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## Social and Emotional Skills Develop Through Play-Based Learning

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Running head: SKILLS DEVELOP THROUGH PLAY

**Social and Emotional Skills Develop Through Play-Based Learning**

April Welding

Northwestern College

An Action Research Project Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Education

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### **Abstract**

This action research study was driven by the researcher's interest in play-based learning. This action research investigates if social and emotional skills develop through play in a preschool classroom setting. This action research answered the question: Can social and emotional skills develop through play-based learning? Preschool students were engaged in developmental learning play-based learning centers that helped them academically, socially, and emotionally. Teachers were more intentional with interactions with students. Teachers were more present with students, encouraging engagement with learning opportunities. This research study was conducted throughout the 2021 – 2022 academic school year. Data was collected throughout two Teaching Strategies GOLD checkpoints in the school year.

*Keywords:* social-emotional development, social-emotional skills, play-based learning, early childhood

### **Social and Emotional Skills Develop Through Play-Based Learning**

Social and emotional skills play a significant part in child development, especially in the early years of life. According to Ferreira et al. (2021), “Research has shown that children’s development of social and emotional skills at preschool age is critical for long-term school and life success” (p. 51). The problem is that many people believe that when children are playing, there is no learning taking place.

The purpose of this action research study is to determine if play-based learning experiences help students develop their social and emotional skills over time. When young children attend a high-quality preschool program, they are exposed to enriched learning activities that will encourage development. Spinrad et al. (2019) states, “In the preschool classroom, children’s play is important for the development of many socio-emotional skills” (p. 58). This action research highlights the development of young children’s social and emotional skills when engaged in play-based learning experiences within a preschool setting.

Research for this paper was drawn from the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database, and the WorldCat discovery tool through DeWitt Library at Northwestern College. The research is from peer-reviewed journals that were published between 2012 and 2022. The studies include topics of social and emotional development, play-based learning, and their significance in an early childhood classroom setting. The Review of the Literature covers 20 peer-reviewed journal articles chosen based on relevance to the present study. Keywords used are social and emotional skills, social and emotional development, play-based learning, and early childhood.

The question that this action research asks is, “Can social and emotional skills develop through play-based learning?” The research findings of this study relied on data from GOLD

Teaching Strategies. The research shows that when children are given more opportunities for play-based learning experiences, they have a greater likelihood of developing social and emotional skills. Research shows the connection between the value of play in early childhood as well as the skills children develop through play in a classroom environment.

This action research study covers the importance of social and emotional development and how play-based learning impacts development at the early childhood level. The researcher, who is also the classroom teacher, took documentation through GOLD Teaching Strategies that were used during the 2021-2022 school year. The researcher analyzed students' data using two checkpoints, one in the fall and one in the winter. Data was obtained through the researcher's anecdotal notes and student observations per checkpoint.

### **Review of the Literature**

The research through peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles covered the benefits of play-based learning and the importance of the development of social and emotional skills at the preschool level. The categories that were discussed in the literature review were social and emotional skills, the importance of the development of social and emotional skills, play-based learning, and the benefits of play-based learning.

### **Social and Emotional Skills**

Social and emotional skills are developmental skills that we all need to be successful and contributing members of society; however, it is imperative to know that social and emotional learning begins in the early stages of a young child's life (Dennis et al., 2015). Doctoroff et al. (2016) explains that social and emotional skills utilize a range of factors such as emotional knowledge, emotional traits, behavioral traits, as well as social skills.

There are connections between social-emotional skills and play when teachers are purposefully creating learning opportunities for students. In the study by Doctoroff et al. (2016), 61 preschool students ages three to five were observed in a preschool setting. The purpose of the study was to find the connection between social-emotional skills and math skills during a play-based learning task. According to the findings, students who had more developed social and emotional skills than other peers tended to be more engaged with the learning activities in the classroom (Doctoroff et al., 2016).

