

# Free Play Activities for Development of Emotional Intelligence AUD

Rita Nofianti<sup>1</sup>, Asmidar Parapat, S.Pd., M.Pd<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNPAB 1; [rita@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id](mailto:rita@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id)

<sup>2</sup> UNPAB 2; [asmidarparapat@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id](mailto:asmidarparapat@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

This community service is motivated by observations showing the very low development of Emotional Intelligence in early childhood. The issue lies in the lack of creativity among teachers in providing learning for young children, which has resulted in low development. The solution to this problem is to provide engaging methods and media through free play, which is aligned with the Merdeka curriculum, allowing young children to freely express themselves and explore their own interests and talents. The goal of the provided media is to improve the development of Emotional Intelligence in early childhood. The method used in this community service is outreach, where children are invited to play directly using available materials. For example, children engage in games like hide and seek or play with loose parts. Loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, separated, and reassembled in various ways. This method has been shown to have many positive impacts on the growth and development of young children. By changing the media and methods, it is hoped that the development of Emotional Intelligence in early childhood will be enhanced. The results of this community service show that young children greatly enjoy free play based on their interests and talents, which is applied in the learning process, particularly in improving the development of Emotional Intelligence in early childhood.

**Keywords:** *Emotional Intelligence, Early Childhood*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a critical phase in a child's life, during which physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development occurs rapidly. One essential aspect that needs to be nurtured from an early age is emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to recognize, understand, manage, and control one's own

emotions and those of others. Goleman (1995) stated that emotional intelligence is one of the key factors for a child's future success, not only in social aspects but also in academic and career achievements. (Nofianti et al., 2024)

According to experts, early childhood is referred to as the golden age. This period is called the golden age because it is a time of rapid and extraordinary development in children. From birth, brain cells develop remarkably, creating connections between cells. This process shapes experiences that will last a lifetime and play a crucial role in determining the child's future. Early childhood refers to children aged between one and five years. This definition is based on developmental psychology stages, which include infancy (0 to 1 year), early childhood (1 to 5 years), and late childhood.

In early childhood, the ability to recognize and manage emotions is still in the early stages of development. In this context, fostering emotional intelligence is crucial to help children understand and regulate their feelings, as well as learn how to interact positively with others. Children with good emotional intelligence are better able to cope with stress, collaborate with peers, demonstrate empathy, and resolve conflicts more effectively. In the context of early childhood education, its essence lies in providing a comprehensive environment that supports the holistic development of children by emphasizing all aspects of their personality. To implement the learning process in early childhood education institutions, an active and engaging teaching strategy is essential.

In line with this, the importance of play activities in developing emotional intelligence cannot be overstated. Play is a natural way for children to learn and interact with the world around them. It is not merely recreational but serves as a vital tool for developing various aspects of a child's intelligence, including emotional intelligence. Through play, children learn to recognize different emotions, such as happiness, sadness, anger, and fear, and how to manage these emotions in various situations.

Piaget regarded play as a cognitive activity that enables children to understand the world and internalize social and emotional values. Similarly, Vygotsky emphasized the importance of social interaction during play in helping children understand social roles and develop empathy. Furthermore, play allows children to learn problem-solving, collaboration, and decision-making skills, all of which are key components of emotional intelligence. (Ritonga et al., 2024)

Despite its importance, the development of emotional intelligence in early childhood is often overlooked in formal education systems. Many educational programs place greater emphasis on cognitive achievements, such as reading and numeracy skills, while paying inadequate attention to emotional development. However, emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in shaping a child's overall growth and long-term success. Good emotional intelligence can serve as a foundation for the development of other cognitive and social skills.

In addition, the limitations in resources, knowledge, and training for educators in Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions also present challenges in implementing effective programs for the development of children's emotional intelligence. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach is needed in designing and implementing play activities that can optimize the development of emotional intelligence in young children.

The development of emotional intelligence in early childhood is a crucial aspect that should not be overlooked. Through specifically designed play activities, children can learn to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions in a healthy way. Play activities also provide children with the opportunity to practice important social skills, such as empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Thus, ECE education should place greater emphasis on the development of emotional intelligence through play activities, as part of efforts to shape emotionally and socially healthy children.

