
Role Play and Exploratory Play in Optimizing the Socio-Emotional Development of Early Childhood

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Abstrak: *Aktivitas bermain pada pendidikan anak usia dini kerap direduksi menjadi sekadar hiburan dan kini terancam oleh dominasi gawai yang rentan memicu agresivitas anak. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji peran strategis metode bermain peran (role play) dan bermain eksploratif/bebas dalam mengoptimalkan perkembangan sosial emosional anak. Studi ini menerapkan metode kepustakaan (literature review) dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan dari artikel jurnal rentang 2020–2025 melalui Google Scholar, SINTA, dan Portal Garuda, lalu dikaji menggunakan teknik analisis isi (content analysis). Hasil sintesis literatur menunjukkan bahwa bermain peran berfungsi sebagai "laboratorium sosial" yang efektif mereduksi patologi perilaku (agresivitas) dan melatih empati melalui simulasi pengambilan perspektif. Sementara itu, bermain eksploratif melalui aktivitas luar ruangan dan material loose parts terbukti krusial dalam menumbuhkan otonomi, kemampuan negosiasi mandiri, serta resiliensi melalui interaksi sosial yang alamiah dan tanpa intervensi kaku. Bermain merupakan ekosistem pedagogis strategis, bukan sekadar pengisi waktu. Keberhasilannya sangat bergantung pada sinergi ekosistem antara guru sebagai perancang lingkungan dan konsistensi orang tua. Penelitian mendatang disarankan menggunakan desain eksperimental untuk menguji efektivitas integrasi kedua model bermain ini secara empiris dan kuantitatif.*

Kata Kunci: *Bermain Peran; Bermain Eksploratif; Sosial Emosional.*

Abstract: *Play activities in early childhood education are often reduced to mere entertainment and are currently threatened by the dominance of gadgets, which are prone to triggering aggressiveness in children. This study aims to examine the strategic role of role-play methods and exploratory/free play in optimizing children's socio-emotional development. This study applies a literature review method with a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected from journal articles published between 2020–2025 through Google Scholar, SINTA, and Portal Garuda, and then examined using content analysis techniques. The literature synthesis results indicate that role play functions as a "social laboratory" that effectively reduces behavioral pathologies (aggressiveness) and trains empathy through simulated perspective-taking. Meanwhile, exploratory play through outdoor activities and loose parts materials is proven crucial in fostering autonomy, independent negotiation skills, and resilience through natural social interactions without rigid intervention. Play is a strategic pedagogical ecosystem, not just a time-filler. Its success heavily relies on the synergy of the ecosystem between teachers as environment designers and the consistency of parents. Future research is advised to use experimental designs to test the effectiveness of integrating these two play models empirically and quantitatively.*

Keywords: *Role Play; Exploratory Play; Socio-Emotional.*

A. Introduction

In the contemporary early childhood education (ECE) landscape, play activities often experience a significant narrowing of meaning. In many classrooms, play agendas are often positioned merely as recreational interludes or breaks after learning activities deemed more substantive. Pedagogically and psychologically, however, it is precisely during play that children lay their socio-emotional foundations—a fundamental capability that dictates how children build relationships, manage emotional turbulence, and adapt to their learning environments. The concept of learning through play essentially affirms that every play activity facilitates the development of a child's potential as initial capital to face the dynamics of future life problems, meaning play cannot be reduced to an activity without educational purpose (Wahyuni & Azizah, 2020). Recent literature on ECE consistently emphasizes the purposes, functions, benefits, and developmental stages of play that are integrated across aspects, including social and emotional domains (Hayati & Putro, 2021).

However, an alarming phenomenon arises when the definition of play shifts due to the dominance of digital-based games. Several studies report a strong correlation between the intensity of smartphone use and increased aggressiveness in early childhood, which directly intersects with their poor emotion regulation and social behavior (Mil & Shanzivani, 2023). At the same time, empirical studies on children exposed to gadgets show variations in delayed gross motor development and indications of developmental mismatch in some subjects. These findings signal that certain forms of play can leave negative developmental consequences that must be anticipated through healthier, developmentally oriented activity

designs. This concern is exacerbated by the relationship between online gaming and physical health disorders, such as eye health, reinforcing the urgency of managing the intensity and selection of play activities (Asmi et al., 2022).

