



THE ROLE OF PLAYING IN ENHANCING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study explores the role of play in enhancing the social and emotional development of early childhood learners within the Indonesian preschool (PAUD) context. Drawing from a literature review and observational research in a Central Jakarta kindergarten, the study highlights the significance of various types of play—particularly symbolic play, role-play, and cooperative play—in developing key competencies such as empathy, self-regulation, social communication, and emotional awareness. The findings demonstrate that structured play activities, when facilitated by educators, can help children who are initially shy or withdrawn to become more confident, emotionally expressive, and socially engaged. The study underscores the importance of integrating play-based learning into early childhood education curricula and provides practical recommendations for educators and policymakers. It concludes that play is not merely recreational but a foundational strategy for shaping children's character and emotional well-being from an early age.

Keywords: *play-based learning; early childhood education; social-emotional development; role-play; cooperative play; preschool education; emotional intelligence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The social-emotional development of children is one of the most critical aspects in the early stages of life, especially during early childhood education (ECE). At this age, children begin to build the foundational skills for social and emotional functioning, which will significantly impact their future social interactions. This phase is crucial in a child's development because the brain undergoes rapid growth, influencing their ability to understand their own emotions and those of others, as well as learning how to interact within groups (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Other scholars also argue that early childhood is a pivotal period for shaping long-term social-emotional competence (Denham et al., 2012; Bierman & Torres, 2016).

Play is an inseparable part of a child's life and serves as the primary medium through which they explore the world, express emotions, and form social relationships. In the context of Early Childhood Education (ECE), play is not merely viewed as a recreational activity, but rather as a powerful pedagogical approach to support holistic child development. Among various developmental domains, social and emotional competencies play a vital role as they form the basis for effective interaction, emotional regulation, and adaptation to ever-changing social environments.

The use of the word "role" in this study's title implies that children's play has a significant contribution to enhancing their social-emotional abilities. As Vygotsky (1978) explained, play is an



activity that enables children to develop their mental functions through rich social interactions. The role of play in improving children's social and emotional abilities is crucial because, through play, children not only enhance their physical skills but also learn to express and understand emotions in healthier ways. Thus, play goes beyond entertainment—serving also as an essential educational tool to support children's social-emotional development.

Despite the growing awareness of the importance of social-emotional development, formal curricula in many ECE institutions still tend to focus on cognitive and academic readiness. As a result, play-based approaches are often underutilized. However, several studies have shown that through play, children engage in complex social interactions, learn to manage conflict, and are able to express and recognize a variety of emotions within a safe and supportive context (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and symbolic play in children's learning processes. Additionally, Erikson's psychosocial theory suggests that early childhood is a critical stage for developing autonomy, initiative, and emotional resilience (Erikson, 1950).

Children aged 4 to 6 years, the target group of ECE, are in a highly sensitive stage of social and emotional development. At this age, they begin to learn about themselves and about broader social groups, including family, friends, and the community. Therefore, learning through play can be an effective way to teach basic social skills that they will need throughout life. As Piaget (1962) noted, young children learn about their world through direct experience, and play is one of the key ways they acquire and practice essential social skills.

Early childhood is a vital period to provide appropriate stimulation, as children's learning abilities at this stage are strongly influenced by their experiences and environment. Therefore, play becomes an effective means of stimulating their social and emotional development. Through developmentally appropriate play activities, young children can learn to identify and manage their feelings in various situations. For example, play involving peer interaction can teach children how to manage feelings such as jealousy, anger, or disappointment—emotions that commonly arise in social relationships. This leads to the development of emotional skills, which are essential for building self-confidence and empathy, two critical components of healthy social interaction (Denham, 2006).

This study aims to further explore the role of children's play in enhancing social-emotional abilities at the ECE level. Through a systematic approach grounded in child development theory, this study seeks to provide deeper insights into how play can be a highly effective tool in supporting children's social-emotional growth in ECE settings. The research also aims to provide a broader understanding of how early childhood education can leverage play in shaping core character traits beneficial for future development.

Based on this theoretical framework, this study employs a literature review method to examine the role of play in enhancing the social and emotional skills of young children at the ECE level. Focusing on the Indonesian context, where structured learning approaches still dominate in many early childhood classrooms, this study offers insights into how play can be strategically integrated into ECE practices. Previous research, such as that conducted by Sunandar Azma'ul Hadi (2021), titled *Improving Social-Emotional Skills of Young Children through the "Catching Fish" Game*, shows that social skill improvements were influenced by this particular game. Through the game, children's interaction, cooperation, and sense of responsibility increased. Children who were initially shy and withdrawn began to develop and participate more actively. Similarly, Nurul Afianti (2014) in her study *Traditional Games as an Alternative Medium for Developing Social-Emotional Competence in Young Children*, concluded that traditional games can serve as an alternative medium for developing these competencies. These games not only provide enjoyment but also instill values such as helping peers, obeying rules, showing self-confidence, cooperation, perseverance, and sportsmanship. Based on this, Afianti recommended the exploration and compilation of locally based traditional games as educational tools to foster social-emotional development in young children.

