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Patterns of Early Childhood Social Interaction During Recess as a Natural Social Space in Playgroups

***Maslakhatul Ummah*[1], *Novita Widiyaningrum*[2]**
[1,2]Universitas Islam Al Azhar Gresik, Jawa Timur, Indonesia
e-mail: *[1]maslakhahummah27@gmail.com,
[2]novitawidiyaningrum@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Social interaction plays a fundamental role in early childhood socio-emotional development. Although previous studies have extensively examined children's social interactions in structured classroom settings, limited attention has been given to recess as a natural environment for social engagement. This study aims to explore patterns of social interaction among young children during recess and identify the factors influencing these interactions. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, involving 15 children aged 3–5 years and two teachers in a playgroup setting. Data were collected through participant observation over four weeks, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Source and methodological triangulation were applied to enhance the credibility of the findings. The results indicate that children's social interactions progress from parallel play to associative play, characterized by increased verbal communication, cooperation, and the emergence of minor social conflicts. These interactions occur spontaneously within small peer groups and are influenced by the play

environment, the availability of play materials, and teachers' roles as facilitators. The findings highlight the importance of recess as a natural social environment that provides meaningful opportunities for developing children's social competence. Therefore, recess should be recognized as an integral component of early childhood education rather than merely a break from structured learning activities.

Introduction

Early childhood education plays a fundamental role in supporting children's development, particularly their socio-emotional competence (Nurhayati et al., 2023; Anisa & Sit, 2024). During early childhood, children experience rapid development in their ability to establish relationships, communicate, and engage with their social environment. Social interaction provides meaningful opportunities to understand social norms, develop interpersonal relationships, and acquire essential skills such as empathy, cooperation, and self-regulation (Wulandari, 2024). Peer interactions, particularly within small groups, also contribute to children's understanding of social expectations, collaborative behavior, and conflict resolution (Rubin et al., 2021). These experiences are essential for establishing a foundation for positive social relationships throughout childhood.

Play represents one of the primary contexts through which young children develop social competence (Putri, 2025). Through play, children explore their surroundings, express creativity, and interact

naturally with their peers. Such interactions encourage sharing, turn-taking, cooperation, and the resolution of everyday disagreements (Mardiyani & Widyasari, 2023; Arisandy & Ananta, 2026). Importantly, conflicts emerging during play should not necessarily be interpreted as negative behavior but rather as opportunities for social learning. Corsaro (2022) emphasizes that peer conflicts constitute forms of social negotiation through which children develop an understanding of rules, social roles, and others' perspectives. Similarly, Yunitasari et al. (2023) highlight the importance of peer interactions in shaping children's social behavior and perspective-taking abilities.

Within early childhood education settings, recess provides opportunities for spontaneous social engagement beyond structured classroom activities. During this period, children can independently initiate interactions, select playmates, negotiate activities, and participate in individual or group play. Unlike teacher-directed learning, recess creates a relatively unstructured environment that encourages authentic social experiences. Ginsburg (2007) emphasizes that free play contributes significantly to children's social and emotional development by providing opportunities for exploration and interaction without excessive instructional pressure. Consequently, recess can serve as a meaningful social environment in which children demonstrate emerging interpersonal skills through everyday experiences.

Despite these developmental benefits, recess is frequently

perceived as a temporary break from instructional activities rather than an integral component of early childhood learning. However, social interactions occurring during free play provide opportunities for children to acquire social knowledge through direct experience (Rahmawati & Suryana, 2021). The quality of these interactions is influenced by several contextual factors, including the physical play environment, the availability of appropriate play materials, and teachers' involvement as facilitators (Jaga et al., 2023; Ismaniar & Landa, 2023). Teachers may support children's social development by providing stimulating environments, modeling positive communication, and facilitating conflict resolution without unnecessarily restricting children's independence. Cooperative play activities can also encourage greater social participation and collaborative engagement among young children (Aulia & Afrianingsih, 2026).

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of play, peer relationships, and supportive learning environments in promoting children's social development (Mardiyani & Widyasari, 2023; Yunitasari et al., 2023; Aulia & Afrianingsih, 2026). However, the studies discussed in this article have primarily emphasized general play activities, peer interactions, or structured educational contexts. Comparatively, less attention has been directed toward understanding how social interactions naturally emerge and develop during recess in playgroup

settings. This distinction is important because recess provides opportunities to observe children's spontaneous communication, cooperation, and conflict negotiation with relatively limited adult intervention. Examining these interactions may therefore offer a more contextual understanding of children's emerging social competence.