Pedagogically, socio-emotional development is a highly crucial aspect to stimulate from an early age. When this aspect does not develop optimally, the impact can spill over into hindrances in other developmental areas, demanding appropriate stimulation strategies from teachers and parents (Harianja et al., 2023). Literature discussing socio-emotional development asserts that play is one of the main instruments for developing social skills, while emphasizing the importance of real social interaction in play for children's emotional maturity (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Nevertheless, studies on strategies for developing emotional intelligence through play acknowledge that constraints of time, space, and the diversity of children's personal needs remain real challenges that must be systematically managed (Fadhila et al., 2024).

Academic literature on early childhood play has evolved from conceptual affirmations to empirical proofs. Conceptually, play is understood to have developmental goals and functions that are often unrecognized (latent functions) but actually help children develop potential to face life's problems (Wahyuni & Azizah, 2020); this framework is reinforced by studies that comprehensively map children's play characteristics and stages (Hayati & Putro, 2021). Strategically, research on play motivation positions educators and parents as key actors in orchestrating innovative play experiences (Asmah & Syamsudin, 2025). On the developmental outcome level, recent studies show the connection between various forms of play and developmental achievements, such as

socio-emotional stimulation through role play and reducing aggressive behavior through play methods (Harianja et al., 2023; Kasmawarni, 2023).

Amidst research that tends to focus on the effectiveness of one specific play method—for example, role play for socio-emotional skills or play interventions to reduce aggressiveness (Mil & Shanzivani, 2023; Santika et al., 2023)—this article is positioned to provide an argumentative synthesis of the strategic role of play activities as a socio-emotional stimulation ecosystem. This ecosystem includes design, choices of play forms, and the teacher-parent role (Ardi & Devianti, 2021; Asmah & Syamsudin, 2025). Furthermore, comparisons of free play and structured outdoor play indicate that free play excels in active engagement and social interaction, whereas structured play stands out in safety aspects; these findings provide an essential foundation for positioning play strategies as pedagogical decisions involving trade-offs (Hidayat & Hasanah, 2024).

This article aims to answer the following descriptive and critical questions: (1) How does role play contribute to optimizing the socio-emotional development of early childhood—especially in improving social skills and reducing aggressive behavior? (2) How can the design of free/exploratory play be structured as an ecosystem that enriches social interaction and emotion regulation?

B. Literature Review

The landscape of Early Childhood Education (ECE) increasingly recognizes the profound necessity of play, not merely as a recreational pause, but as the foundational architecture for socio-emotional development. Current literature highlights a disturbing trend: the displacement of traditional play by digital gadgets. Studies show that excessive smartphone usage correlates directly with heightened aggressiveness

and poor emotional regulation in young children, alongside delayed gross motor skills (Mil & Shanzivani, 2023; Prima, 2021). To counteract these developmental pathologies, recent scholarly discourse emphasizes reconstructing play as a strategic, pedagogical ecosystem, focusing specifically on role play and exploratory play.

Role play operates as a critical "social laboratory" where children safely navigate complex interpersonal dynamics. A primary cognitive benefit of role play is the cultivation of perspective-taking. By adopting diverse personas, children transition out of natural egocentrism and actively practice empathy, reading non-verbal cues and providing immediate social feedback to peers (Harianja et al., 2023; Ilahi & Elvira, 2024; Mukhlis, 2024). Furthermore, role play serves as a robust curative intervention for aggressive behavior and social withdrawal. The "Protective Mask" effect allows anxious or shy children to externalize their actions through a character, thereby building self-efficacy and confidence without the threat of direct social scrutiny (Febrianti, 2021; Santika et al., 2023). However, scholars note that for role play to be effective, educators must meticulously structure the themes, provide imaginative props, and facilitate reflective post-play discussions (Ardi & Devianti, 2021).

Conversely, exploratory and free play emphasize autonomy, resilience, and natural social negotiation. Unlike structured or "command" play, free play outdoors creates a power vacuum where children must independently establish rules, negotiate boundaries, and manage minor conflicts. This unstructured environment is vital for developing democratic principles, tolerance, and compromise (Hidayat & Hasanah, 2024). The physical environment acts as a catalyst for this development. Nature and "loose parts"

(ambiguous materials like stones or wood) offer "affordances" that demand cooperation and cognitive flexibility. Because loose parts have no predetermined function, children must communicate and collaborate to assign them meaning, fostering prosocial behaviors (Khoerulbariyyah et al., 2025; Qurrotu'Ainii, 2025). Additionally, outdoor physical play acts as a natural mood regulator, releasing neurotransmitters that stabilize emotions and reduce stress.

