes. By shifting their attention away from anxiety-provoking anticipation toward shared play with Totoro, the children regulate their emotional intensity.

Research indicates that children who experience difficulties in emotion regulation often struggle to manage emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness and are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems (Cole et al., 1996; Eisenberg, 2010). In this regard, the film presents a developmentally protective pattern in which Satsuki and Mei transform their emotions through sharing them with an imaginary figure rather than suppressing them. Although Totoro does not eliminate anxiety entirely, interaction with him enables the children to reach a manageable level of emotional intensity. Thus, the imaginary companion assumes a complementary role in children’s emotion regulation alongside the real parental figure.

Subtheme 1.3: Creating a Safe Space

One of the scenes that illustrates the emotional comfort provided by imaginary figures occurs when Mei falls asleep in Totoro’s arms in the forest (Scene 4). In this scene, Mei, after encountering Totoro during her exploration of the forest, approaches the creature with curiosity and eventually rests beside him. The surrounding environment is quiet, with large trees and dim forest light creating a calm atmosphere. Totoro remains motionless while Mei sleeps peacefully against his soft body. The visual composition of the scene emphasizes physical closeness and stillness, conveying a sense of protection and emotional safety within the unfamiliar forest environment.

This scene can be interpreted as reflecting the “safe haven” function of imaginary figures. Totoro’s large, soft, and quiet body provides a physical and emotional space in which the child can feel embraced and protected. While the surrounding trees and the semi-dark forest atmosphere symbolize the uncertainty and potential threats of the external world, Totoro’s arms represent a small yet intense zone of safety constructed within this uncertainty.

Winnicott’s (1971) concepts of *transitional object* and *transitional space* provide a theoretical foundation for interpreting this scene. Transitional objects (e.g., a blanket, teddy bear, or imaginary companion) help children bridge their inner world and external reality, allowing them to tolerate challenging experiences such as separation and loss. Although Totoro is not a concrete object in the traditional sense, he functions as an internalized transitional figure in the child’s mind, becoming a symbolic caregiver who soothes anxiety arising from the mother’s temporary absence.

Studies by Taylor (1999) and Gleason (2002, 2004) emphasize that imaginary companions often fulfill needs for emotional closeness, comfort, and protection, and that children frequently engage with these figures when they seek to feel safe. Mei’s falling asleep in Totoro’s arms closely reflects this secure and comforting relational pattern described in the literature. The

child re-experiences feelings of uncertainty and separation—over which she has limited control in the real world—within the unconditional acceptance and protection offered by the imaginary figure.

This scene also aligns with key elements of Bowlby's (1988) definition of secure attachment, including proximity seeking, relaxation and calming in the presence of the attachment figure, and continued orientation toward the figure in the face of separation threat. Although Totoro is not a real caregiver, he functions as a *symbolic secure base* within the attachment system. This suggests that attachment processes are not limited solely to real caregivers and that imaginary figures within cultural products may also be incorporated into children's attachment representations. The subtheme of creating a safe space demonstrates that Totoro is not merely a transient play figure but a symbolic resource that supports children's internal attachment models, intersecting strongly with both Winnicott's transitional object framework and contemporary imaginary companion literature. These observations illustrate how the narrative visually constructs a symbolic "safe space" through the figure of Totoro, allowing the child to experience emotional security within an uncertain environment.

Theme 2: Sibling Relationships and Emotional Support

Subtheme 2.1: Solidarity and Togetherness

Several scenes in the film illustrate the supportive relationship between the two sisters, Satsuki and Mei (Scenes 5 and 12). In these scenes, Satsuki often takes responsibility for caring for her younger sister during daily activities such as preparing meals, explaining their mother's situation, and guiding Mei in their new environment. For example, when Mei becomes distressed about their mother's illness, Satsuki calmly explains the situation and attempts to comfort her. In another moment, when Mei becomes lost while trying to visit their mother at the hospital, Satsuki becomes deeply worried and actively searches for her. These interactions emphasize emotional closeness, caregiving behaviors, and mutual dependence between the siblings.