Lindsey & Colwell (2013) provided a comprehensive view by analyzing various forms of play—symbolic, cooperative, and physical—and their connections with social-emotional dimensions



such as empathy, emotion recognition, self-regulation, and interpersonal communication. The study also emphasizes the role of educators and educational environments in designing meaningful and developmentally appropriate play experiences.

Therefore, this article will explore: (1) the conceptual relationship between play and the social-emotional development of young children; (2) types of play most effective in supporting these skills; (3) empirical evidence on the effectiveness of play-based approaches in ECE; and (4) practical recommendations for educators and policymakers in designing child-centered learning activities. This study reaffirms that play is not merely a fun activity, but a vital foundation for emotional well-being and social competence from an early age.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative descriptive study aimed at exploring and describing concepts and findings from previous researchers related to the chosen topic. One factor that ensures data validity is the researcher's presence, who also serves as a teacher at the research site, which enables more precise decisions in determining appropriate methods for data collection and obtaining more accurate results.

The research was conducted over a period of approximately two months, from February to March 2025, at a kindergarten located in Central Jakarta, specifically within the Group B level. The data sources in this study included direct observations and interviews with the students. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive-analytical methods, which involve organizing the initial data and then analyzing it based on the descriptive nature of the research. The analysis went through the following stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

In Indonesia, research on this topic remains relatively limited and tends to focus more on cognitive aspects in early childhood learning. Therefore, it is crucial to further explore the role of play in shaping the social-emotional skills of young children in the local context.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The literature review findings show that play has a significant impact on the development of social and emotional aspects in early childhood. An analysis of more than 20 scholarly publications published between 2013 and 2024 revealed that play activities—particularly role-play, cooperative play, and facilitated free play—contribute directly to the development of skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and social communication.

Lindsey and Colwell (2013) found that children aged 4–5 years who regularly engaged in cooperative play showed significant improvements in conflict resolution skills and higher prosocial behavior compared to a control group with less play exposure. The study was conducted through eight weeks of observation in preschool settings in the United States, showing that small-group play interactions strengthen children's capacity to cooperate and understand others' perspectives.

In the Indonesian context, a study by Sari and Yuliani (2020) at an ECE center in Yogyakarta revealed that regular implementation of role-play activities for six weeks led to improved emotional recognition and regulation among children. Children began to exhibit positive behavioral changes such as being willing to express their feelings, becoming more patient when waiting their turn, and being able to calm themselves when angry. These findings emphasize the importance of the teacher's role as an active facilitator in guiding and reflecting on children's play experiences.

In a field study conducted at a kindergarten in Central Jakarta, the researcher observed variations in children's social adaptation abilities within groups B2 and B3. Based on preliminary



observations over a two-week period, approximately 8 out of 32 children exhibited a tendency toward quiet social behavior and required more time to initiate interactions with peers and adjust to their surroundings. These criteria were identified through indicators such as limited initiative to join group play activities, minimal verbal responses, and a preference for observing rather than actively engaging in social interactions.

To support the social development of these children, the researcher introduced a range of traditional and thematic collaborative games, including *Domikado*, *Cublak-Cublak Suweng*, *Ular Naga*, and themed role-play activities. These games were designed to provide equal opportunities for participation and allow children the freedom to choose their play partners. In the early stages of implementation, three of the eight children began to show increased initiative in selecting playmates and participating in group activities. Meanwhile, the remaining five children still required encouragement and guidance from teachers and tended to engage more as observers.

These findings suggest that well-structured, inclusive play activities can serve as an effective strategy for enhancing social engagement among young children. Continued observation is needed to assess long-term behavioral changes and to further explore contextual factors that support children's socialization processes through play-based approaches.

These games were repeated more frequently, both at the beginning and end of class sessions. Over time, a positive shift in behavior was observed among the previously quiet children. Gradually, all 8 children began to socialize, became more emotionally expressive, and learned to manage their feelings better—although some still required encouragement in specific situations. They started to mingle with peers, wait for their turns, understand winning and losing in simple terms, enjoy playing with friends, and share stories about their fun experiences.

Teacher interviews supported these observations. One teacher remarked, *"Children learn how to resolve small conflicts during play, such as fighting over toys. We usually guide them to talk it out and make peace, and they can follow quickly."* Teachers also observed that shy or introverted children became more confident after regularly participating in cooperative games.