Ultimately, the literature synthesizes that optimizing socio-emotional development requires a holistic play ecosystem. This ecosystem demands synergy between teachers, who must act as intentional "environment designers" providing safe scaffolding without rigid intervention, and parents, who must maintain parenting consistency by encouraging physical play at home rather than defaulting to digital pacification (Asmah & Syamsudin, 2025). While the current literature strongly supports the qualitative benefits of role play and exploratory play in fostering empathy and autonomy, a notable gap remains. Future research must pivot toward empirical, longitudinal, and experimental studies to quantitatively measure the integrated impact of these play models across diverse ECE demographics.

C. Method

This study applies a literature review method with a qualitative descriptive approach to construct a comprehensive understanding of the strategic role of play activities in the context of early childhood education. This method was chosen to synthesize theories and empirical findings scattered across various previous studies into a cohesive argumentative framework. Data sources were obtained through systematic searches on reliable academic indexing

databases, primarily Google Scholar, SINTA (Science and Technology Index), and Portal Garuda.

The literature search was limited to academic manuscripts published within the last five years (2020–2025). Data analysis techniques were conducted using content analysis. The stages included data reduction (sorting key findings), data display (grouping based on themes: role play and exploratory play), and drawing conclusions. The synthesis was conducted narratively to bridge the gap between ideal theories and practical challenges in the field, to formulate strategic recommendations for teachers and parents.

D. Results and Discussion

1. Role Play as a Social Laboratory

This section outlines an in-depth analysis of the strategic role of role-play methods in optimizing children's socio-emotional development. Based on recent literature synthesis (2020–2025), it was found that role play is not merely a recreational mimetic (imitation) activity, but a complex psychosocial intervention strategy. In the ECE context, role play functions as a social laboratory where children can experiment with various identities, emotions, and conflict resolutions in a safe and controlled environment.

Findings by Harianja et al. (2023) and Ilahi & Elvira (2024) highlight the social-cognitive aspect of role play, namely perspective-taking. Young children are naturally in an egocentric phase, where it is difficult for them to understand that others have different feelings or thoughts. Through role play, this barrier is broken. When a child is instructed by a teacher to play a sad mother whose child is sick, the child must perform a mental simulation: *How does it feel to be sad? What does a sad face look like? What does a sad person say?* This process, according to the analysis of Ilahi & Elvira's (2024) study, is the most effective empathy training.

Unlike the storytelling method where children are passive listeners, in role play, children are active actors. This experience creates strong emotional memory traces. Mukhlis (2024) emphasizes that social interactions occurring in a role-play setting force children to read their playmates' non-verbal cues. If a patient (played by a friend) grimaces in pain, the doctor (played by a child) must respond with gentleness. If the response is wrong (e.g., laughing), the game scenario changes. Therefore, role play provides instant and natural social feedback, teaching children about cause and effect in interpersonal relationships (Salna et al., 2024).

One of the most crucial findings in this literature review is the effectiveness of role play in handling behavioral pathologies, particularly aggressiveness. Santika et al. (2023) provide empirical evidence that this method can reduce aggressive behavior in children. This is highly relevant when contrasted with the findings of Mil & Shanzivani (2023), who reported that gadget (smartphone) exposure correlates directly with increased aggressiveness. Children exposed to gadgets tend to adopt aggressive behaviors from unfiltered games or videos and lose self-regulation skills because they are accustomed to instant gratification.

In addition to interacting with others, role play also impacts a child's relationship with themselves (intrapersonal). Febrianti (2021) and Pertiwi (2023) highlight an interesting phenomenon where shy or withdrawn children experience behavioral transformations during role play. In-depth analysis reveals a "Protective Mask" effect. For an anxious child, being themselves in public is terrifying. However, when they wear a costume and play Superman or a Princess, the anxiety decreases because social

attention is directed at the character, not the child's true self.

Febrianti (2021) notes that small successes in portraying a character, such as receiving applause or successfully leading an army of toys, provide a boost of self-efficacy. This sense of competence slowly transfers confidence into the child's real personality. Thus, role play not only trains children to socialize but also heals the insecurities that are often the root of socio-emotional issues at an early age.

All the above benefits do not occur automatically but depend on implementation quality. Kasmawarni (2023) emphasizes the importance of a structured learning cycle. Role play without careful planning will only result in classroom chaos. Ardi & Devianti (2021) assert that teachers must play an active role, starting from choosing themes relevant to children's problems (e.g., a theme of sharing toys for a class that frequently fights over them), preparing props that provoke imagination, to conducting post-play discussions. This discussion stage is crucial to confirm children's feelings (*How did it feel when you weren't invited to play?*) and lock in the moral values learned.