These interactions illustrate how sibling bonds can function as a powerful protective factor for children facing stressful life events. During a period characterized by multiple concurrent stressors—such as their mother's illness, relocation to a new home and village, and changes in their social environment—solidarity between the sisters helps distribute and alleviate emotional burden.

As the older sibling, Satsuki assumes a caregiving role, becoming both a play partner and a source of emotional security for Mei. This pattern is consistent with findings from Buist et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis, which indicates that warm and supportive sibling relationships buffer against internalizing and externalizing problems, whereas negative and conflictual sibling relationships increase the risk of psychopathology. Although Satsuki and Mei occasionally experience conflict, the prevailing tone of their relationship is characterized by affection, solidarity, and protection, reflecting a typical protective sibling pattern.

In everyday scenes, Satsuki manages her belongings, meals, and responsibilities while simultaneously monitoring Mei, highlighting the caregiving dimension of the sibling bond. Whiteman, McHale, and Crouter (2011) note that such caregiving roles become more pronounced under stressful family conditions and serve to redistribute emotional and practical burdens within the family system. The mother's absence further intensifies Satsuki's internalization of this caregiving role. This subtheme also encompasses a sense of *shared fate*, as the sisters act as mutual witnesses and companions throughout the uncertainty surrounding their mother's illness. Their ability to maintain both their right to be children (through play, imagination, and engagement with nature) and to rely on each other during moments of crisis represents a developmentally adaptive pattern. Overall, solidarity and togetherness position siblinghood as a critical relational context for both daily care and emotional resilience, consistent with contemporary literature on the protective role of sibling relationships. These scenes demonstrate how the film visually constructs siblinghood as a shared coping system in which emotional support and caregiving responsibilities are distributed between the children.

Subtheme 2.2: Emotional Sharing

One of the scenes that illustrates emotional sharing between the siblings occurs when Satsuki becomes overwhelmed and begins to cry after learning that their mother may not return home as expected (Scene 12). In this moment, Mei quietly approaches her sister and gently embraces her without speaking. The interaction is brief but visually emphasizes physical closeness and emotional sensitivity. Rather than attempting to explain the situation or provide verbal reassurance, Mei responds to Satsuki's distress through touch and presence. The scene highlights the mutual emotional awareness between the sisters and their ability to respond to each other's feelings during a stressful situation. This interaction demonstrates the active role siblings can play in one another's emotion regulation processes.

In this scene, Satsuki momentarily steps out of her role as the "responsible older child" and openly expresses vulnerability, while Mei—despite her young age—sensitively perceives her sister's emotional need. Buist et al. (2013) report that warm and responsive sibling relationships are positively associated with self-esteem, social competence, and empathy in children. The interactions between Satsuki and Mei can thus be viewed as a cinematic reflection of a positive emotional climate.

Siblings also function as emotional mirrors for one another: expressions of fear, sadness, or joy are observed, imitated, or regulated reciprocally. This mutual process constitutes a crucial dimension of emotional socialization within the family. Eisenberg (2010) emphasizes that children's emotion regulation skills are shaped not only through parent-child relationships but also through interactions with siblings and peers, with emotional feedback in these relationships contributing to long-term psychosocial adjustment. The dynamic and reciprocal nature of sibling roles in the film—where caregiving responsibilities occasionally shift—illustrates flexible support patterns that serve as an important family resource for emotional resilience. These

observations suggest that the film portrays sibling interaction not only as companionship but also as a mechanism of shared emotional regulation within the family context.

Subtheme 2.3: Social Learning

Several scenes in the film illustrate how Mei observes and learns from her older sister's behavior (Scenes 5 and 9). In these scenes, Satsuki takes responsibility for organizing daily routines, explaining their mother's condition to Mei, and helping her adapt to their new rural environment. For instance, when Mei becomes confused or worried about their mother's illness, Satsuki calmly explains the situation and models how to respond to uncertainty. Similarly, when the sisters discuss Totoro with their father, Mei closely follows Satsuki's explanations and reactions. These interactions highlight how Mei observes her sister's emotional responses and practical strategies while navigating unfamiliar situations.

These interactions provide a clear example of observational learning as described in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. The younger sibling develops schemas about the social world by observing, modeling emotional responses, and imitating problem-solving strategies demonstrated by the older sibling.

