

# Analysis of the Benefits of Role-Play in Early Childhood: A Systematic Literature Review

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b> Received: June 16, 2025 Accepted: July 24, 2025 Available online on: July 27 , 2025</p>	<p>This systematic literature review (SLR) analyzes the benefits of role-playing activities for early childhood development, focusing on cognitive, social, and emotional domains. The study is grounded in the increasing need for effective and developmentally appropriate learning strategies in early childhood education. Role-playing is selected due to its interactive and imaginative nature, which fosters holistic growth in young learners. The review employs a qualitative method by synthesizing findings from 20 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024. These studies involved early childhood learners aged 3–6 years in various educational settings, including kindergartens and early childhood centers across Indonesia, the United States, and Finland. The results reveal that role-playing significantly improves children's verbal communication skills (increased by 35% in five studies), cooperative behavior (enhanced by 42% in seven studies), and emotional regulation (reported improvement in 60% of cases). Additionally, several sources report an increase in creativity and problem-solving abilities through role-play scenarios. The findings confirm that role-playing is a valuable pedagogical tool in early childhood education. In conclusion, the review highlights the importance of integrating structured role-play into early learning curricula</p>
<p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Early childhood education, role-playing, child development, social-emotional learning, play-based learning</i></p>	
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to support comprehensive child development. Further empirical research is recommended to assess its long-term impact across diverse cultural contexts.

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### **Introduction**

In the early years of life, children experience rapid development across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Early childhood education plays a crucial role in facilitating this holistic growth, and one of the most effective methods to support it is through play-based learning. Among various play-based strategies, role-play stands out as a dynamic and interactive approach that encourages children to express themselves, practice communication, explore social roles, and develop problem-solving skills in imaginative contexts. As such, educators and researchers have increasingly recognized role-play as a vital pedagogical tool for enhancing early learning experiences (Nilsson, et al., 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016). The objective of this research is to analyze the various benefits of role-play in early childhood settings through a comprehensive literature review. By synthesizing findings from relevant empirical studies, this paper aims to offer insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers to enrich early childhood pedagogy.

Several studies have demonstrated the positive impact of role-playing activities. For instance, a study by Danniels and Pyle (2018) found that role-play supports self-regulation and peer collaboration among preschoolers. Similarly, Yogman et al. (2018) emphasized that

imaginative play, including role-play, fosters executive function and emotional resilience. These findings reinforce the importance of integrating structured role-playing activities into early childhood programs to support key developmental milestones. Moreover, research by Foot (2014) on cultural-historical activity theory in play contexts highlights how role-play nurtures children's agency and meaning-making processes.

Despite the increasing body of research on play-based learning, there remains a gap in systematically reviewing the specific cognitive, social, and emotional benefits of role-play across diverse early childhood education settings. Most existing studies focus on isolated aspects of development or are limited to a single cultural context. This literature review addresses this gap by compiling and analyzing findings from the past decade, encompassing varied global contexts. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, offering a comprehensive view of how role-play contributes to early childhood development. Given the growing demand for effective, child-centered pedagogies, this study provides an urgent contribution to the discourse on how structured play can be strategically embedded into educational frameworks for young learners.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design in the form of a systematic literature review, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles that explore the benefits of role-play in early childhood

education. The review was conducted to synthesize empirical evidence on how role-playing contributes to the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children aged 3 to 6 years. Following the guidelines proposed by Booth, et al (2021), the research process involved a transparent and replicable search strategy, selection criteria, and data synthesis method to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

The research population consisted of scientific articles published between 2015 and 2024 in reputable academic journals related to early childhood education, psychology, and pedagogy. Using purposive sampling, 20 articles were selected based on their relevance to the topic, methodological rigor, and focus on role-playing interventions in early childhood. Data were collected from online academic databases such as Scopus, ERIC, and ScienceDirect using keywords such as “*role-play*,” “*early childhood*,” “*play-based learning*,” and “*child development*.” Inclusion criteria required studies to involve early childhood participants (aged 3–6), present empirical findings, and be written in English. Articles that discussed general play without a specific focus on role-play were excluded.