## 2. METHODS

. The approach methods used in the community service activities in collaboration with the partner village include lectures, Q&A sessions, and discussions. The lecture materials and free play activities were delivered by the team leader, Rita Nofianti, S.Pd., M.Pd., as part of the community service program, assisted by other group members.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

With the theme of Development of Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood through Free Play Activities, the program was highly popular and enjoyed by the children, as it allowed them more freedom compared to the usual teacher-controlled activities. In practice, the results visible in the development of early childhood can be seen in the following areas:

- a. Emotional Management: Children began to show an understanding of various emotions they experienced, such as feeling happy when winning or disappointed when losing. Teachers helped children manage these emotions through light conversations.
- b. Improved Social Skills: In group play, children learned to cooperate, take turns, and respect their peers' opinions. Shy children began to interact more confidently.
- c. Positive Emotional Expression: Through drawing activities, children were able to express their moods using colors and shapes. For instance, a child who felt happy would use bright colors like yellow and red in their drawings.
- d. Problem-Solving Skills: Some children demonstrated the ability to resolve small conflicts, such as fighting over toys, by apologizing and sharing after being guided.

These activities provided significant progress in various aspects of emotional development among the children. To determine whether the socialization or material presented was successfully followed by the early childhood children, the community

service team conducted an evaluation of the activity's success. This was done by asking the children to recall and apply what had been taught and implemented during the free play activities. The children were asked to play again on their own, without being accompanied by the community service team or teachers. The results of this follow-up activity clearly showed that the material presented and the community service activities were well received and followed by the children. (Utami et al., 2020)

### 2.1. Social Intelligence

Social behavior refers to activities involved in interacting with others, whether with peers, parents, or siblings. From a young age, children learn how to behave socially in accordance with the expectations of the people closest to them, such as their mother, father, siblings, and other family members. What children learn from their family environment plays a significant role in shaping their social behavior.

There are four factors that influence a child's ability to socialize:

- a. The opportunity to interact with people around them from various age groups and backgrounds.
- b. The interest and motivation to socialize.
- c. The guidance and teaching from others, usually those who serve as "role models" for the child.
- d. The ability to communicate well, which the child possesses.

To become someone capable of socializing effectively, three processes are required:

- a. Learning behaviors that are socially acceptable.
- b. Playing socially acceptable roles.

Birth to 3 years old	3-4 years old	5-6 years old	7-8 years old
Reacting to others	Becomes more self-aware	Wants to be number one	Becomes more independent
Enjoys socializing with	Develops a sense of	Takes part in all school	Relies on parents for

other children	humility	activities	interests and activities
Can maintain order with other children for short periods	Becomes aware of racial and gender differences	Becomes more possessive of their belongings	Starts to be influenced by friends' opinions
Can share without being persuaded	Can follow directions, follow some rules	Can share and take turns	Starts to offer others a turn
Can imitate actions of others	Has imaginary playmates	Frequently argues for short periods	Starts to form groups
Starts to engage in parallel play	Starts playing games that require cooperation	Begins to consider the teacher's words	Needs advice from teachers

*Table Social Intelligence Development*

## 2.2. Emotional Intelligence

Emotion is a state or feeling that fluctuates within a person, which is recognized and expressed through facial expressions or actions, functioning as an inner adjustment to the environment to achieve well-being and safety. The ability to react emotionally is present from the moment a baby is born. The first signs of emotional behavior can be seen in the general arousal to strong stimuli. For example, when a baby is happy, they may kick their legs. Conversely, if they are unhappy, they react by crying. As the child grows older, their emotional reactions become less generalized and more differentiated. For instance, a child shows dissatisfaction only by screaming and crying, and later their reactions develop into resistance, throwing objects, tensing their body, running away, hiding, and using words. As they grow, verbal emotional reactions increase, while muscular reactions begin to decrease.