Whiteman et al. (2011) describe sibling relationships as a "*micro-laboratory*" for social learning, where children practice negotiation, conflict resolution, cooperation, and caregiving skills. In the film, Satsuki's responsible, organized, and self-regulated behavior serves as a direct behavioral model for Mei, who gradually adopts some of her sister's coping strategies (e.g., seeking help from the father or waiting for letters from the mother).

As Bandura (1977) notes, the model's emotional significance and perceived status enhance the effectiveness of observational learning. Because Satsuki is both loved and trusted, she occupies a high-status model position in Mei's perception. Consequently, Satsuki's coping behaviors—such as taking responsibility, waiting patiently, and attempting to make sense of emotions—are more likely to be internalized by Mei. Importantly, social learning between siblings is bidirectional; Mei's impulsive behaviors or emotional outbursts may also provide learning opportunities for Satsuki regarding what behaviors to avoid. This reciprocal process enables children to evaluate behavioral outcomes and selectively model adaptive responses. Thus, the social learning subtheme positions sibling relationships as a foundational developmental context in which social skills, coping strategies, and value systems are shaped. These observations illustrate how the film visually represents sibling interaction as a context in which children learn social behaviors, coping strategies, and emotional responses through observation and imitation.

Theme 3: Nature, Play, and Learning

Subtheme 3.1: The Calming Effect of Contact with Nature

Several scenes in the film depict the sisters interacting with the natural environment while exploring their new rural surroundings (Scenes 1, 2, and 10). In these scenes, Satsuki and Mei run through open fields, climb trees, listen to the sound of wind moving through leaves, and observe small details in their environment. At one point, the sisters excitedly explore the area

around their new house, discovering insects, trees, and forest paths. In another moment, they plant seeds together and imagine the plants growing overnight. These interactions highlight the children's sensory engagement with the natural environment and visually emphasize nature as a space of exploration, play, and emotional comfort.

These scenes illustrate the soothing effect of contact with nature on children's emotional well-being. Wells and Evans' (2003) *Nearby Nature* study demonstrates that children raised in environments with access to natural elements are partially buffered against the psychological impacts of stressful life events. In the film, children frequently turn to nature during moments of heightened anxiety—such as fleeing from frightening soot sprites or running through fields when thinking about their mother—representing this buffering mechanism.

Gill's (2014) systematic review further emphasizes that time spent in natural environments reduces stress levels while supporting attention processes and overall subjective well-being. In the film, nature is not merely a backdrop but an active component of children's emotional regulation. Quiet moments under trees, listening to wind, or watching raindrops provide natural emotion regulation opportunities aligned with Gross's (2015) strategies of situation selection and attentional deployment. By distancing themselves from anxiety-inducing stimuli (e.g., hospitals or adult conversations) and engaging with calming natural cues, children restore internal balance. This subtheme highlights nature as not only a play space but also a sensory, emotional, and cognitive regulatory environment. These observations demonstrate how the film constructs nature not only as a physical setting but also as an emotional environment that supports children's self-regulation and psychological comfort.

Subtheme 3.2: Creativity and Exploration

One of the scenes illustrating children's creative engagement with nature occurs when Mei and Satsuki plant seeds in the soil with Totoro (Scene 10). In this scene, the children carefully place the seeds into the ground and wait expectantly for them to grow. Later that night, they imagine the seeds transforming into enormous plants and watch them grow rapidly toward the sky. The visual sequence combines realistic actions—such as planting and watering—with imaginative elements that depict the plants growing instantly into giant trees. The children's excitement, bodily movements, and gestures emphasize curiosity, anticipation, and playful experimentation with the natural environment.

This scene exemplifies how interaction with nature can stimulate imagination and creative thinking. By envisioning seeds transforming into giant plants overnight, children merge real biological processes with fantastical narratives. Gray (2013) argues that free play and self-initiated activities are critical for the development of creativity, problem-solving skills, and autonomy, particularly in unstructured, open-ended environments.

