GEMILANG
Early Childhood Education Programs

Enhancing Emotional Intelligence through Role-Play Activities in Early Childhood Education

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INFO ARTICLE	ABSTRACT
 	This study examines how role-play activities enhance emotional intelligence in early childhood education through a systematic literature review of 33 empirical and conceptual publications. Findings demonstrate that role-play develops emotional awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, social collaboration, and executive functioning through experiential and imaginative interactions. Children learn to understand and manage emotions by embodying diverse social characters, negotiating group dynamics, and engaging in emotionally rich scenarios supported by teacher facilitation. Sustainability of role-play requires structural support including teacher professional development, leadership commitment, parental involvement, resource management, and cultural contextualization to ensure consistent emotional learning rather than occasional dramatic play. This review contributes by synthesizing mechanisms and pedagogical components that make role-play a holistic and sustainable approach to enhancing emotional intelligence in early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence has become a foundational component of early childhood education because children's ability to recognize, manage, and express their emotions influences learning readiness, social relationships, adaptation to school routines, and psychological well-being. In the early years, the development of emotional intelligence is not shaped primarily by verbal instruction but through interactive experiences that allow children to interpret emotions, practice empathy, and respond to social cues in meaningful contexts. Research shows that role-play provides a natural and developmentally appropriate medium for children to embody different emotional perspectives, experiment with feelings, and translate emotional impulses into constructive communication (Fadhilah, 2021). During role-play, children encounter emotionally charged scenarios that activate cognitive, social, and affective processes simultaneously, enabling deeper emotional learning than didactic instruction offers (Paavola, 2017). Thus, role-play is recognized as one of the most effective strategies to nurture emotional intelligence during early childhood.

The early childhood period is marked by rapid growth in emotional and cognitive regulation, and role-play provides the social scaffolding necessary to support these transformative developmental milestones. Evidence shows that when children take on different social roles such as parents, teachers, doctors, community members, or fictional characters, they practice perspective-taking, emotional labeling, empathy, and

self-regulation in a safe and structured manner (Indrawati, 2019). Through imaginative situations, children learn to negotiate conflicts, initiate collaboration, suggest solutions, and understand interpersonal boundaries, which form the basis of emotional maturity. Role-play empowers children to verbalize emotional needs that they cannot express in ordinary circumstances because the structure of pretend play allows them to externalize inner emotions without fear of judgment (Gershon & Pellitteri, 2018). This aligns with the view that emotional intelligence develops through experiential opportunities rather than formal instruction.

A growing body of evidence also highlights that role-play enhances children's emotional intelligence through cognitive-affective processes that build behavioral regulation. The integration of dramatic play and emotional exploration activates executive functioning, allowing children to control impulses, plan communication strategies, and negotiate complex social events (Sukhikh et al., 2022). Children in drama-based interventions demonstrate increased emotional awareness, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills because the structured narrative format makes emotions more predictable and easier to understand (Armesto Arias et al., 2025). Emotional regulation becomes progressively internalized as children absorb feedback from peers and educators during pretend interactions, reinforcing emotional competencies that extend beyond the role-play context and into daily routines.

Role-play additionally enhances emotional development by creating learning environments that prioritize belonging, acceptance, and meaningful expression. Programs that integrate role-play into daily learning show stronger improvements in emotional engagement and self-esteem because they validate children's inherent need to communicate feelings through action and imagination (Garaigordobil et al., 2022). Children feel valued when emotions are treated as learning material rather than behavioral issues. This increases intrinsic motivation to practice emotional reflection and empathy toward peers. The social demands of role-play also foster emotional resilience, requiring children to adapt their reactions to group decisions, unexpected scenarios, and contrasting personalities. Thus, role-play not only develops emotional intelligence but strengthens psychological readiness for future schooling.

Research further demonstrates that role-play is essential for children with diverse emotional and learning profiles. Introverted and socially reticent children benefit significantly because role-play situates emotional learning within supportive group interactions rather than competitive performance or one-to-one verbal communication (Saihu, 2022). Children facing social-emotional difficulties show improved emotional expression and peer connection when role-play is used systematically because it lowers anxiety and offers predictable emotional scripts to follow (Hikmawati et al., 2021). This suggests that role-play is a highly inclusive pedagogical strategy that supports both neurotypical learners and those needing additional emotional reinforcement.