Similar findings were found in a study by Ferreira et al. (2021) when researching to understand preschool teachers' representations of social-emotional learning and the methods they used to develop the social and emotional skills of their students. In this study, 13 preschool teachers were interviewed regarding their experiences implementing social and emotional learning into their pedagogy. The results included their viewpoints, perceptions, and comprehension of social and emotional learning. Factors such as self-awareness, self-control, social awareness, and relationship-building skills indicated to be developed best at the early stages of life (Ferreira et al., 2021). In other words, when young children develop their social and emotional skills at the preschool level, they will be more successful socially and emotionally when entering kindergarten.

For many young children, preschool is the first educational experience where they engage with peers socially. Social understanding of interactions includes effective behavior in peer interactions and the ability to interact cooperatively, effectively, and positively with their peers. These abilities include initiating and joining groups that will build a foundation for their social understanding (Fung & Cheng, 2017).

Social and emotional development is imperative because young children's health depends on it (Ho & Funk, 2018). When students have developed their social and emotional skills, they foster positive relationships, deal with positive and negative events more constructively, and continue to build a foundation needed for the rest of their life (Ho & Funk, 2018).

### **The Development of Social and Emotional Skills**

Building social and emotional development skills should be the core of any early childhood environment (Ho & Funk, 2018). Children who have not developed their social and emotional skills have shown more difficulties following directions, participating in developmentally age-appropriate activities, and maintaining healthy self-esteem compared to children who have a more positive social and emotional development (Ho & Funk, 2018).

There are many parts in the development of social-emotional skills. Pyle et al. (2017) breaks down the parts of social-emotional development into competencies that include cooperative skills, social interactions, self-capability skills, and positive peer relationships. In a study by Kirk and MacCallum (2017), one early childhood teacher was observed and interviewed on the strategies she implemented to support her students' development of social and emotional skills. The findings show that the classroom environment plays a significant role in young children's development and learning. When teachers intentionally create positive relationships with their students, they grow academically and develop socially and emotionally because they feel safe and welcomed in their learning environment (Ho & Funk, 2018; Kirk & MacCallum, 2017).

In a similar study on social-emotional development by Blewitt et al. (2021), 30 early childhood educators were interviewed on their personal perspectives of their students' social and emotional development. The findings show that when students are exposed to positive social



interactions, communications, and situations with classmates and teachers, they are building their social skills (Blewitt et al., 2021). When students are recognizing other classmates' emotions, regulating their own emotions, and showing empathy, they are developing their emotional skills (Blewitt et al., 2021).

Teachers take part in the development of their students in many ways. Blewitt et al.'s research (2021) shows that early childhood educators play a significant role in the development of their students' social and emotional skills. There are many ways early childhood educators help build their students' foundation to create positive social and emotional learning experiences. For example, reading children's books about feelings and emotions, praising and modeling positive behavior in the classroom, and providing social cues are some ideas that teachers can implement into their teaching methods (Ho & Funk, 2018).

Early childhood educators know the importance of play in the classroom. Play in the classroom benefits and promotes growth and development socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically (Pyle et al., 2020b). This evidence brings connection to the research question, "Can social and emotional skills develop through play-based learning?"

### **Play-Based Learning**

Play is the highest form of learning for young children (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Play-based learning is when play and education combine to achieve growth in academics as well as socially and emotionally (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Play-based learning focuses on the development of young children by being aware of students' interests and abilities when creating developmentally age-appropriate learning experiences (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

In a study by Pyle et al. (2015), three kindergarten teachers were interviewed and observed on their methods of integrating play-based learning in their classrooms. The research

was completed over six months on the topic of play-based learning. Each teacher had a different view and different methods of integrating play into their classroom. The findings show that self-regulation, communication, social skills, emotional skills, and cognitive skills are all best developed in play-based learning environments (Pyle et al., 2015). Through play-based learning, children are engaging, exploring, investigating, and problem solving (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Taylor and Boyer (2020) state that play-based learning benefits students more developmentally and academically than direct teacher instruction do.