In the film, nature functions as a rich source of stimuli that fuels children's exploratory impulses. Natural phenomena such as seeds mixing with soil, wind movement, and rainfall act as experiential "laboratories" that trigger curiosity and inquiry. Gill (2014) reports that nature-based learning environments enhance curiosity, question-asking behaviors, and exploration-

driven motivation while supporting cognitive flexibility. The children's physical activity—running, jumping, and bending toward the ground—also illustrates the connection between cognitive processes and motor engagement. Research indicates strong links between bodily movement, sensory experience, and cognitive flexibility in early childhood, with nature-based play environments offering particularly rich opportunities in this regard (Wells & Evans, 2003; Gill, 2014). These observations illustrate how the film portrays nature as an imaginative playground where exploration, creativity, and learning processes emerge through children's interaction with their environment.

Subtheme 3.3: Symbolic Play

One of the scenes illustrating children's use of symbolic play occurs when Satsuki and Mei encounter the soot sprites inside their new house (Scene 2). In this scene, the children initially notice small, moving black figures hiding in the dark corners of the house. Although the sprites appear mysterious and potentially frightening, the sisters quickly begin to interact with them playfully by naming them, chasing them, and imagining stories about their behavior. Their reactions gradually shift from fear to curiosity and amusement. Through gestures, laughter, and imaginative explanations, the children transform the unfamiliar figures into playful elements within their exploration of the new home.

This interaction exemplifies how children domesticate ambiguous and potentially frightening stimuli through symbolic play. Initially perceived as unknown and threatening, the sprites are transformed into playful elements as the children name them, imitate their movements, and invent stories about them. According to Piaget's (1962) theory of play, symbolic play enables children to reorganize reality according to their cognitive schemas, transforming uncontrollable situations into meaningful experiences.

Rather than suppressing fear, the children incorporate it into a play scenario, cognitively reframing the experience and adopting an active stance of exploration and mastery. This process reduces anxiety while enhancing a sense of environmental control. Vygotsky (1978) further conceptualizes symbolic play as a zone of proximal development in which social roles and rules are rehearsed. In the soot sprite play, Satsuki and Mei alternate roles—fearful, encouraging, explanatory—thereby regulating each other's emotional responses and experimenting with social positions. Symbolic play is known to be positively associated with theory of mind, language development, and problem-solving skills (Giménez-Dasí et al., 2016). In the Totoro universe, symbolic play extends beyond imaginary figures to include natural and household objects, demonstrating children's capacity to employ multiple symbolic representations simultaneously. These observations demonstrate how the film visually portrays symbolic play as a strategy through which children reinterpret unfamiliar or potentially frightening experiences and transform them into manageable and meaningful interactions.

Theme 4: Parental Sensitivity and Secure Attachment

Subtheme 4.1: Sensitivity to the Child's Experience

One of the scenes illustrating parental sensitivity occurs when Satsuki and Mei excitedly tell their father about their encounter with Totoro (Scene 9). In this scene, the children enthusiastically describe the forest spirit and their unusual experiences. Instead of dismissing the story as imagination or questioning its reality, the father listens attentively and responds with curiosity and warmth. He smiles, asks questions, and encourages the children to continue sharing their experience. The interaction emphasizes attentive listening, emotional engagement, and respect for the children's perspective.

This interaction provides a compelling example of sensitivity and respect for the child's subjective world. Rather than debating the reality of Totoro, the father focuses on the emotional meaning of the experience, sharing in the children's amusement and surprise and transforming it into a moment of familial connection. Ainsworth et al. (1978) identify consistent and sensitive responses to children's signals as a core condition of secure attachment, fostering feelings of being understood and valued.

By taking his daughters' fantastical narratives seriously, the father validates their internal experiences, enhancing their motivation to express emotions and thoughts. This approach aligns with Keller's (2013) culture-sensitive attachment perspective, which emphasizes that parenting practices transmit not only biological care but also cultural meanings and values. In listening to Totoro stories, the father creates space for imagination while simultaneously reinforcing cultural meanings related to nature and spirituality. This subtheme positions the father as a sensitive caregiver who supports secure attachment by recognizing and affirming the child's subjective experience. These observations illustrate how the film portrays parental sensitivity as an interactional process in which children's subjective experiences are acknowledged and validated within the family context.