The literature also shows that role-play supports the broader ecosystem of social-emotional learning through guidance materials and structured planning. Educators require systematic frameworks, such as emotional-themed role-play modules or social-emotional guiding books, to design and scaffold meaningful emotional learning experiences (Oktaviana et al., 2021). Without structured design, role-play may devolve into unintentional play without emotional learning goals. The role of educators is therefore vital: when teachers ask guiding questions, model emotional vocabulary, and facilitate emotional reflections, children internalize emotional competencies more

effectively (Manila, 2022). The environment, the storyline, and teacher guidance become the core determinants of impact.

Role-play's contribution to emotional intelligence also extends to character education. Pretend scenarios allow children to explore values such as cooperation, caring, patience, responsibility, and leadership by acting them out and receiving social feedback (Pertiwi & Zahro, 2018). Leadership and self-independence emerge when children initiate ideas, assign roles, and coordinate group dynamics during role-play (Febriantini & Salsabila, 2025). Outbound-based role-play activities also reinforce emotional growth by integrating real-life challenges that require empathy and social adaptation during outdoor collaborative tasks (Salsabila, 2025). Thus, role-play shapes emotional intelligence through cognitive, affective, social, and moral learning channels simultaneously.

However, despite strong evidence supporting the role of role-play in emotional development, the literature reveals research gaps requiring scholarly attention. First, Fadhilah (2021) emphasized the freedom-to-learn approach in role-play but did not analyze neurocognitive mechanisms that support emotional growth through role-play. Second, Gershon and Pellitteri (2018) reviewed preschool emotional intelligence programs but did not explore role-play as a central pedagogical anchor in early childhood. Third, Armesto Arias et al. (2025) provided experimental evidence of drama-based emotional intelligence intervention but focused narrowly on dramatization instead of diverse forms of role-play within natural classroom settings. These gaps show the need for comprehensive synthesis that identifies how role-play supports emotional intelligence across experiential, cognitive, and pedagogical dimensions.

The novelty of this research lies in developing an integrated conceptual synthesis connecting role-play mechanisms with the emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral dimensions of emotional intelligence in early childhood. The objective of this study is to systematically review relevant literature to identify how role-play activities enhance emotional intelligence in early childhood education and to formulate essential role-play learning principles that can be implemented sustainably by educators.
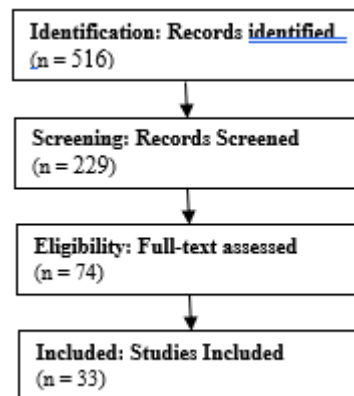
METHODOLOGY

This study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize empirical and theoretical studies on role-play and emotional intelligence in early childhood education. Searches were conducted through Scopus, Web of Science, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar using the keywords "role-play", "emotional intelligence", "dramatic play", "pretend play", and "early childhood education". The review focused on the past ten years and included studies in English and Indonesian analyzing developmental outcomes related to emotional intelligence through role-play.

Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed empirical or conceptual articles focusing on early childhood, role-play activities, and emotional intelligence outcomes. Exclusion criteria involved articles discussing role-play without emotional indicators, studies outside early childhood age groups, and publications that did not describe emotional advancement. The PRISMA flow of the screening process was as follows: Identification (n = 516) → Screening (n = 229) → Eligibility (n = 74) → Included (n = 33).

The selected articles were analyzed using thematic synthesis to identify

recurring dimensions across role-play activities, emotional intelligence components, pedagogical frameworks, and strategic implementation. Categorization included emotional awareness, self-regulation, empathy development, peer collaboration, and teacher-assisted scaffolding. The findings from this SLR form the analytical foundation for the discussion sections.

Identification: Records identified
(n = 516)

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Screening: Records Screened
(n = 229)

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Eligibility: Full-text assessed
(n = 74)

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Included: Studies Included
(n = 33)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mechanisms of Role-Play in Enhancing Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood

Role-play develops emotional intelligence by allowing children to engage in social simulation that triggers emotional awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation within authentic yet psychologically safe situations. In early childhood, emotional growth relies heavily on experiential learning rather than instruction because children grasp emotions more easily through action than verbal explanation. During role-play, children encounter interpersonal dynamics such as conflict, negotiation, support, sharing, and comfort, and these experiences form internal representations of emotions through social participation rather than passive observation (Fadhilah, 2021). When children assume various roles, they learn to label feelings, recognize others' emotions, and predict emotional responses based on contextual cues. This mechanism makes emotional intelligence development natural and internalized in everyday classroom learning.