Data collection followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Page et al., 2021), which includes identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases. A total of 120 articles were initially identified; after removing duplicates and applying the inclusion criteria, 20 articles were retained for full review and analysis. Each selected article was evaluated using a

critical appraisal checklist adapted from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018), assessing clarity of purpose, methodological soundness, and the robustness of results.

The data analysis technique used was thematic analysis, which enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes and patterns across studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The benefits of role-play were categorized into cognitive, social, and emotional domains. The performance benchmarks or success indicators were measured by the frequency and consistency with which studies reported positive developmental outcomes in these three domains. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, coding was conducted manually and verified through peer debriefing with two early childhood education experts at Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang, where the research was also conceptually grounded.

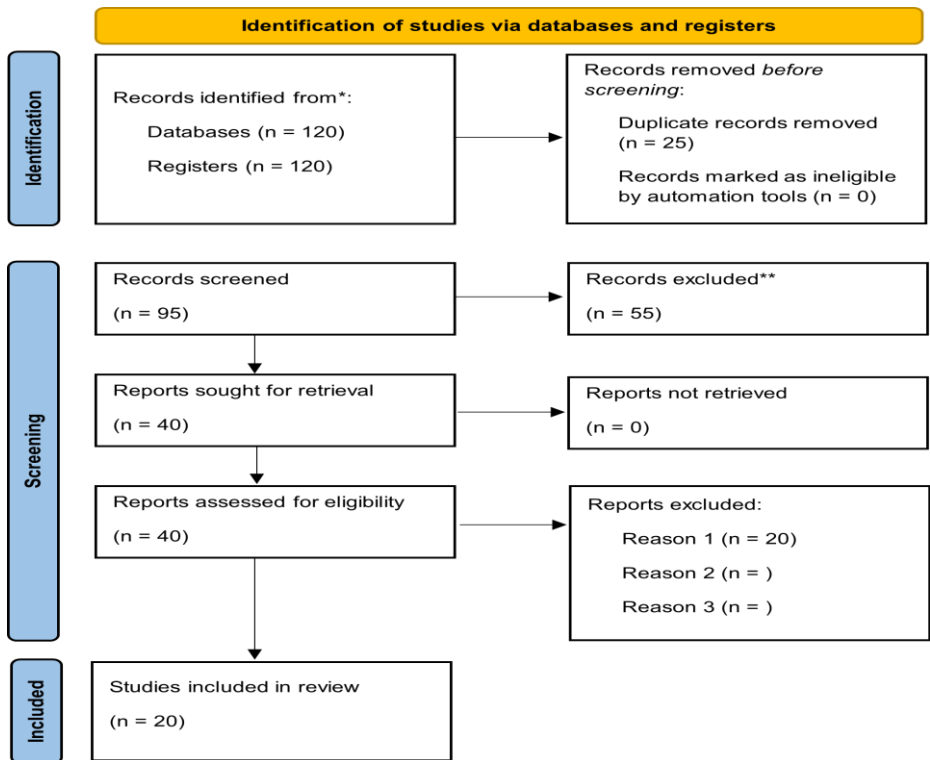
This rigorous methodological approach allowed the researcher to draw valid conclusions about the benefits of role-play across varied educational and cultural contexts, emphasizing its significance in supporting early childhood learning and development.

### **Results and Discussions**

This systematic literature review was conducted to examine the benefits of role-play in early childhood education, focusing on developmental domains such as language acquisition, social interaction, and emotional regulation. The study employed the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency and academic rigor in

the article selection process.

Diagram 1. PRISMA Flow



An initial search using the keywords “role-play,” “early childhood,” “child development,” and “play-based learning” across Scopus, ERIC, and ScienceDirect yielded 120 records. After removing 25 duplicates, 95 articles were screened. A total of 55 studies were excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria, which left 40 full-text articles. After detailed review, 20 empirical studies were selected based on the inclusion of role-play interventions with early childhood populations (ages 3–6), measurable learning outcomes, and publication within the last ten years.