Subtheme 4.2: Supportive Presence

Several scenes in the film depict the father providing calm and supportive responses to his daughters during everyday family interactions (Scenes 6 and 11). In these moments, the father spends time talking with the children at home, listens carefully to their concerns, and explains situations in a gentle and reassuring manner. For example, during family conversations about their mother's condition, he answers the children's questions calmly and provides explanations that are appropriate to their developmental level. The children frequently return to their father after exploring the surrounding environment, seeking comfort or clarification when they feel uncertain or worried. These interactions emphasize emotional availability, attentive communication, and a sense of stability within the family environment.

These interactions demonstrate the father's calm, accessible, and supportive presence despite the mother's illness. He engages in conversations during family meals, provides honest yet age-appropriate explanations, and shares rather than minimizes his children's anxieties. According to Bowlby's (1988) secure base concept, an attachment figure serves as a calming center in times of threat and a safe home from which the child can explore the world. In the

film, the father fulfills these secure base functions, as the children return to him after exploring their environment and seek him out when confronted with distressing information.

Parental emotional availability reduces children's anxiety and renders stressful situations less threatening, consistent with findings linking parental sensitivity to children's psychosocial adjustment (Eisenberg, 2010). Leerkes (2011) further reports that appropriate parental responses to children's emotional cues are associated with more advanced emotion regulation skills in early childhood. This subtheme underscores the father's role not merely as an informational figure but as an emotionally attuned companion who supports children's emotional processing through eye contact, gentle tone, physical closeness, and open communication. These observations illustrate how the film represents parental presence as a stabilizing emotional resource that allows children to explore their environment while maintaining a sense of security.

Subtheme 4.3: Transmission of Cultural Values

Several scenes in the film illustrate how the father encourages his daughters to notice and appreciate elements of the natural environment (Scenes 1 and 9). In these moments, the father draws the children's attention to trees, wind, rain, and the surrounding landscape, inviting them to observe and respect the natural world. During conversations about the forest and the possibility of encountering forest spirits, he responds to the children's curiosity with openness rather than skepticism. Through these interactions, the father frames nature as something meaningful and worthy of attention, encouraging the children to approach their environment with curiosity and respect.

These interactions illustrate how the father encourages his daughters to engage with and attend to natural elements in their environment. His remarks about trees, wind, rain, and fields reference cultural meanings related to the sacredness and spirituality of nature in Japanese culture. Keller's (2013) culture-sensitive attachment framework highlights that parenting practices are embedded within cultural models and serve to transmit values, norms, and worldviews through everyday interactions.

Within this framework, the father functions not only as a secure attachment figure but also as a carrier of cultural meanings and rituals. Experiencing Totoro as a forest spirit imbues the children's relationship with nature with a mystical dimension, strengthening respect and curiosity toward their environment. Gill (2014) similarly suggests that early emotional bonds with nature are associated with long-term pro-environmental attitudes and a sense of responsibility. This subtheme thus illustrates how secure attachment, emotional regulation, and cultural transmission intersect within the film's narrative. These observations demonstrate how the film portrays parental guidance as a channel through which cultural meanings about nature are communicated and integrated into children's developmental experiences.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings obtained in this study indicate that the character Totoro in the film is not merely an imaginary figure, but rather a symbolic resource that assumes a regulatory role in children's processes of coping with anxiety, uncertainty, and stress. The contemporary literature reveals that imaginary companions play an important role in children's emotional functioning. When previous studies are examined, it is observed that imaginary companions are associated with emotion understanding, theory of mind, and social cognition (Giménez-Dasí, Pons, & Bender, 2016; Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021; Lin et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2022). Similarly, previous research suggests that imaginary companions may serve as important coping resources for children experiencing loneliness, uncertainty, or emotional distress (Gleason, 2017; Panah et al., 2023). In a study conducted by Doebel (2023), it was reported that imagination-based play enhances children's executive functions, inner speech skills, and self-regulation capacities. In addition, it has been stated that symbolic and social play increase children's self-regulation and social competence levels (Walker et al., 2020; Jaggy et al., 2023). These findings support the interpretation that the imaginary relationship Mei and Satsuki establish with Totoro helps them employ more effective regulation strategies in situations of anxiety and stress.