To address this gap, the present study explores patterns of social interaction among children aged 3–5 years during recess in a playgroup setting. Its distinctive contribution lies in examining recess as a natural social environment in which children independently initiate and negotiate peer relationships outside structured classroom activities. Specifically, this study aims to describe the forms and patterns of children's social interactions and identify the environmental and educational factors influencing these experiences. The findings are expected to contribute to a contextual understanding of early childhood social development while providing practical insights for educators seeking to optimize recess as an opportunity to support children's socio-emotional competence.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore patterns of social interaction among young children during recess as a natural social environment. The research was conducted at Nurul Ilmi Playgroup over four weeks, involving 15 children aged 3–5 years and two teachers. Participants were selected through purposive sampling

based on their direct involvement in social interactions during recess. The study focused on children's social interaction patterns, verbal and nonverbal communication, cooperation, minor social conflicts, and contextual factors influencing their interactions.

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted to examine children's spontaneous social behaviors and interactions during recess, while semi-structured interviews with teachers provided additional insights into children's social development. Documentation, including photographs of activities and field notes, was used to supplement observational and interview data. The researcher served as the primary research instrument, supported by observation guidelines, interview protocols, and documentation.

Data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation involved organizing and selecting information relevant to children's social interactions, while data display facilitated the identification of recurring interaction patterns. Conclusions were subsequently developed and verified through the interpretation of the collected evidence. To enhance the credibility of the findings, source triangulation and methodological triangulation were employed by comparing information obtained from observations, teacher interviews,

and documentation.

Result and Discussions

Dynamics of Children's Social Interactions During Recess

Observational findings revealed that children's social interactions during recess frequently began with verbal invitations, such as "Let's play together," followed by group activities involving imaginative and role-playing games. Minor conflicts occasionally emerged, particularly when children competed for the same toys. In these situations, teachers acted as mediators by encouraging dialogue and helping children identify mutually acceptable solutions.

These findings suggest that children's social interactions during recess are not merely spontaneous responses but also reflect their emerging socio-emotional competence. Children aged 3–5 years are beginning to develop an awareness of their social identities, recognize their roles within peer groups, and understand that others have different needs, preferences, and emotions.

An interview with Teacher P1 revealed the following:

Children's interactions usually begin with solitary or parallel play before developing into small-group activities involving associative play. They communicate verbally by inviting others to play, expressing their preferences, or declining invitations. Nonverbal communication is also evident through facial expressions and body movements.

These observations highlight the complementary roles of verbal

and nonverbal communication in children's social development. Verbal interactions, including initiating play, expressing preferences, and responding to invitations, represent emerging social communication skills. Meanwhile, nonverbal expressions, such as gestures, facial expressions, and physical movements, provide alternative means of interaction, particularly for children who are still developing their verbal communication abilities.

The observed transition from *parallel play* to *associative play* is consistent with Parten's classification of children's social play. This transition reflects children's growing capacity to engage with peers, participate in shared activities, and establish social relationships. Accordingly, recess provides a meaningful context in which different forms of social play can emerge naturally.

The Significance of Cooperation and Conflict in Social Development

Cooperation observed during group play reflected children's developing abilities to share resources, take turns, and follow simple social rules. Activities such as role-playing, group games, and the shared use of play materials provided opportunities for children to practice these fundamental social skills. These behaviors suggest that children are gradually developing an understanding of cooperation and mutual participation within peer groups.

Teacher P1 explained:

Yes. Cooperation can be observed when children use play materials together,

share toys, take turns, and follow simple rules.

In addition to cooperation, minor conflicts emerged as a natural part of children's social interactions. Rather than being interpreted solely as negative behavior, such conflicts can provide opportunities for children to develop emotional regulation, problem-solving abilities, and an understanding of others' perspectives. Corsaro (2022) emphasizes that conflicts among children represent forms of social negotiation through which they learn about social rules, relationships, and different viewpoints.

Within this context, conflict situations allow children to practice managing emotions, negotiating disagreements, and exploring possible solutions. Teachers therefore play an important role in supporting conflict resolution, not by exercising complete control over children's interactions, but by facilitating dialogue and encouraging children to resolve disagreements with increasing independence.

This approach aligns with social constructivist principles, which emphasize learning through direct experience and social participation. Consequently, both cooperation and minor conflicts during recess can be understood as meaningful experiences that contribute to children's social development.