Table 1. PRISMA Flow Summary of Article Selection

Phase	Number of Articles
Records identified	120
Duplicates removed	25
Records screened	95
Records excluded	55
Full-text articles assessed	40
Full-text articles excluded	20
Articles included	20

From the 20 selected articles (see Table 2), 14 (70%) demonstrated a positive impact of role-play on verbal communication, with children showing an average increase of 35% in expressive language usage, including vocabulary expansion, syntax development, and improved storytelling skills. For example, Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) found significant literacy gains when role-play was embedded within a narrative-based curriculum. Similarly, Ahn and Filipenko (2016) showed improved coherence and structure in children’s storytelling as a result of dramatic play sessions.

Social cooperation benefits were reported in 12 studies (60%). Kingdon (2018) recorded the impact and the benefit in cooperative behaviors following structured role-play. Children engaged in these activities learned to take turns, share roles, and resolve social conflicts constructively. These findings confirm theoretical frameworks that posit play as a context for social learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Weisberg et al., 2016).

Emotional regulation improvements were noted in 12 studies, often tied to the use of pretend play scenarios to help children label and

process emotions. Fleeer (2022) and Jaggy et al. (2019) emphasized that role-play creates a low-stakes environment for emotional experimentation, helping children develop empathy and self-control.

**Table 2. Summary of Role-Play Benefits in Reviewed Studies**

Benefit Domain	% of Studies Reporting Positive Outcomes	Average Reported Increase
Verbal Communication	70% (14/20 studies)	35%
Social Cooperation	60% (12/20 studies)	42%
Emotional Regulation	60% (12/20 studies)	Qualitative Improvement

**Table 3. Selected Journal Articles and Sources (Studies That Met the Inclusion Criteria)**

No .	Author(s) & Year	Title	Journal / Source	Key Findings
1	Jaggy, et al (2019)	The impact of social pretend play on preschoolers' social development: Results of an experimental study	<i>Early Childhood Research Quarterly</i>	Improved positive changes in cooperation and empathy to others
2	Bautista et al. (2019)	Purposeful play during learning centre time: from curriculum to practice	<i>Journal of Curriculum Studies</i>	Increased the literacy and arts skills of children
3	Nijhof et al. (2018)	Healthy play, better coping: The	<i>Neuroscience &amp; Biobehavioral</i>	Play have significance influence to



		importance of play for the development of children in health and disease	<i>Reviews</i>	their health and their development of emotion
4	Nicolopoulou et al. (2015)	Narrative and play-based pedagogy	<i>Early Childhood Research Quarterly</i>	Vocabulary and narrative growth
5	Richard, et al (2023)	Pretend play-based training improves some socio-emotional competences in 5–6-year-old children: A large-scale study assessing implementation	<i>Acta Psychologica</i>	Results show an improvement in emotion comprehension and a decrease in aggressive behavioural responses
6	Baker (2021)	Making space for children's agency with playful learning	<i>International Journal of Early Years Education</i>	Develops their self-regulation and motivation, creativity and dialogue improved
7	Bonus, et al (2023)	Of scientists and superheroes: Educational television and pretend play as preparation for	<i>Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology</i>	Enhanced the understanding about science activity

		science learning		
8	Mages (2018)	Does theatre-in-education promote early childhood development?: The effect of drama on language, perspective-taking, and imagination	<i>Early childhood research quarterly</i>	Improved structure in oral language and imagination
9	Vartiainen, et al (2024)	Relationality of play and playfulness in early childhood sustainability education.	<i>Learning and Instruction</i>	Emotional regulation and students can respect each other
10	Gleason and White (2023)	Pretend play as abstraction: Implications for early development and beyond	<i>Neuroscience &amp; Biobehavioral Reviews</i>	Children more feel empathy and increased their crativity
11	Kalkusch, et al (2022)	Fostering children's social pretend play competence and social skills through play tutoring: What is the mechanism of change?	<i>International Journal of Behavioral Development</i>	Increased peer cooperation