Children's emotions have the following characteristics:

- a. Strong emotions. Young children react to stimuli with the same intensity, whether the situation is trivial or difficult. A child is not yet capable of showing an emotional response proportional to the stimulation they experience.
- b. Emotions are often visible. Children often cannot control their emotions, and they tend to express their emotions visibly, sometimes even excessively.
- c. Emotions are temporary. A child's emotions tend to be short-lived, meaning that in a relatively short period, a child's emotions can shift from anger to a smile, or from cheerfulness to sadness.
- d. Emotional reactions reflect individuality. As an infant, a child's emotional reactions are relatively the same. Gradually, with the influence of learning and environmental factors, the behavior accompanying the child's emotions becomes more individualized. One child may run out of a room if they are scared, while another may cry or scream.
- e. Emotions change in intensity. As children grow older, the intensity of their emotions changes at different ages. Emotions that were previously strong may become weaker, while those that were initially weak may become stronger.
- f. Emotions can be identified through behavioral symptoms. The emotions a child experiences can be seen through behavioral symptoms such as daydreaming, restlessness, crying, difficulty speaking, or nervous behaviors like biting nails or sucking their thumb. At ages 2-4 years, children's emotional characteristics emerge in explosive anger. To express displeasure, children may engage in excessive behaviors such as crying, screaming, throwing objects, rolling on the floor, or hitting their mother. At this age, children are not concerned with the consequences of their actions, whether they harm others or not. At ages 5-6 years, children's emotions begin to mature. They start to understand the consequences of their emotional expressions. Children begin to understand how others feel, such as how someone feels when they are hurt, and thus, they learn to control their emotions. Emotional expressions in children can change

quickly, shifting from one form of expression to another. For example, a child who is happy may suddenly become angry if something unpleasant happens. Conversely, a child who is angry can be made to feel cheerful again through comforting gestures or something pleasant.

Next, in conjunction with social and emotional development, early childhood social and emotional development can be seen based on three types of child temperament according to psychologists, namely:

- a. Children who are easy to manage: These children easily adapt to new experiences, enjoy playing with new toys, have regular eating and sleeping patterns, and can adjust to changes in their surroundings.
- b. Children who are difficult to manage: These children tend to reject daily routines, cry frequently, take a long time to finish their meals, and are restless during sleep.
- c. Children who require a long warming-up time: These children are generally seen as somewhat lazy and passive, rarely participate actively, and often wait for everything to be handed to them.

From the above explanation, it is clear that a child's personality and ability to empathize with others is a combination of inherent traits and the parenting style they receive in their early years. At the age of one, children enjoy games involving social interaction and tend to prefer playing with children of the same gender when in separate groups. However, between 1 to 1.5 years of age, children usually start showing a desire for greater independence, such as playing alone, eating, and dressing themselves, as well as displaying jealousy and tantrums (getting upset when their desires are not fulfilled).

At 1.5 to 2 years old, children begin interacting with others but still need time to socialize. They still have difficulty sharing with others and may cry when separated from their parents, even for short periods. For children aged 2.5 to 6 years, their



emotional development becomes much stronger, such as outbursts of anger, intense fear, and unreasonable jealousy due to a desire to possess other people's belongings, which is often observed in large family environments. Jealousy can also arise due to a lack of attention compared to others, often occurring in smaller family settings. These feelings can arise from prolonged play, refusal to nap, or eating too little. Clearly, social cognition in a child aged 0-1 year is marked by the development of a sense of self, leading them to prefer familiar people (objects of emotional attachment). At the age of 1-2 years, social recognition develops as the child begins to understand intentional behavior. For children aged 3-5 years, they start to grasp the difference between belief and desire, forming friendships based on shared activities. At the age of 6-10 years, friendships become more focused on physical similarities and mutual trust.

This aspect of early childhood development actually begins right after birth. For example, emotionally, this can be observed through various behaviors in babies, such as smiling or kicking their feet when they are happy. Alternatively, they may cry to express dissatisfaction or displeasure. During their growth, children tend to express their emotions through physical actions, such as throwing, slamming, or hitting objects. However, as they age, emotional reactions generally become verbal, meaning they begin to articulate their feelings or use specific words.

Meanwhile, the attachment of a baby to adults is the first step in the development of their social stages. Social development refers to the child's ability to interact and socialize with their environment. Initially, the child only knows those close to them, such as primary caregivers, siblings, and others living in the same household. As the child grows, they will start to recognize people outside the home and need to be taught the rules of social interaction, such as manners, discipline, and more. (Widya, 2019).