2. Free and Exploratory Play Ecosystem Building Autonomy, Resilience, and Natural Interaction

This section discusses the analysis results regarding the strategic role of free play, outdoor play, and the utilization of loose parts materials. Unlike scenario-based role play, this approach emphasizes freedom of exploration, interaction with the physical environment, and independent negotiation of rules. This analysis proves that the disorder inherent in free play is actually a prerequisite condition for the growth of autonomy, social creativity, and mental resilience in children.

A comparative study by Hidayat & Hasanah (2024) provides a critical

finding that outdoor free play is superior in stimulating social interaction compared to command play. In command play (e.g., group gymnastics or filling out worksheets), children's social interactions are limited by teacher instructions. Conversely, in free play, a power vacuum occurs. No adult dictates who should be the leader or how the game is played. This condition forces children to fill the void with their own initiatives.

Analysis shows that the initial chaos in free play is a highly valuable learning moment. Children must negotiate the rules of the game. Minor conflicts, such as who gets to hold the ball or which direction to run, arise naturally. In Mukhlis's (2024) view, these are the moments that train social maturity. Children learn that if they are too selfish, their friends will abandon them (a natural social sanction). If they are too passive, their aspirations are unheard. This social trial and error process teaches principles of democracy, tolerance, and compromise far more effectively than moral lectures in a classroom.

The physical environment's role proves deterministic in the quality of social interaction. Qurrotu'Ainii (2025) found that utilizing empty lots as nature centers increases learning activities and interactions. Unpredictable nature (uneven ground, tree branches, water) provides "affordances" (invitations to act) that demand cooperation. Lifting a log or gathering scattered leaves cannot be done alone; a child must invite a friend. This creates collaborative interactions driven by a common goal.

Furthermore, the use of loose parts media (such as stones, bottle caps, fabric), as studied by Khoerulbariyyah et al. (2025), has a significant impact on cognitive and social flexibility. Unlike manufactured toys (e.g., a remote-control car) whose play method is predetermined (press button, car moves), loose parts are ambiguous. A

piece of wood can be a spoon, a sword, or a telephone. This ambiguity forces children to communicate: *Let's pretend this is money, okay?* Zaida's (2023) findings on the use of sensory media like slime support this, where sensory media triggers prosocial behaviors such as sharing materials and appreciating friends' work. Flexibility in interpreting objects correlates with flexibility in accepting other people's opinions.

Discussions on exploratory play cannot be separated from modern health challenges. Prima (2021) reported that gadget-addicted children experience delayed gross motor skills. Asmi et al. (2022) added the risk of eye health disorders. These findings assert that a child's body is designed to move, not remain static staring at a screen.

Outdoor physical play activities become an integrative solution. When children climb, run, and jump, they not only train muscles but also release neurotransmitters (like endorphins and dopamine) that regulate mood. Physically active children tend to have more stable emotion regulation and lower stress levels. Therefore, the strategy of returning children to nature and physical play is a preventive measure to avoid emotional and physical disorders simultaneously.

Freedom in exploratory play does not mean neglect. Ardi & Devianti (2021) remind us that teachers remain in control as environment designers. Teachers are tasked with ensuring the play area is safe yet challenging. Teachers must also refrain from intervening too quickly in children's conflicts, giving them space to resolve their own problems (conflict resolution scaffolding).

However, school efforts will be futile if not supported at home. Asmah & Syamsudin (2025), in their research on play motivation, emphasize the crucial role of parents. If a child is encouraged

to play in the sand and climb at school, but is forbidden at home for fear of getting dirty or immediately handed a gadget to stay quiet, the child's development will not be optimal. Parenting consistency is required. The child's intrinsic motivation to explore the world must be maintained by both parties.

This section concludes that free and exploratory play are essential strategies for creating autonomous and resilient human beings. Through direct interaction with the environment and peers without the barrier of rigid instructions, children learn to navigate the complexities of the social world, an ability that can never be taught by any gadget screen.

E. Conclusion

This study concludes that play activities constitute a strategic ecosystem in early childhood education, not merely recreational time-fillers. Specifically, the role-play method is proven effective as a curative intervention to reduce aggressive behavior resulting from gadget exposure and to increase empathy through social simulation. On the other hand, free and exploratory play (outdoor environments and loose parts) function crucially in building autonomy, independent negotiation skills, and social resilience. The success of both strategies relies heavily on the synergy of the play ecosystem, involving the teacher's role as a facilitator and parents as supporters at home. However, this research is limited as a literature review relying on secondary data synthesis, thus it has not directly captured real-time interaction dynamics in the field or specific local cultural variations that might influence play patterns. Future research is advised to conduct experimental or longitudinal studies to quantitatively measure the effectiveness of integrating role play and exploratory models across broader demographics.

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