Emotional intelligence also emerges through perspective-taking, a cognitive-affective ability where children try to understand the viewpoints of others. When children play a parent, doctor, teacher, or community helper, they reenact emotional scripts and social expectations that help them extend empathy because they attempt to respond the way the real role would (Indrawati, 2019). Pretend play also encourages children to reflect on their behaviors, shaping their capacity to regulate emotions and inhibit impulsive reactions during social conflict. Role-play therefore functions as a laboratory for emotional processing, where children practice real-world social and emotional interactions in a safe and non-punitive setting.

Role-play also strengthens executive functioning, which is closely intertwined with emotional regulation. When role-play scenarios become complex, children must plan actions, anticipate outcomes, negotiate rules, and maintain character coherence. These cognitive requirements activate the prefrontal cortex, the brain region responsible for self-control and emotional management (Sukhikh et al., 2022). Structured drama-based interventions show improvements in impulse control, problem solving, and emotional flexibility because children rehearse alternative responses to emotionally

challenging situations instead of acting reflexively (Armesto Arias et al., 2025). Emotional habits developed during role-play become internal behavioral strategies that children use outside the play context.

Social-emotional growth through role-play also depends on the emotional feedback that children receive from peers. During pretend play, peers reinforce positive communication behaviors, compassionate responses, and collaborative actions, making emotional learning an interpersonal process instead of an individual one (Garaigordobil et al., 2022). Children become more emotionally competent because peer responses validate feelings and strengthen mutual awareness. If a child expresses anger, sadness, or joy during play, the reactions of other participants help shape emotional interpretation and empathy. This shared emotional experience encourages children to adjust their emotional behaviors to maintain harmony in the group.

For introverted children or those with social anxiety, role-play provides an accessible pathway to express emotions safely. The pretend situational setting lowers self-consciousness and provides structure so emotional learning does not rely exclusively on spontaneous conversation, which may be intimidating. Children can express emotions indirectly through characters instead of revealing personal feelings, allowing gradual emotional progression without psychological pressure (Saihu, 2022). This makes role-play an inclusive approach for supporting emotional development across diverse learning profiles.

Teacher facilitation also plays a key role. Without adult scaffolding, role-play may become random and lose its emotional learning focus. Educators who provide guiding questions, emotional vocabulary prompts, and reflective debriefing help children move beyond superficial imitation toward deeper emotional understanding (Pertiwi & Zahro, 2018). Teacher-led dialogues such as "How did that character feel?" or "What could you say to comfort a friend?" reinforce emotional meaning and build emotional vocabulary. The role of teachers is therefore not to control role-play but to construct emotional bridges between the play world and real emotional life.

Role-play also builds emotional independence by giving children leadership opportunities during play. When children choose roles, construct narratives, or manage group decisions, they develop confidence, assertiveness, and emotional responsibility (Febriantini & Salsabila, 2025). Leadership in young children does not only consist of commanding but also listening, negotiating, and motivating peers, all of which require emotional management. Similarly, outbound-based role-play activities encourage resilience because children must deal with uncertainty and overcome emotional discomfort through cooperation (Salsabila, 2025). Emotional intelligence becomes a practical competence rooted in everyday participation.

Collectively, evidence shows that role-play influences emotional intelligence through four mechanisms: emotional expression, empathy and perspective-taking, emotional self-regulation and executive functioning, and socio-emotional collaboration. These mechanisms make role-play one of the most holistic pedagogical strategies for nurturing emotional intelligence in early childhood.

Structural Components of Effective Role-Play Implementation in Emotional Intelligence Learning

The impact of role-play on emotional intelligence depends on how learning environments and activities are designed. Research shows that role-play is most effective when supported by structured scenarios, emotional vocabulary guidance, peer

collaboration, and reflection sessions, rather than unsupervised pretend play. Effective role-play environments allow children to explore emotions freely while ensuring developmentally meaningful learning objectives (Gershon & Pellitteri, 2018). Dramatic interventions based on emotionally layered narratives provide maximum benefits because children experience diverse emotional states, moral dilemmas, and social outcomes inside their roles (Armesto Arias et al., 2025). In contrast, spontaneous dramatic play without facilitation may fail to produce measurable emotional gains.