It is also important to understand that each young child has unique characteristics, including:

- a. strong curiosity – Young children are eager to explore and learn about their environment.
- b. unique personality – Every child has their own distinct traits and behaviors that make them different
- c. A love for fantasy and imagination – Children at this age often engage in imaginative play and create their own stories.
- d. Egocentric attitude – Young children tend to view the world from their own perspective and find it difficult to understand others' viewpoints.
- e. short attention span – Young children typically have a limited ability to focus on one activity for long periods of time.

*Table Emotional development*

<b>Birth to 3 years old</b>	<b>3-4 years old</b>	<b>5-6 years old</b>	<b>7-8 years old</b>
Cannot tolerate frustration	Can tolerate some frustration	Can express feelings	Expresses reactions to others
Easily cries or shouts	Begins to develop self-control	Can control aggression better	Becomes more sensitive when laughed at or criticized
Often unable to control impulses or emotional movements	Appreciates surprises and certain events	Learns about right and wrong	Expresses doubts excessively
Starts to express affection	Begins to express gratitude	Starts to express feelings	Becomes more diligent

Needs routine and a sense of security	Begins to show a sense of humor	Starts to display a sense of humor in jokes	Becomes more empathetic
Starts to express themselves	Afraid of the dark	Begins to show attention	Can see from others' perspectives

### 2.3. Free Play

Free play is a form of unstructured play in which children have the freedom to decide on the activities they engage in without direct intervention from adults. This activity provides children with the space to explore, create, and interact according to their own interests and desires.

Below are the theories of play according to experts:

*Table of Play Theory and Early Childhood Games*

No	Nama Tokoh	Pendapat
1	Herbert Spencer	Children play because they have excess energy. This energy drives them to engage in activities, helping them release feelings of stress. This means that, without play, children may face serious problems as their energy remains unchannelled.
2	Lev Vygotsky	Play is a source of development for children, particularly in terms of thinking. Children do not simply acquire knowledge due to maturation, but rather through active interaction with their environment. From this

		<p>perspective, providing space for children to construct knowledge through active interaction with various involved aspects, such as roles and functions, is essential. A child is an active individual who, through the process of play, engages in building necessary concepts, such as understanding the shape, function, and characteristics of objects. Children also build abstract concepts, such as rules, certain values, and culture.</p>
3	Moritz Lazarus	<p>Children play because they need to refresh or restore the energy that has been depleted from daily routine activities. This means that if children do not engage in play, they will suffer from fatigue due to the lack of rejuvenation.</p>
4	Erikson	<p>Play helps children develop a sense of self-esteem. The reason is that through play, children gain the ability to control their bodies, master and understand objects, and learn social skills. Children play because they interact to create and explore knowledge. Play is the way children think and solve problems. Children</p>

		play because they need direct experiences in social interactions to build the foundation for social life.
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*Table Classical theories*

No	Theory	Initiator	Goal Of Play
1	Surplus Energi	Schiller/Spencer	To release excessive energy
2	Rekreasi	Lazarus	To restore energy
3	Rekapitulasi	Hall	To bring out the instincts of ancestors
4	Praktis	Groos	To perfect instincts.

In addition to classical play theories, there are also modern play theories. Modern play theories emerged after World War I. The main difference is that modern theories emphasize the consequences of play for children. Modern theories not only explain why play behaviors arise but also focus on the benefits of play for early childhood development. (Rozana, 2019)

At all ages, children engage in both active and passive play. The proportion of time spent on each type of play does not depend on age, but on health and the enjoyment derived from each category. Although active play is generally more prominent in early childhood and entertainment play increases as children approach puberty, this is not always the case. For example, young children may prefer watching television rather than engaging in active play because they have not yet learned the games favored by their peers, which results in them not being accepted as members of peer groups

#### 4. CONCLUSION

From the results and discussions of the community service activity, with the theme 'Development of Early Childhood Emotional Intelligence through Free Play

Activities,' it is evident that this activity was highly enjoyed and very popular among the early childhood participants in the community service project. Based on the results of this activity, it can be concluded that free play is essential for the holistic development of young children. With the freedom to explore, children not only grow physically but also develop emotionally, socially, and cognitively. Encouraging this activity will help children become creative, confident individuals who can manage their emotions and interact positively with their environment, in line with the initial goals and the identified issues.

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