There are many ways teachers can connect play and learning in their classrooms. Nilsson et al. (2018) observed three preschool classrooms on the relationship between play and learning in the classrooms. The research took place over several months. The intervention being tested was play and exploration in the classroom. The findings of this study show the connection between play, exploration, and learning. The authors of this study suggest that young children's play opportunities should be engaging, challenging, and supported with adults in the classroom to add ideas and continue the exploration within the classroom (Nilsson et al., 2018). Nilsson et al. (2018) share that learning is a fundamental part of play and exploration.

### **The Benefits of Play-Based Learning**

Research revealed that play benefits students' growth and development in areas of social skills, emotional skills, cognitive skills, language skills, and physical skills (Pyle et al., 2018). Veiga et al., (2016) tested 78 children ages four to six years on their social and emotional functions through free play. The findings disclosed that when students do not have opportunities to play, there is a greater chance for more negative behaviors (Veiga et al., 2016). Veiga et al., (2016) shared that young children learn best by exploring, using their imagination, and doing. Young children learn through play (Veiga et al., 2016).

Parents can also help their children develop social and emotional skills through play. In a similar study by Keung and Cheung (2019), 29 principals and teachers and 50 kindergarten students were interviewed on their perspectives of play-based learning and how it affected whole child development. The research was both qualitative and quantitative over the span of two years. The findings affirmed that when parents were involved in the play-based learning activities, young children were more effectively developing skills (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Keung and Cheung (2019) also found that play-based learning is developmentally appropriate for young children when teachers incorporate students' interests, including activities that allow the children to problem solve and explore. For overall development in each domain (social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and cognitive), children need to play (Petrie & Clarkin-Phillips, 2018). Slot et al. (2017) also documented that self-regulation skills are developed through play.

Play-based learning also leads to academic benefits. In a study by Bahlmann et al. (2020), early childhood teachers were interviewed and observed on the process of integrating early writing opportunities into play. The teachers created engaging learning centers for their preschool classrooms. The learning centers were based on students' interests and enabled students to grow academically. Findings from the study reported that teachers need to purposefully implement developmentally appropriate materials into every center to attract students' interests and engagement. The findings also showed that teachers should embed opportunities for students to write in every center, rather than having one designed writing center. Bahlmann et al., (2020) explained that a child's motivation to learn comes from adult support and quality materials with which to learn and play.

Play is an important piece of child development (Pyle et al., 2020a). When young children are given the opportunities to play, learning and development takes place. Play-based

learning has many benefits towards students' development when it is intentionally integrated into a classroom environment. When early childhood educators maximize students' interests and engaging materials that offer exploration and inquiry, children will gain skills over time (Sumsion et al., 2014).

## **Methods**

### **Methodology**

The research question for this action plan was, "Can social and emotional skills develop through play-based learning?" The variables in this research were the Teaching Strategies GOLD scores that were subject to change throughout the two checkpoints from fall to winter. Other variables that may have impacted the findings of the research include students' attendance rate. If students were missing consecutive days of school, the researcher would not have adequate anecdotal notes that reflected the students' learning and knowledge. Some students may have had learning challenges that affected the outcome of this study. Those qualifying received special instructional assistance for these learning difficulties.

The participants of this study included 11 preschool students in a public school in Northwest Iowa during the 2021-2022 school year. These students ranged in age from three to five years old. The students attended the preschool program every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. The research was on the social and emotional development of six boys and five girls. Out of the 11 students, one student was on an individualized educational plan and received services. Two additional students were monitored for possible future identification. Ability ranges and prior exposure to academic content varied greatly within the classroom, including students who had previously attended one or two years of a preschool program and students who had no prior experience in a formal education setting.

This study was on social and emotional development through play-based learning. Therefore, observations and anecdotal notes were taken during center time. Center time was planned for one hour each day. During center time, students choose what interest area to play in and with whom to play. Each interest area was set up by the classroom teacher and paraprofessionals in the classroom. Centers included a variety of engaging, developmentally age-appropriate learning materials and manipulatives based on students' interest and abilities. The interest area centers consisted of blocks, dramatic play, science/discovery, math, reading, art/writing, and sensory materials.