Structural Component	Key Characteristics	Emotional EI Outcome	Supporting Literature
Scenario-based emotional situations	Narratives involving conflict, empathy, moral decision-making	Emotional awareness, emotion labeling	Fadhilah (2021); Paavola (2017)
Guided emotional vocabulary	Teacher prompts, reflection questions, emotion-rich language	Improved emotional expression and self-regulation	Gershon & Pellitteri (2018); Manila (2022)
Peer collaborative role-play	Shared decision-making, rotating roles, group negotiation	Perspective-taking and empathy development	Garaigordobil et al. (2022); Indrawati (2019)
Post-play reflection	Recalling feelings, evaluating reactions, constructing alternatives	Transfer of emotional skills to daily life	Sukhikh et al. (2022); Armesto Arias et al. (2025)

Structured scenarios create emotional learning opportunities because they present emotional challenges that children must navigate. Scenarios containing disagreement, loss, celebration, conflict resolution, or caregiving trigger emotional negotiation and promote emotional awareness when children verbalize and physically demonstrate feelings (Fadhilah, 2021). These emotionally rich storylines deepen emotional representation more effectively than routine teacher-centered learning.
Guided emotional vocabulary helps transform emotional reactions into emotional understanding. Teachers support children by modeling emotion words and prompting children to describe their feelings and those of others. Children who routinely hear emotional vocabulary during play show stronger emotional self-expression and regulation because language shapes emotional cognition (Manila, 2022). Without vocabulary guidance, children may act out emotions physically but fail to internalize emotional understanding.

Peer collaboration in role-play strengthens empathy because shared play requires adjusting emotions to group needs. When children negotiate roles, share imaginative control, or respond to peers' emotional displays, empathy and emotional reciprocity become embedded in behavior (Garaigordobil et al., 2022). Collaborative play enhances acceptance of differences and encourages emotional flexibility because children learn that maintaining interpersonal harmony is essential to sustain group play (Indrawati, 2019).

Reflection consolidates emotional learning by converting emotional experiences into emotional reasoning. During reflection sessions, children describe how their characters felt, what caused emotional reactions, and how alternative choices could improve outcomes. Reflective dialogue activates emotional metacognition, enabling children to transfer emotional competencies to nonplay contexts (Sukhikh et al., 2022). When reflection is missing, emotional learning remains situational and does not generalize to daily life.

Altogether, these structural components ensure that role-play becomes a powerful emotional intelligence strategy rather than casual play. Effective implementation requires interplay between free imaginative exploration and structured pedagogical scaffolding.

Sustainability Challenges and Strategic Solutions for the Long-Term Integration of Role-Play in Emotional Intelligence Learning

Despite strong evidence that role-play effectively develops emotional intelligence in early childhood, its long-term sustainability depends on systemic readiness rather than the activities themselves. Many early childhood centers acknowledge the developmental value of emotional learning yet continue to prioritize academic outcomes such as literacy and numeracy drills over social-emotional growth. When role-play is implemented only as an occasional supplementary activity rather than a core pedagogical strategy, children lose opportunities for sustained emotional practice and modeling, which limits emotional intelligence development during critical years of social-emotional formation (Gershon & Pellitteri, 2018). Sustainability requires emotional learning to be embedded institutionally rather than framed as an optional enrichment component.

Teacher competence is a primary enabler of sustainable role-play activities. Educators who understand emotional intelligence pedagogy tend to design purposeful role-play that includes emotionally rich narratives, reflection guidance, and peer interaction structures. Conversely, teachers with insufficient training may restrict role-play, discourage messy or loud expression, or minimize children's emotional behaviors, mistakenly interpreting them as misbehavior rather than emotional communication (Fadhilah, 2021). Teachers require professional development on emotional intelligence concepts, emotional vocabulary facilitation, conflict mediation techniques, and structured role-play planning to ensure that emotional learning is intentional and continuous (Pertiwi & Zahro, 2018). When teachers internalize these competencies, role-play becomes a dependable emotional learning mechanism integrated into the curriculum.

School leadership plays a decisive role in determining whether role-play becomes sustainable. Administrators shape curriculum priorities, time allocations, classroom design, and professional development schedules. Institutions that adopt emotional intelligence as a core developmental target demonstrate stronger persistence in implementing role-play because learning objectives and assessments include emotional outcomes rather than solely cognitive performance (Manila, 2022). When school leaders emphasize emotional learning, teachers feel supported and empowered to adopt role-play despite pressure to accelerate academic content. Leadership investment ensures that emotional development is institutionalized rather than dependent on individual teacher preferences.