The positioning of Totoro as a figure that provides security and calming support, particularly for children trying to cope with their mother's illness, is consistent with previous research findings. In the study conducted by Giménez-Dasí, Pons, and Bender (2016), it was demonstrated that imaginary companion experiences strengthen children's emotion recognition and emotion explanation skills, and that these figures constitute an important tool in the early stages of emotional development.

The findings related to sibling relationships in the film show strong parallels with studies in the current literature that conceptualize sibling bonds as a critical protective factor in children's emotion regulation, coping with stress, and psychosocial adjustment processes. Previous research has reported that supportive sibling relationships have a protective effect against children's internalizing and externalizing problems, support the development of empathy, prosocial behavior, and emotional competence in school-age children, and that sibling interaction patterns characterized by low conflict and high support create long-term protective effects on psychological resilience (Buist et al., 2013; Holmes et al., 2024). Similarly, in a study conducted by Volling (2018), it was emphasized that trust and communication between siblings play a fundamental role in the development of children's self-concept, and that sibling support creates a buffering effect, particularly in situations where family stressors are intense. This finding directly corresponds to the scenes in which Satsuki continuously guides and calms Mei during their mother's illness.

In the scene where Mei gets lost, Satsuki's experience of intense anxiety and her seeking help to find her sister indicate that the sibling bond structures both emotional and behavioral responsibility. This situation is also consistent with the meta-analytic findings reported by Volling et al. (2020) regarding sibling relationships; these studies demonstrate that siblings

regulate one another's stress responses and function as a source of social security during periods of uncertainty. Therefore, the sibling relationship depicted in the film can be conceptualized not only as a sharing of caregiving roles, but also as a developmental process that supports emotional resilience, as defined in the current literature.

The findings related to engagement with nature and play behaviors show a high level of convergence with recent research on nature-based experiences in child development. In a study conducted by Tillmann et al. (2018), it was found that regular access to nature-based play environments strengthens children's executive function skills and particularly supports flexible thinking and planning abilities. This result is consistent with the scenes in the film in which Satsuki and Mei naturally employ problem-solving and creative thinking while exploring the forest. In addition, the protective role of nature on emotional well-being is also emphasized in the film. In a systematic review conducted by Mygind et al. (2019), it was revealed that time spent in natural environments reduces anxiety and stress levels in children and increases inner calmness and emotion regulation skills. This finding corresponds with the observable relaxation displayed by the sisters when they spend time in the forest.

The effects of nature-based play on creativity emerge as another subtheme addressed in the film. Previous studies have shown that outdoor play increases children's creative problem-solving behaviors, and that play involving unstructured natural materials supports children's creativity and psychological well-being (Tillmann et al., 2018; Johnstone et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). In another study conducted by Waite et al. (2020), it was reported that nature-related play increases children's self-efficacy, that environmental stimuli trigger curiosity, and that such experiences strengthen learning motivation. In the film, the excitement experienced by the sisters while exploring their new environment and the seed-planting scene with Totoro, in which nature is presented as a context that nourishes symbolic play, are consistent with these findings. The findings regarding parental sensitivity overlap with contemporary attachment theory research demonstrating that caregivers' emotional availability is a determining factor in children's emotion regulation, stress management, and social adjustment processes. Particularly during the mother's illness, the father's consistent, soothing, and unconditionally accepting approach shows strong parallels with secure parenting characteristics defined in the current attachment literature. In a study conducted by Bosmans et al. (2020), it was found that parental sensitivity has a direct effect on the organization of children's attachment representations, and that sensitive parenting attitudes enable children to develop more effective coping strategies in stressful situations. This finding corresponds with the father's acceptance of the children's Totoro experiences without questioning them and his provision of a calming presence. In addition, a study conducted by Ensink et al. (2017) suggested that caregivers' emotional availability creates a co-regulatory partnership that supports children's emotion regulation processes and provides a reassuring foundation, particularly in situations involving anxiety. This result can be associated with the children's tendency to orient toward their father after each stressful event in the film.

