



Original Article

Let Them Play: A Systematic Review Investigating the Benefits of Free Play in Emotional Development of Children



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Abstract

Play-based learning has been increasingly discussed in existing literature as it enhances holistic child development and facilitates essential life skills. Free play is often regarded as most beneficial for child development allowing children to take charge of their learning and encouraging problem-solving skills and creativity. Free play allows children for independent learning as it helps them to gain essential life skills making it an important aspect of holistic child development. Owing to its autonomous nature, it nurtures emotional, physical and cognitive aspects of the personality in early childhood. Therefore, this review of the literature aims to investigate the role of free play in fostering emotional development during early childhood. The researchers employed a systematic literature review. The existing literature on free play was meticulously studied, following the given guidelines and methodological framework. The existing literature suggests that free play can facilitate the development of emotional intelligence, resilience, emotional expression and coping strategies. During free play, children are free to use their imagination and creativity without adult interference which leads to intrinsic motivation, creativity and self-exploration.

Keywords: Child education, Early childhood care, Emotional development, Free play educators

INTRODUCTION

It is evident that early childhood education plays a crucial role in the development of children's social, cognitive and emotional skills (Adams, et al., 2023). Play-based learning emphasizes the pedagogical benefits of play, providing learners with the exploring opportunities of their surroundings, developing social interactions, and critical thinking. An important aspect of play-based learning is free play which is characterized by unstructured activities promoting self-sufficiency and inventiveness (Collins, et al., 2023). It has been discussed in the existing literature that free play has a greater capacity to boost emotional and cognitive skills in children than structured play-based learning (Pyle, et al., 2017).

The emotional development of children during infancy and childhood is particularly crucial in providing them with the essential techniques in order to become independent and interact appropriately in social circles (Mohamadou, 2022). A critical time for facilitating a robust socio-emotional development in children is initial years. Moreover, researchers have indicated that a large number of children enrolled in kindergarten have difficulty adjusting to the new setting. According to a study by Janssen and LeBlanc (2010), most of the children face issues in adapting to the new changes and environment in pre-schooling environments. One possible cause for this is thought to stem from lack of emotional self-regulation skills in children (Shin, et al., 2023). Consequently, it further highlights the importance of enhancing children's emotional development during their early years.

This research is of great value and potential relevance as it investigates the implications of integrating play-based learning strategies, specifically free play for emotional development in early childhood. A comprehensive review of existing literature aims to gain an understanding of play-based learning techniques, particularly free play, nurturing emotional intelligence, creativity, emotional expression, and resilience in children during their formative years. An exploration of the potential advantages and issues linked to the approach grants a better comprehension of how play-based learning impacts emotional growth in critical years. By exploring the relationship between emotional development and free play, this study contributes to a growing body of literature on the complicated interplay between free play and emotional development throughout this pivotal period of development.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study delineated the techniques utilized for data gathering and analysis (Hancock, et al., 2021). A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach was employed to collect and assess the evidence in investigating play-based teaching techniques in early childhood education. This specific methodology ensures a neutral and empirical evaluation, adequately identifies scholarly literature, and accurately responds to the queries. Furthermore, SLR builds a knowledge base that is reliable, highlights the literature gaps, and follows the methodological rigor throughout the investigation.

The research procedure detailed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009) was adopted throughout the study. The first phase entailed defining the objectives and parameters of the study, specifically examining the beneficial role of play-based pedagogies in early childhood education. The second stage was to identify pertinent literature with the help of a database-driven methodology (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). The articles acquired were scrutinized as the third step to confirm that they pertained to the research questions and themes. Additionally, the valid nature of the data along with its reliability were substantiated with a thorough search. The articles were further narrowed down according to the stated inclusion and exclusion criteria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Intelligence and Emotional development

The steady acquisition of emotional awareness that begins as early as birth and lasts the whole of one's life is known as emotional development. It is a crucial component of a person's personality. Erik Erikson and John Bowlby, placed a specific emphasis on letting children engage in experiences that strengthen their personalities and help them develop emotional competence by helping them comprehend emotions and attachments (Erikson, 1968; Bowlby, 1969).

As opposed to Freud's initial five stages of psychosexual development, Erik Erikson divided the human development into eight stages. Drawing on his experiences, Eric propounded that as a child becomes older, they undergo eight phases of psychosocial development. In contrast to Freud's psychosexual stages, a supportive environment promotes healthy psychosocial development, whereas a hostile setting results in unhealthily slow emotional maturation in children (Hamachek, 1985). These children develop into adults with a declining sense of self and no purpose in life. Particularly, the second and third stages of psychosocial theory underline the significance of the aforementioned idea. A suitable degree of freedom to exercise free will aids in the child's independence at the second stage, Autonomy vs. Shame. Children can play and learn while exercising their autonomy when allowed to engage in free play (Storli & Sandseter, 2019). By using this PBL approach, children get better prepared to operate as adults by improving their emotional intelligence and making a healthy transition from one stage to the next. The significance of providing the child with leverage is emphasized in the third stage, Initiative vs. Guilt. Giving children the freedom to choose how they want to play and allowing them to take the initiative, are necessary for a smooth progress through developmental stages. The freedom of choice leads the child to discover the meaning of their existence. According to Batra (2013), it is necessary to give children a secure environment where they can experience certain autonomy. This can be implemented by making using of free play to safely allow children learn in order to foster their emotional growth.

