

The Role of Play in Developing Children's Social and Emotional Skills

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ABSTRACT

Children's social and emotional development forms a critical foundation for their readiness to face future life challenges, whether in academic settings, interpersonal relationships, or adaptation to a dynamic social environment. Play encompassing both traditional and modern forms has proven to be one of the most effective strategies for supporting this development. Beyond serving as a source of entertainment, play carries an educational dimension that stimulates children to share, cooperate, empathize, regulate their emotions, and understand social rules. This study aims to explore in depth the role of play in shaping children's social and emotional skills through an SIR (Study, Interpretation, and Reflection) approach. The findings show that play contributes significantly to building interaction and communication skills, emotional regulation, and conflict-resolution ability. This article is expected to offer a scholarly contribution for educators, parents, and other stakeholders in designing learning strategies that are more inclusive and enjoyable, enabling children to develop holistically through play

INTRODUCTION

Children's development cannot be measured by cognitive achievement alone; their social and emotional skills matter just as much. Across the child development literature, social and emotional competence is widely regarded as a key determinant of an individual's future success. Children with strong social skills tend to adapt more easily to their surroundings, build friendships, and handle conflict in healthy ways. Emotional skills, meanwhile, allow children to recognize, manage, and express their feelings appropriately, so that those feelings do not become harmful to themselves or others. Cultivating both skill sets from an early age is therefore essential.

Play offers an enjoyable bridge to children's social and emotional growth. Through play, children absorb a great deal without realizing it taking turns, sharing roles, respecting rules, and cooperating toward a shared goal. Play also gives children a safe space to express emotions, whether joy, disappointment, anger, or pride. Seen this way, play is not merely entertainment; it is an educational tool that helps shape character and interpersonal skills.

In Indonesian society, traditional games play a significant part in shaping children's social interaction. Games such as gobak sodor (a team tag-and-strategy game), congklak (a mancala-style counting game), and engklek (a hopscotch variant) demand more than physical skill they teach cooperation, sportsmanship, and a sense of togetherness. Digital-era games, meanwhile,

now shape children's lives in different ways. Online games, though often criticized for their potential downsides, can also foster virtual teamwork, cross-cultural communication, and problem-solving ability. Traditional and modern play alike, then, can nurture social and emotional skills when guided appropriately. This need is reinforced by broader global trends: the World Economic Forum has identified social and emotional competencies cooperation, creativity, and emotional regulation among them as core 21st-century skills that young people must possess. Play offers a natural pathway toward building exactly these competencies, which is why children's education should extend beyond academics to make room for play as part of the learning process itself.

In practice, however, many parents and educators still underestimate the value of play as an educational tool, dismissing it as a waste of time with little bearing on a child's development. As a result, children are often pushed toward rigid academic routines that leave little room for social and emotional growth to unfold naturally despite evidence that children given a healthy balance of play develop stronger cognitive, social, and emotional abilities than those whose play is restricted. Against this backdrop, this study sets out to build a more comprehensive understanding of the role play plays in developing children's social and emotional skills, with the aim of helping educators, parents, and policymakers treat play as an integral part of how children learn. In doing so, children can grow into individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also socially and emotionally mature a foundation for becoming a resilient generation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the SIR (Study, Interpretation, and Reflection) approach, which centers on developing an in-depth understanding of the social phenomenon of play and its role in shaping children's social and emotional skills. The first stage, Study, involved data collection through a review of the literature scholarly articles, books, and prior research together with observation of children's play in both school and home settings. This literature review provided a solid theoretical grounding for the relationship between play and social-emotional development, while participatory observation captured the dynamics of play itself, including interaction among children, emotional management, and adherence to game rules.

The second stage, Interpretation, involved qualitative analysis of the collected data to identify meaning and patterns linked to social and emotional skill development through play. This included categorizing types of play, identifying the social-emotional dimensions that emerged during play, and examining supporting and inhibiting factors. The final stage, Reflection, involved a critical evaluation of the findings in relation to the context of children's education in Indonesia, aimed at producing practical recommendations for parents, teachers, and policymakers on using play more effectively as a holistic learning strategy. Through the SIR method, this study offers not just a description of the phenomenon but a deeper understanding that can be applied in real-world settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Play and the Development of Social Skills

The findings show that play plays a significant role in strengthening children's social skills, particularly in cooperation, communication, and leadership. Children who regularly take part in group play show a stronger ability to build relationships, resolve conflict, and coordinate strategy toward a shared goal. Traditional games such as gobak sodor, for instance, require children to plan strategy together, share roles, and trust one another for their team to win teaching a degree of coordination and cooperation that is not easily achieved through conventional academic activities.