Throughout the study interventions were made regarding the play-based learning centers. Teachers and paraprofessionals were more purposeful when creating and adding materials and manipulatives to each interest area to support students academically. The adults in the classroom were more present throughout each interest area to support students' social and emotional needs. They were also supporting students' engagement through play by sharing ideas and suggestions.

Data collection was done for six months of the school year. Data was collected during center time each day through observing and taking anecdotal notes. The data was compiled on Teaching Strategies GOLD for two checkpoints (fall and winter) to see at what level students scored. The data was collected electronically through the Teaching Strategies website. Each anecdotal note entered in the system was dated and has either a written student observation or a picture attached to describe and support students' social and emotional development. The method used for data, Teaching Strategies GOLD, showed both validity and reliability. GOLD is an assessment tool used by educators to document and track students' learning progress.

Data was analyzed after both fall and winter checkpoints to compare students' social and emotional skill development. The interventions in the classroom occurred after the fall

checkpoint. Teaching Strategies GOLD states that four- and five-year-old's must be within the blue band to be considered proficient. Two Teaching Strategies GOLD objectives were observed to determine students' social and emotional development. The first GOLD objective observed was "2. Establishes and sustains positive relationships c. interacts with peers." The second GOLD objective observed was "3. Participates cooperatively and constructively in group situations b. solves social problems."

This action research study received an Institutional Review Board exemption through Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa. Normal educational practices were implemented as part of the research project by using Teaching Strategies GOLD data. The research was gathered in a preschool classroom as has been the routine. The research did not adversely impact student learning or teacher assessment.

### **Data Collection**

The data collected for this action research project was qualitative. The data included Teaching Strategies GOLD fall and winter checkpoints from the 2021-2022 school year. From Teaching Strategies GOLD, two objectives were observed for this research. Each objective was observed in the preschool classroom during center time. The first GOLD objective data was collected on is objective 2: "establishes and sustains positive relationships c: interacts with peers." The second GOLD objective data was collected on objective 3: "participates cooperatively and constructively in group situations b. solves social problems.: Preschool students ages four to five years of age should score within the blue band. For objective 2c, the blue band gives a target score of 4-6 for preschool students. For objective 3b, the blue band gives a target score of 5-7 for preschool students.

The fall checkpoint served as the baseline for both objectives to show where students' development was at the beginning of the school year. The fall checkpoint data was reviewed to see which students needed more support during center time to make progress from fall to winter. After reviewing the observed objectives 2c and 3b, revisions were made to integrate more purposeful play-based learning activities into center time. Teachers and paraprofessionals were more methodical when preparing play-based learning activities for students. They based the engaging, hands-on, play-based learning activities on students' interests, strengths, and areas of need. The teachers and paraprofessionals were more involved and present in the play with students during center time. They were providing play suggestions, modeling social cues, and advising communication skills as needed. By integrating these interventions, the winter checkpoint data showed that students made progress in their social and emotional development. This was concluded by reviewing and comparing Teaching Strategies GOLD fall and winter checkpoint data on objectives 2c and 3b.

## **Findings**

### **Data Analysis**

Appendix A and B show data Tables 1 and 2 of two GOLD learning objectives, 2c and 3b, that were observed during center learning time. The tables in Appendix A and B show the two data checkpoints that were used for this action research project. This data was from the 2021-2022 school year. The data in each table shows where students are based on Teaching Strategies GOLD standards. For social and emotional learning objective 2c, students should score between levels 4-6. For social and emotional learning objective 3b, students should score between levels 5-7. Both 2c and 3b fall data show that most of the class were not proficient in checkpoint 1. When integrating interventions during center time, almost all students made

progress towards proficiency. The data shown in Appendix A and Appendix B show that all students scored in the proficient range during the second checkpoint. Overall, the action research was successful when integrating play-based learning into center time.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The action research results show that the supports implemented into center time were successful in helping students progress socially and emotionally. Students made progress in Teaching Strategies GOLD objectives 2c and 3b from checkpoint 1 to checkpoint 2. In checkpoint 1, before the supports were implemented, fall data shows that two to three students were proficient in each objective. After supports were put in place, 11 students were proficient in both objectives 2c and 3b at checkpoint 2: all students scored in the range of a 5-year-old level.