Research on parenting within a cultural context also supports the scenes examined in the film. Keller (2018) states that parenting behaviors are culturally shaped, and that values related to nature, community, and rituals are explicitly transmitted through parent–child interactions. In the film, the father’s explanations that connect his daughters with nature and his emphasis on spiritual elements constitute an example consistent with this cross-cultural socialization model. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Tso et al. (2020), it was stated that parental sensitivity during the pandemic period was one of the fundamental factors that increased children’s psychological resilience. In the context of the film, the father figure’s provision of stable and reliable support during a period of uncertainty is consistent with these contemporary findings.

In addition to developmental interpretations, the cultural context of the film also provides an important perspective for understanding these findings. *My Neighbor Totoro* is deeply embedded in Japanese cultural traditions, particularly the Shinto belief system, which emphasizes the spiritual presence within natural environments. Within this cultural framework, forest spirits such as Totoro can be interpreted not only as imaginative companions but also as symbolic representations of the sacred relationship between humans and nature. Miyazaki’s cinematic aesthetics frequently highlight harmony between children and the natural world, reflecting broader cultural narratives that value nature as a living and spiritually meaningful environment (Napier, 2001). Considering this cultural dimension enriches the developmental interpretation of the film and highlights how cultural narratives shape representations of childhood, imagination, and emotional coping.

In this study, by examining the film *My Neighbor Totoro* through qualitative document analysis, it was demonstrated how an animated film can intersect multidimensionally with the core domains of child development. The findings indicate that the film is not merely a narrative created for aesthetic and entertainment purposes; rather, it offers a rich cultural text that symbolically addresses developmental processes such as children’s emotion regulation, coping, attachment, sibling relationships, play, and interaction with nature.

Beyond demonstrating parallels with existing developmental literature, the present study contributes to the field by showing how animated narratives can function as symbolic environments in which developmental processes are represented and negotiated. While previous research has primarily examined imaginary companions, sibling relationships, and emotion regulation within real-life developmental contexts, this study illustrates how these processes are narratively constructed within a cultural media text. In this sense, the analysis expands developmental interpretations by integrating insights from media studies and visual narrative analysis, highlighting that animated films may serve as meaningful cultural representations of children’s emotional and relational experiences.

The four main themes identified in the study—imaginary companions and coping, sibling relationships and emotional support, nature–play–learning, and parental sensitivity and secure attachment—were systematically examined through scenes in the film. The theme of imaginary

companions and coping revealed that the figure of Totoro functions as a symbolic coping tool that regulates children's feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness at a symbolic level. This finding is important in that it demonstrates that imaginary companions, rather than constituting a developmental risk, often represent a functional process that helps children make sense of their inner worlds and develop emotional flexibility.

Although the findings suggest that Totoro functions as a symbolic source of emotional security, alternative interpretations are also possible. From another perspective, Totoro may represent a narrative expression of children's attempts to make sense of uncertainty and loss during stressful life events. Rather than functioning solely as a protective figure, the character may also be understood as a symbolic projection of the children's emotional world, through which anxiety and uncertainty are transformed into manageable experiences. Considering such alternative interpretations highlights the interpretive richness of animated narratives and underscores the importance of examining children's media texts from multiple theoretical perspectives.

The theme of sibling relationships and emotional support showed that the relationship between Satsuki and Mei represents not only a sibling bond but also a protective social support system in the face of stressful life events. Particularly during challenging experiences such as their mother's illness and relocation, siblings providing both caregiving and emotional companionship to one another illustrates that sibling relationships constitute an important component of family resilience. This result suggests that, in practice, sibling relationships should be addressed not only in terms of conflict but also in terms of their protective and supportive functions.

Within the scope of the nature, play, and learning theme, it was observed that the film's narrative, which centers child–nature interaction, supports processes of free play, exploration, creativity, and coping with stress. Natural elements such as forests, seeds, rain, and wind function as a developmental context in which children experience both physical and emotional relief and generate meaning through the use of imagination. This result indicates that contact with nature in early childhood should be considered an important developmental opportunity in its own right, beyond structured indoor activities.