Additionally, interviews with parents of the 8 identified quiet children revealed positive changes in their children's social engagement and emotional expression after regularly participating in play-based activities at school. One parent shared, *"My child used to be shy and quiet in class, afraid to talk to friends. Now they love inviting friends to play and can express when they feel happy or sad."*

These field findings reinforce the literature review results, confirming that play not only enhances social skills but also helps children manage their emotions. The interactions that occur during play create a natural and enjoyable learning environment for young children.

Discussion

Play contributes significantly to the development of social and emotional skills in early childhood. Based on the literature analysis, various forms of play—especially symbolic play, role-playing, and cooperative games—positively influence elements such as empathy, social communication, emotional recognition, and self-regulation.

Symbolic play allows children to express emotions through symbolic representations of real-life experiences. Through role-play, children learn to understand other people's perspectives, develop empathy, and practice social skills such as taking turns, sharing, and collaborating. Cooperative play helps children improve their communication abilities, resolve conflicts, and manage emotions during group interactions.

Play acts as a medium for social interaction, where children engage with peers, practice sharing, taking turns, and resolving conflicts—foundational social skills that will evolve over time. While playing, children encounter various emotions such as winning, losing, disappointment, or joy. These situations teach them to recognize and manage their feelings, forming the basis of emotional intelligence.



Role-playing games, group games, and traditional games offer children opportunities to practice social norms and develop empathy. Activities like “playing doctor” or “playing market” allow children to imitate real-life social roles. Here, early childhood education (ECE) plays a vital role in providing a safe and enjoyable learning environment. The educator’s role is crucial—not only as a facilitator but also as an observer and mentor who helps children reflect on their play experiences.

A flexible, structured play approach, which still allows for spontaneity and self-expression, has proven to be more effective than entirely instructional learning methods. In the context of early childhood education in Indonesia, the findings from several studies imply that play-based learning not only enhances learning motivation but also builds social-emotional character from an early age. Therefore, play should not be seen merely as a supplementary activity in the curriculum, but as a core learning strategy.

Overall, these findings emphasize that play is not just a recreational activity, but a comprehensive educational strategy that supports children's holistic social and emotional development. Educators and policymakers should consider strengthening play-based learning approaches in planning and implementing early childhood education programs.

The findings of this study highlight the pivotal role of play in supporting young children's social-emotional development across several key dimensions. One significant contribution of play is the enhancement of children's social communication skills (Vygotsky, 1978; Sari & Yuliani, 2020). Through playful interactions, children gradually learn to express their needs and desires, actively listen to others, and engage in resolving interpersonal conflicts using verbal language. These experiences foster the foundations of effective communication and mutual understanding.

In addition, play especially imaginative and role-based scenarios offers a meaningful context for the development of empathy and social awareness (Denham *et al.*, 2012). By taking on various roles and exploring different perspectives, children begin to understand the emotions and experiences of others. This process helps cultivate a sense of compassion and interpersonal sensitivity, which are essential for healthy social relationships.

Another vital aspect is the way play supports self-regulation and emotional management (Erikson, 1950; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Within the boundaries of play, children encounter situations that require them to manage impulses, delay gratification, and navigate emotions such as anger or frustration. These moments become valuable opportunities for learning how to cope with challenges in emotionally appropriate ways.

Play also contributes to the strengthening of self-identity and confidence (Bierman & Torres, 2016). It provides children with the autonomy to make choices, initiate actions, and experience a sense of competence. When children are given the freedom to lead or contribute meaningfully during play, they begin to build a stronger sense of self and feel valued within their peer group.

Finally, play serves as a foundation for the formation of positive social habits (Lindsey & Colwell, 2013). Cooperative play, in particular, helps children practice taking turns, following shared rules, and working together toward a common goal. These early experiences of collaboration lay the groundwork for respectful and responsible participation in social environments.

Play is not merely a learning aid—it is a foundation for character building and social-emotional growth. At the early childhood level, strengthening play practices should be accompanied by teacher training to design meaningful, structured, and developmentally appropriate play activities. This way, learning becomes not only enjoyable but also transformative in shaping well-rounded children.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that play plays a vital role in enhancing the social and emotional skills of young children. Through various forms of play such as role-play, cooperative games, and symbolic play, children develop communication skills, empathy, self-regulation, and the ability to recognize and express emotions.



Play creates opportunities for active learning through meaningful social interactions. Previous studies, both local and international, consistently show that integrating play into early childhood education leads to positive outcomes in children's social-emotional character development.

The role of educators is crucial in creating a supportive play environment and facilitating exploratory, experience-based learning processes.

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