The results in the fall checkpoint were gathered before the teacher made changes to center time. Changes made to center time were focused on a more play-based learning environment and students' learning and development. After reviewing data from the GOLD objectives, the findings revealed a positive impact. The results in the winter checkpoint indicated that the supports integrated into the center time allowed students to learn through play and progress developmentally.

The findings in this action research project aligned with the published research that was mentioned throughout the literature review. Many of the researchers found social and emotional skills developed when children were engaged in enriched play-based learning environments that were intentionally integrated in preschool settings. When teachers were intentional in creating play-based learning opportunities, they met the needs of all their students and increased student learning and development.



**Limitations of the Study**

There were some limitations that affected the findings of the research on social and emotional skills developed through play-based learning. One of these limitations was the length of the study. This research took place from August to February. There could have been other factors that played a part in the development of students' social and emotional skills because of the brevity of the study. Another limitation that affected the findings of the research was the age of the students. If a student was attending the preschool program for a second year, they had more exposure to play-based learning opportunities than a student who was starting their first year of preschool. Other limitations of the study were students' demographics. Some students were absent from school for consecutive days while other students did not miss a day throughout the school year. Absences could affect the students' development of social and emotional skills because they missed enriched learning opportunities that were provided during class time.

**Further Study**

The next step of this action research project will be to continue with the interventions that are in place for a developmentally appropriate play-based learning environment for the remainder of the school year and into next year. Interventions will begin at the start of the school year to compare Teaching Strategies GOLD data from checkpoint 1 of the past and present school year. The teacher will be more purposeful by incorporating play-based learning materials that meet the needs of all students in each learning center throughout the classroom. The teacher will review data more to see if the materials present in each play-based learning center are helping students develop socially and emotionally.

Another future step will be to promote more parent involvement to help students positively develop their social and emotional skills. The teacher will provide families with

educational materials to help their children learn through play. Information that includes the benefits of play-based learning and how to set up a positive learning environment to encourage skill development will be shared with other early childhood programs. Sharing this information with other early childhood settings will encourage teachers to implement developmentally age-appropriate strategies and activities into their classrooms. This research may be eye-opening to other early childhood educators who are considering the benefits of play-based learning and how their students can develop social and emotional skills.

### **Conclusion**

This action research project provides support for using play-based learning opportunities to help students develop social and emotional skills in preschool classrooms. Using developmentally age-appropriate materials and creating engaging learning experiences support students' growth of social and emotional skill development. The 11 students participating in this action research benefited from the interventions that took place during play. The results of this study reveal that play-based learning has an impact on both social and emotional skill development in preschool children.

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Appendix A

**Table 1**  
*Gold Data*

Student (2c)	Checkpoint 1	Checkpoint 2	2c. Students should score between 4-6			
			Proficient	Not Proficient	Marginal Row Totals	
1	3	5				
2	3	4				
3	3	4	<b>Checkpoint 1</b>	2	9	11
4	4	5	<b>Checkpoint 2</b>	11	0	11
5	3	4	Marginal Column Totals	13	9	22 (Grand Total)
6	3	5				
7	3	4				
8	3	4				
9	3	5				
10	3	4				
11	4	4				

Student (3b)	Checkpoint 1	Checkpoint 2	3b. Students should score between 5-7			
			Proficient	Not Proficient	Marginal Row Totals	
1	5	6				
2	4	5				
3	4	5	<b>Checkpoint 1</b>	3	8	11
4	4	5	<b>Checkpoint 2</b>	11	0	11
5	4	5	Marginal Column Totals	14	8	22 (Grand Total)
6	5	5				
7	4	5				
8	4	5				
9	3	5				
10	4	5				
11	5	6				

Appendix B

Table 2

GOLD Progress