Different definitions of intelligence have been put forth by a number of pioneers over the years. Leading academics and psychologists have defined intelligence in a variety of ways, but they all agree that intelligence is the capacity of an individual to learn new things and use them when needed. American psychologist, Lewis Terman, described intelligence as the capacity for reasoning and imagining. In view of Walter Dearborn, intelligence is a person's ability to learn and grow from experiences (Pfeifer & Scheier, 2001). According to Walter Dearborn, experiences have a significant impact on an individual's intellectual development and are essential to human growth. This idea is consistent with the Experiential Learning Theory of David Allen Kolb, which emphasizes the impact of experiences on learning (Kolb, 1984). Eight categories of intelligence—linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic—are presented by Howard Gardner's multiple theory of intelligence (Gardner & Hatch, 1989). As it acknowledges that people can flourish in various fields depending on their preferences, strengths, and aptitudes, it complements the idea of intelligence as the capacity to learn and apply knowledge.

It's interesting to note that the ideas of self-awareness and self-management revolve around the idea of intrapersonal intelligence, while social awareness and relationship management fall under interpersonal intelligence, according to Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001). In contrast to gaining self-awareness, which helps people notice their own emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and motives, self-management enables people to regulate their emotions in constructive ways, increasing

intrapersonal intelligence. The concepts of social awareness and relationship management, on the other hand, relate to interpersonal intelligence. This includes establishing trust, demonstrating empathy, and effectively comprehending and relating to others. These ideas are thereby intertwined, supporting an individual's whole social and emotional growth and personality. For a person's growth, the interaction of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management has deep effects. Self-management gives individuals the ability to consciously control their emotions and keep their resiliency while navigating difficult situations. Self-awareness, correspondingly, enables them to identify their emotional states, strengths, shortcomings, and motivations. As opposed to this, social awareness enables a person to uphold societal peace. It enables people to be mindful of both their own feelings and those of those around them, developing empathy and perspective taking.

Emotional Intelligence and Free play

The internal states and emotions of an individual have a direct impact on their emotional intelligence. For people to successfully navigate their life, this trait must be developed from an early age. Goleman (1996) goes on to remark that those with high emotional intelligence are also adept at exercising empathy, self-control, and motivation. They also have good control over their emotions. Conversely, those with low emotional intelligence may experience internal conflicts that result in low morale, a reduction in their ability to work, a lack of drive, and trouble thinking effectively. Emotions and attitudes are related and attitudes call for particular acts that can only be accomplished by particular gestures and behaviors.

Children engage in things that make them feel joyful. Young children primarily participate in physical activity through play, even if this activity may not be seen as a task. Play is a crucial component for early childhood development. Landreth (2012) believes that children learn through play because it gives them the opportunity to explore new things and develop new abilities. It encourages alternative thinking and improves their imagination and creativity, particularly in the setting of free play. Play also helps kids learn self-control, impulse control, and how to face obstacles head-on rather than giving up (Landreth, 2012). Therefore, it is important to consider the relationship between play and emotional growth. According to Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1967), children can use play as a way to examine who they are, especially their emotions and desires. They are able to demonstrate and explore their emotional responses as well as comprehend the effects of their activities in the real-world context.

There have been considerable alterations in free play over the years. Considering the technological advancements and children's excessive indulgence in electronic gadgets, free play has been paired with Information and Communications Technology (ICT). An age where imaginative play was encouraged in which children were provided with the space to explore their vast and creative imaginative abilities has now been captured powerfully by technological gadgets. Around 70-80% of children below five years of age are using smartphones or other gadgets excessively, worldwide. Therefore, some researchers realized that it is essential to make use of it and turn it to the good of the next generation. If academic institutes initiate believing in the effectiveness of incorporating ICT into PBL and take active steps to do so, then children's learning experience can be maximized (Nikolopoulou & Gialamas, 2015). Sweeney and Geer (2010) posited that with appropriate adult supervision, electronic gadgets can be helpful in enhancing the learning experience of children along with contributing to healthy development. Taking this into account, there has been a humongous increase in the number of educational mobile applications as entrepreneurs have diverted their attention towards this untapped marketing which has evident potential for profit. Researchers have noticed an increase in academic performance using such apps. Therefore, infusing technology with PBL is an efficient way to positively deal with the increased screen time of children.