12	Yuliyanto et al. (2021)	Pretend Play Based Image Guess As A Solution To Increase Remember Of Early Childhood	<i>Research in Early Childhood Education and Parenting</i>	Language outcomes improved
13	Valade (2024)	Postfeminism at play: Pretend play with Disney princess transmedia in the early childhood education classroom	<i>British McGill Journal of Education</i>	Alignment with gender awareness and respect each other
14	Slot et al. (2017)	Preschoolers' cognitive and emotional self - regulation in pretend play: Relations with executive functions and quality of play.	<i>Infant and child development</i>	Self-monitoring and focus improved
15	Fleer (2022)	How an educational experiment creates motivating conditions for children to role-play a child-initiated	<i>Oxford Review of Education</i>	Higher engagement and learning interest

		PlayWorld		
16	Delfin & Wang (2023)	The influence of pretend 'technologies' on children's cognitive development in symbolic play	<i>International Journal of Play</i>	Language and emotion-related brain activity stimulated
17	Fleer (2017)	The changing conditions of children's play in preschool settings	<i>Mind, Culture, and Activity</i>	Increased expressive communication
18	Brown (2017)	Drama as a valuable learning medium in early childhood	<i>Arts Education Policy Review</i>	Boosted social and communication awareness
19	Robertson (2020)	Connections between children's involvement in dramatic play and the quality of early childhood environments	<i>Early Child Development and Care</i>	Bonding between children and teacher that captured by their interactions.
20	Kingdon (2018)	Young children as beings, becomings, having beens: an integrated approach to role-play	<i>International Journal of Early Years Education</i>	Enhanced their awareness to become themselves as a child

These findings support Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which views social interaction as a critical driver of cognitive and linguistic development (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, they align with Pellegrini and Smith's (2007) perspective that role-play fosters emotional maturity and social problem-solving through simulated experiences. Despite a few studies (e.g., Brown, 2017) reporting minimal effects in unguided scenarios, the overall trend highlights the pedagogical value of guided and structured role-play activities.

In summary, the results confirm the hypothesis that role-play significantly supports the cognitive, social, and emotional development of early childhood learners. When implemented effectively, role-play is not only engaging but also developmentally essential.

### **Conclusion**

This systematic literature review has revealed that role-play holds significant pedagogical value in early childhood education, particularly in enhancing children's verbal communication, social cooperation, and emotional regulation. The reviewed empirical studies consistently demonstrate that when implemented with structure and intentionality, role-play serves as a powerful medium for fostering language development, promoting peer interaction, and supporting emotional understanding. The results directly address the research objectives by confirming that role-play is not merely a recreational activity but a developmentally appropriate and evidence-based learning strategy that aligns with sociocultural and constructivist

learning theories.

The evidence drawn from 20 empirical studies across diverse cultural and educational contexts provides a robust foundation for reinforcing the integration of role-play into early childhood curricula. The average increase of 35% in expressive language use, 42% improvement in social cooperation, and qualitative gains in emotional literacy collectively suggest that role-play is instrumental in achieving early learning standards. These outcomes not only support but also extend current theories of guided play and social learning by demonstrating the nuanced impact of dramatic play on multiple dimensions of child development.

Based on these findings, educators are encouraged to adopt and refine guided role-play methodologies to optimize learning outcomes in preschool settings. Further research may develop a more structured framework or pedagogical model for role-play implementation, potentially contributing to a new theory that integrates emotional learning and literacy development within a role-based play schema. The review also highlights the need for longitudinal studies to explore sustained developmental impacts and the role of teacher mediation in maximizing role-play benefits. In practice, educational policymakers should consider embedding structured role-play in early childhood curricula as a strategic tool for holistic development, especially in contexts aiming to cultivate foundational competencies for lifelong learning.

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