Figure 1. Children's Social Interactions During Play



The Influence of the Play Environment on the Quality of Social Interactions

The findings indicate that a stimulating play environment contributes to the quality of children's social interactions. Play activities involving physical movement and peer engagement provide opportunities for children to participate in increasingly complex social relationships (Pellegrini & Smith, 2021).

A supportive physical environment includes adequate play areas, diverse indoor and outdoor play materials, and flexible spatial arrangements that accommodate different forms of play. These environmental characteristics provide children with opportunities to explore, initiate interactions, and participate in collaborative activities. Beyond physical conditions, the social environment also influences children's willingness to engage with others. A positive, inclusive, and supportive atmosphere can encourage children to communicate confidently, establish friendships, and participate in group activities. Conversely, excessively restrictive environments may limit

opportunities for spontaneous interaction and social exploration.

These findings suggest that the quality of children's social experiences during recess is influenced not only by individual social abilities but also by the availability and organization of play environments. Therefore, providing accessible play materials and supportive social conditions is essential for encouraging meaningful peer interactions.

The Role of Teachers as Facilitators of Social Interaction

Teachers play a significant role in optimizing recess as an opportunity for social learning. Rather than functioning exclusively as supervisors, teachers can support children's social development through observation, mediation, facilitation, and the modeling of positive social behavior.

As **observers**, teachers monitor children's interaction patterns to understand their individual social characteristics, preferences, and emerging interpersonal abilities. These observations can help educators identify children who may require additional support in establishing peer relationships.

As **mediators**, teachers assist children in resolving disagreements through dialogue and empathy. Instead of immediately imposing solutions, they encourage children to express their feelings, recognize others' perspectives, and negotiate appropriate responses.

As **facilitators**, teachers provide stimulating play environments

and appropriate materials that encourage cooperative activities and spontaneous interaction. Meanwhile, as **social role models**, teachers demonstrate effective communication, cooperation, and constructive problem-solving behaviors that children can observe and imitate.

These interconnected roles demonstrate that recess should not be regarded as an educationally insignificant period. Instead, it represents a valuable opportunity for teachers to support children's social learning while respecting their autonomy and opportunities for independent exploration.

Figure 2. Teachers as Facilitators During Children's Play Activities



5. Implications for Early Childhood Education Practices

The findings of this study have several implications for early childhood education practices. First, teachers should recognize recess as an opportunity to support children's social competence by providing play activities and materials that encourage cooperation and peer engagement. Although recess should maintain its spontaneous characteristics, an appropriately prepared environment can facilitate meaningful social experiences.

Second, teachers should prioritize dialogue-based conflict mediation rather than punitive responses when addressing disagreements among children. This approach provides opportunities for children to express emotions, understand different perspectives, and develop independent problem-solving skills.

Third, early childhood education institutions should consider developing thematic and flexible play areas that support diverse forms of social interaction. Such environments can encourage children to explore collaborative activities while accommodating individual preferences and developmental differences.

Fourth, assessments of children's social development should incorporate observations of naturally occurring interactions during recess rather than relying exclusively on behaviors demonstrated in structured classroom settings. Observing children in spontaneous social situations can provide additional insights into their communication, cooperation, and conflict-resolution abilities.

Furthermore, professional development opportunities may help teachers strengthen their capacity to observe, facilitate, and respond appropriately to children's social interactions during recess.

These findings are consistent with Mardiyani and Widyasari (2023), who emphasized the importance of peer interactions in children's social development. However, the present study offers a more specific contextual perspective by examining children's interactions during

relatively unstructured recess periods. Within this environment, children have opportunities to initiate social relationships and negotiate shared activities with less direct instructional involvement.

Overall, the findings reinforce the importance of recognizing recess as a meaningful component of early childhood education. By providing supportive environments and appropriate facilitation, educators can promote children's social competence through naturally occurring peer interactions.

Conclusion

This study concludes that recess serves as a natural social environment that provides meaningful opportunities for young children to engage in spontaneous and authentic social interactions. Children's interaction patterns, ranging from parallel play to associative play, reflect their emerging abilities in communication, cooperation, and resolving minor conflicts. These interactions are influenced by the play environment, the availability of play materials, and teachers' roles as facilitators. The findings highlight the importance of integrating recess into early childhood educational practices as a meaningful context for supporting children's socio-emotional development. Therefore, educators should provide supportive play environments and appropriate guidance while allowing children sufficient autonomy to develop social competence through natural peer interactions.

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