Parental perception is another key challenge because some caregivers view role-play as mere play rather than a structured learning tool. Parents who measure learning through academic products rather than behavioral changes may resist role-play-based instruction, especially when activities involve dramatic expression that appears noisy, imaginative, or emotionally intense. However, when parents receive clear explanations linking role-play to emotional intelligence and observe behavioral improvements such as confidence, empathy, and self-regulation, acceptance strengthens (Febrianti & Wahidah, 2024). Communication strategies including open class observations, parent workshops, and emotional development reports foster parental approval and cooperation, which reinforces sustainability both at school and at home (Maulida et al., 2023). Home–school consistency is critical, as children develop emotional competencies more effectively when emotional learning is supported across settings.

Learning materials and infrastructure also influence sustainability. Role-play requires costumes, props, thematic spaces, puppets, replicas, and expressive tools to support narrative immersion. Some schools perceive resource limitations as barriers to role-play but research has shown that emotional learning can be achieved with simple and low-cost props such as household items, loose parts, and recycled materials when paired with creative teacher facilitation (Oktaviana et al., 2021). Clear resource management strategies help schools maintain sustainable access to role-play media. By designing thematic prop banks, rotating scenarios, and communal sharing systems, schools can optimize material usage without significant spending (Hikmawati et al., 2021). Sustainable emotional learning depends more on strategic design than budget size.

Inclusivity presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Children with emotional difficulties, developmental delays, or introverted dispositions may initially hesitate to participate in role-play activities. A classroom climate that pressures performance may intensify withdrawal. Sustainable emotional learning must incorporate differentiated support, such as giving nervous children observer roles, providing small-group role-play before whole-group scenarios, and allowing puppetry as an emotional mediation tool (Saihu, 2022). When emotional safety and voluntary participation are prioritized, role-play becomes accessible for all children, not only those with strong expressive skills.

Documentation of emotional growth is essential for demonstrating role-play's value to stakeholders. Because emotional intelligence is not easily quantified, educators may struggle to present measurable outcomes. However, observational data, behavior logs, emotional vocabulary growth records, and photo narratives of play episodes help translate emotional development into visible indicators that administrators and parents can understand (Garaigordobil et al., 2022). With clear evidence of improvements in empathy, self-regulation, collaboration, and leadership, stakeholders become more supportive of role-play as a sustained learning strategy.

In addition, cultural context influences how role-play is perceived and implemented. Some educational communities have cultural norms that discourage expressive behavior or emotional disclosure, making pretend emotional expression uncomfortable for children and adults alike. Literature shows that role-play becomes sustainable when narratives and characters align with cultural and religious identities, as in the integration of local stories and moral figures that children recognize and respect (Jember, 2021). Emotional intelligence does not need to conflict with cultural values;

instead, it may be strengthened when role-play incorporates cultural expectations of kindness, respect, responsibility, and care.

Taken together, sustainability of role-play requires holistic reinforcement across five fronts: pedagogical knowledge, leadership commitment, parental support, resource management, and cultural adaptability. When these structural conditions align, role-play becomes a stable emotional learning ecosystem that reshapes the social culture of early childhood education rather than functioning merely as a classroom activity.

CONCLUSION

Role-play emerges as an exceptionally powerful pedagogical approach for enhancing emotional intelligence in early childhood education because it stimulates emotional awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and social collaboration through experiential learning. By embodying diverse roles within safe imaginative environments, children internalize emotional concepts and translate them into practical social skills. The mechanisms of emotional growth unfold through emotional expression, perspective-taking, executive functioning, and behavioral reflection facilitated by peers and teachers. When integrated intentionally, role-play becomes a comprehensive emotional development tool rather than an optional enrichment activity.

For long-term sustainability, role-play must be supported structurally through professional development for teachers, curriculum alignment, material management strategies, home–school partnerships, and cultural contextualization. Educators and parents should view emotional development as foundational rather than secondary to academic learning, allowing role-play to become a routine learning practice in early childhood classrooms. When emotional learning is institutionalized rather than incidental, role-play contributes not only to immediate emotional growth but also to the formation of emotionally resilient, empathetic, confident, and socially responsible individuals who are prepared to succeed in later stages of education and life.

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