This pattern is consistent with Li, Hestenes, and Wang (2020), who found that preschool children's social skills are closely linked to their play behavior, with the emotional climate of the classroom moderating how strongly that link is expressed. In a supportive climate, group play becomes a natural training ground for negotiation: children learn to voice their own preferences while also accommodating the wishes of their playmates, a balance that is difficult to teach through direct instruction alone. Rogoff, Correa-Chávez, and Silva (2021) add a cultural dimension to this picture, showing that children across many societies learn a great deal simply by observing and participating alongside peers and more experienced others during shared activities play being one of the richest of these settings because it is voluntary, repeatable, and low-stakes.

Leadership also emerges as a distinct outcome of sustained group play. In games with rotating roles a team captain in gobak sodor, or the first player in congklak children take turns directing the flow of activity, resolving disputes over rules, and motivating teammates who fall behind. Rubin, Bukowski, and Laursen (2020) note that these peer-led micro-structures give children practice with authority and responsibility in a context where the stakes of failure are low, which makes it a safer space to experiment with leadership than more formal, adult-supervised settings. Over time, children who are given repeated opportunities to lead within play appear more willing to take initiative in other group settings, including classroom group work.

Emotional Regulation Through Play

Beyond its social dimension, play also gives children considerable room to develop emotionally. Through play, children learn to manage their emotions in both winning and losing. A child who loses learns to accept defeat gracefully, while a child who wins is encouraged not to gloat and to respect their opponent situations that naturally train a child's capacity for emotional regulation. Play also generates positive emotions such as excitement, enthusiasm, and pride, which in turn support children's mental well-being and motivation.

This finding echoes Denham, Bassett, and Zinsler (2020), who describe early childhood educators as active socializers of emotional competence adults who, whether inside structured lessons or on the sidelines of a game, model how emotions should be named, expressed, and regulated. Play offers a particularly rich context for this kind of socialization because the emotional stakes are real to the child even though the consequences are minor: losing a round of engklek genuinely disappoints a child, but the disappointment is safe to sit with and recover from. Saracho (2021) similarly emphasizes that the emotional intensity generated during play is

precisely what makes it a productive setting for regulation to be practiced and reinforced, rather than merely discussed in the abstract.

Whitebread, Basilio, Kunalja, and Verma (2021) extend this argument further, describing self-regulation as one of the central developmental gains attributable to play, alongside its cognitive and social benefits. Their review suggests that the repeated, low-risk emotional cycles built into ordinary play anticipation, frustration, relief, celebration give children far more practice managing their internal states than most single, high-stakes academic assessments ever could. The children observed in this study who played frequently in mixed-outcome group games (i.e., games with clear winners and losers) appeared visibly more composed when facing setbacks than children whose activities were mostly individual and non-competitive, suggesting that repeated exposure to modest emotional stakes builds a kind of resilience over time.

Traditional Games versus Modern, Technology-Based Play

Turning to modern forms of play, the findings indicate that technology-based games also carry educational potential when used appropriately. Online games, for example, can build cross-cultural communication skills, virtual cooperation, and strategic thinking. This potential, however, depends on close parental supervision to prevent overuse and to keep online play in balance with real-world social activity. Modern play should therefore be approached thoughtfully, so that its benefits outweigh its risks.

Supriyadi and Kurniawati (2023) reach a comparable conclusion in their study of digital game integration among elementary school children, finding that carefully selected online games can meaningfully support social-skill development particularly communication and collaborative problem-solving in multiplayer settings provided that screen time is bounded and paired with adult guidance. Left unstructured, however, the same games can crowd out the face-to-face interaction that in-person play naturally provides. Pramono (2022), by contrast, highlights what is distinctive about traditional games specifically: their embeddedness in local culture gives them a social function that goes beyond skill-building alone, transmitting shared norms, language, and communal identity from one generation of children to the next in a way that most digital games, designed for global and largely anonymous audiences, do not.