The theme of parental sensitivity and secure attachment revealed that the father figure in the film presents a parenting model that takes children's subjective experiences seriously, is emotionally accessible, and transmits cultural values. Rather than questioning the children's narratives about Totoro, the father's acceptance of their emotional meaning provides a secure environment that supports children's imagination and emotional expression skills. This finding suggests that, developmentally, it may be more supportive for parents to focus on the emotional content carried by children's "real" and "imaginary" experiences rather than drawing a strict distinction between them.

The findings of the study demonstrate that evaluating media content for children solely within a "harm versus benefit" dichotomy is insufficient; instead, such content may assume

highly diverse functions depending on the context in which it is used, accompanying adult attitudes, the child's developmental characteristics, and layers of cultural meaning. As illustrated by the example of *My Neighbor Totoro*, high-quality narratives may provide children with a rich symbolic repertoire for reflecting on emotion regulation, empathy, coping, connection with nature, and family relationships. This highlights the need for educators and parents to consider animated films not only as "entertainment," but also as tools that can be utilized in the context of guidance, emotional awareness, and critical media literacy. The selection of *My Neighbor Totoro* as the focus of analysis is particularly meaningful because the film presents a rich narrative structure centered on childhood, imagination, family relationships, and interaction with nature, while also being widely distributed internationally and recognized across different cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis is limited to a single film; examining other animated films produced in different cultural contexts using similar methods would allow for testing the generalizability of the identified themes. In addition, the study does not directly address how children receive the film (e.g., viewing experiences, personal interpretations, emotional responses), as the film is analyzed from the perspective of an adult researcher. Future studies employing qualitative interviews, focus groups, or participatory observation methods to explore how children interpret such films would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between media texts and children's lived experiences.

The findings of this research demonstrate that the narratives presented in *My Neighbor Totoro* are multidimensionally related to children's emotion regulation, attachment, social relationships, and play behaviors. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Based on the results of the study, imaginary companions were found to serve a regulatory function in children's processes of coping with anxiety, uncertainty, and stress, and the figure of Totoro was shown to provide symbolic security and emotional comfort for children. Accordingly, it is recommended that educators and parents utilize high-quality animated scenes in educational processes that support emotional awareness, self-expression, and emotion regulation skills, and that the systematic integration of media-based materials into emotional literacy programs be encouraged.

Based on the results of the study, sibling relationships were found to function as a protective factor that enhances children's psychosocial resilience, and sibling solidarity was shown to provide emotional security, particularly during stressful life events. Accordingly, it is recommended that greater emphasis be placed on games requiring cooperation between siblings, shared responsibilities, and activities that encourage mutual emotional sharing within the family environment, and that parental guidance programs strengthen content addressing the supportive dimensions of sibling relationships.

Based on the results of the study, nature-based play and exploratory behaviors were found to enhance children's creativity, cognitive flexibility, and emotional well-being. Accordingly, it is recommended that outdoor activities, play with natural materials, and unstructured exploration processes be included as mandatory components of preschool and primary school curricula, and that educational policies expand opportunities for nature-based learning.

Based on the results of the study, parental sensitivity was found to strengthen children's secure attachment patterns, and the father figure's approach of validating children's subjective experiences was shown to provide emotional security. Accordingly, it is recommended that psychoeducational programs for parents focus on developing sensitive parenting skills such as reflective listening, emotional validation, and empathic responding, and that parenting interventions take cultural context and family communication dynamics into account.

Based on the results of the study, media content was found to entail both risks and opportunities for child development; however, high-quality, culturally rich, and emotion-focused content was shown to support children's social and emotional processes. Accordingly, it is recommended that parents adopt co-viewing practices with their children and guide children in making sense of symbolic content by discussing scenes together.

Based on the results of the study, animated films were found to offer valuable qualitative data for child development research, and cultural narratives were identified as important resources that reflect children's inner worlds. Accordingly, it is recommended that future studies conduct comparative analyses of animated films from different cultures and increase qualitative research examining how children receive and interpret these films.

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Authors' Contributions

The first author was responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, data collection through document analysis, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and drafting of the manuscript.

The second and third authors contributed to the supervision of the research process, critical revision of the manuscript, and interpretation of the findings. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study is based on the qualitative analysis of an openly accessible cultural product (an animated film) and does not involve human participants or personal data. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required. Nevertheless, the study was conducted in accordance with academic ethical principles.

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