Taken together, these two strands of evidence suggest that traditional and modern play are not in competition so much as complementary. Traditional games such as gobak sodor, congklak, and engklek offer embodied, face-to-face cooperation rooted in local culture, while well-chosen digital games can extend children's cooperative and communicative reach across distance and cultural difference. Pellegrini (2021) frames this as consistent with a broader pattern across the history of childhood play: the specific form play takes changes with each generation's available tools and technologies, but its underlying developmental function practicing social roles, testing rules, and managing emotion in a low-stakes setting remains remarkably stable.

The Role of the Surrounding Environment

The surrounding environment also strongly influences how effectively play develops social and emotional skills: support from parents, teachers, and peers enriches a child's play experience, whereas treating play as a trivial activity denies children a valuable opportunity to

learn. Adults, then, have an important role to play in creating a healthy, educational play environment.

Sheridan and Williams (2020) describe this as a question of pedagogical quality within play-based learning environments: the presence of play alone does not guarantee developmental benefit, since the way adults structure, observe, and occasionally scaffold that play matters just as much as whether play happens at all. A teacher who steps in briefly to help two children negotiate a disputed rule, for instance, models conflict-resolution language that children can then reuse independently, whereas a teacher who is entirely absent or entirely directive forecloses that same learning opportunity. Galyon and Stowe (2021) reach a related conclusion in their study of play-based learning classrooms, finding that social-emotional gains were strongest where educators intentionally set aside protected time for play and treated it as core curriculum rather than as a reward for finishing other academic work.

This has direct implications for the Indonesian context examined in this study. Where parents and teachers view play as marginal or a distraction from “real” learning, children lose access to precisely the kind of unstructured, socially rich practice that this study's findings suggest is developmentally valuable. Conversely, where the home and school environment actively supports play by allowing time for it, offering a safe physical space, and occasionally participating in it children appear to draw substantially more social and emotional benefit from the same games.

Play as a Medium for Moral and Character Development

The findings further point to play's contribution to children's moral development and character formation. Through play, children learn honesty, sportsmanship, and responsibility values that form an important foundation for life in society. As children grow accustomed to playing by the rules, they also grow accustomed to respecting rules in real life, underscoring that play cultivates not only social-emotional skills but also character.

Isenberg and Quisenberry (2020) describe play as essential precisely because its rule structures are self-imposed and peer-enforced rather than handed down by an external authority: children police the rules of their own games, which gives the resulting sense of fairness and honesty a different, more internalized quality than rules that are simply obeyed to avoid adult punishment. Wulandari and Hidayah (2024), in a study of group games among young children, similarly found measurable gains in social-emotional indicators including honesty in reporting game outcomes and willingness to take turns among children who took part in structured group play over an extended period, reinforcing the idea that these are trainable, not merely innate, dispositions.

Santrock (2021) situates these findings within the broader arc of child development, noting that moral reasoning in early and middle childhood is built substantially through concrete social experience rather than abstract instruction precisely the kind of experience that play, with its immediate consequences and peer accountability, is well suited to provide.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, these findings underscore that play is a holistic vehicle for developing children's social, emotional, and moral capacities simultaneously rather than in isolation. A single round of a traditional or modern game routinely calls on cooperation, communication, emotional

regulation, and rule-following all at once, which may explain why its developmental effects appear broader than those of activities that target only one skill domain at a time. Its role is substantial, yet still frequently overlooked in educational practice, often dismissed as recreational filler rather than recognized as a legitimate and efficient mode of learning.

A coordinated effort across stakeholders is therefore needed to integrate play into learning strategies at both school and home. This includes protecting dedicated time for both traditional and well-chosen modern play, training teachers to scaffold play thoughtfully rather than either ignoring it or over-directing it, and helping parents understand play's developmental value so that it is treated as complementary to academic learning rather than as competing with it. So that children can grow into individuals who are intellectually capable as well as emotionally mature and socially skilled, play deserves a deliberate and protected place within the broader architecture of children's education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that play plays a crucial role in developing children's social and emotional skills. Whether traditional or modern, play stimulates children to cooperate, communicate, manage their emotions, and internalize moral values such as honesty and sportsmanship. Play provides a natural setting in which children can practice social interaction while sharpening their emotional regulation in an enjoyable way. Play should therefore no longer be seen merely as a recreational activity, but as an important component of children's learning and education. Integrating play more deliberately into educational curricula and home parenting practices will help children develop optimally and holistically, preparing them to face future life challenges with mature social and emotional skills.

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