Fostering Self-Regulation and Resilience via Free Play

Resilience as a subconstruct of emotional development is defined as a general concept related to positive adaptation in the context of challenge. It helps children to regulate their emotional character effectively and develop a sense of control and independence over emotions that are at times exhausting. Several Researches have found resilience to be an important developmental trait that should be developed during the developmental years (Masten & Barnes, 2018; Yoon et al., 2021). It provides children with a

cushion to grow up handling difficult situations in life effectively without excessive activation of the parasympathetic system and reduction of coping abilities. It was reported through interviews taken from mothers that they encouraged their children to do their work independently, actively taking part in new skill-building activities, and establishing positive relationships with others. The predominant approach employed to foster resilience was to support children in identifying, naming, and expressing their emotions. Given the foundational support from this investigation, the role of free play in nurturing resilience becomes readily apparent, as it serves as an effective instrument for fostering children's self-reliance through the autonomy they experience in their activities, acquiring new skills through self-directed play, and nurturing healthy social relationships. Additionally, free play aids children in recognizing and comprehending their emotions as they familiarize themselves with their peers, respond to them with empathy, and develop emotional competence (Lester & Russell, 2010).

The regulation of one's emotions along with expressing empathetic behavior towards others is developed through resilience. Self-regulation as an ability is important in providing aid for emotional development. Therefore, its introduction to children should be made at an early age so they are able to regulate their emotional response. Through independent and autonomous activities during play, children encounter various emotional experiences, allowing them to practice self-reliance. Gray (2011) supports this perspective, highlighting free play as a key element in fostering emotional resilience and self-regulatory habits in young children. The unstructured nature of free play provides a space for children to navigate social interactions, negotiate, and resolve conflicts with peers. These experiences contribute to the cultivation of adaptive coping strategies, establishing a foundation for resilience in the face of life's challenges. By engaging in free play, children not only explore their creativity but also develop the emotional tools necessary for effective self-regulation and resilience throughout their early years.

Colliver, et al. (2022) propose that free play can be used as an instructional approach to help children develop self-regulation. This entails children experiencing a range of emotions, interacting with peers in autonomous and self-directed activities, and practicing self-control. Children learn to control their emotions through their interactions with peers during unstructured play. These interactions involve mediation, gaining the approval of their peers, and resolving any potential disputes.

The Significance of Free Play in Developing Coping Mechanisms

Play, an essential element of childhood, regulates and supports the facilitation and enhancement of coping responses among children. According to Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck, (2007) coping is a dynamic process involving back and forth exchange, where individuals continuously evaluate and handle the demands or stressors they encounter in a particular environment. Central to this conceptualization is the notion that individuals when confronted with stressors, engage in a thorough evaluation of the situation to discern its controllability. This assessment shapes their perception of the stressor, subsequently influencing their strategic actions aimed at emotional well-being. In the face of stressful circumstances, play has the potential to serve as a supportive mechanism, alleviating stress-related symptoms and fostering a nuanced comprehension of the situation.

When granted the autonomy to take part in play, children predominantly engage in imaginative or fantasy play, categorized as a form of free play. In a study conducted by Benninger and Savahl (2017), findings indicated that children involved in imaginative play exhibited consistently improved utilization of coping skills over an 18-month duration. A comprehensive rationale for this phenomenon posits that imagination and free-thinking offer children the time and space for expressing themselves through creating imaginative scenarios as an expression of releasing the negative emotions, thereby aiding in coping with distressing situations (Niehues, et al., 2013). Researchers have delved into the role of play as a coping mechanism for children with a history of disaster and violence. It has been observed that free play serves as an inherent ability for children to address distressing situations and memories. With the employment of free play, children establish a protective barrier and distance themselves from trauma and distressing situations. This facilitates the step-by-step handling of profound negative emotions and allowing for the cultivation of positive emotions and sentiments, serving as coping mechanism (Masten, et al., 2015).

Pretend play, a type of unstructured play has been explored in the literature for its potential to enhance

coping skills in young individuals. In their study, Salmela, et al. (2010) concluded a positive correlation between engaging in pretend play and the development of improved coping abilities in children scheduled to undergo medical procedures. Pretend play allows children to immerse themselves in their imaginative world, enacting scenarios of their choosing. Consequently, the researchers aimed to investigate whether children proficient in pretend play demonstrated more effective coping strategies. To evaluate children's play skills, a 5-minute video-recorded session was conducted, where the researchers provided puppets and blocks for play and the children were instructed to engage the puppets in various activities. The findings indicated that children with greater intent and ownership of pretend play exhibited a higher utilization of coping strategies.

In the realm of childhood development, free play unquestionably plays a pivotal role in shaping effective coping strategies that aid children in navigating various stressors. Research concludes that the coping skills honed during play extend beyond its immediate setting. Edwards and Mackenzie (2013) remark that play-based learning contributes to the ongoing development of coping strategies. The mastery of specific skills acquired during play equips children to readily apply them in diverse situations, irrespective of the context. As highlighted earlier in the review, coping is fundamentally intertwined with adaptation. A qualitative study conducted by Jepsen, et al. (2019) revealed that when faced with the challenges of a novel environment, hospitalized children initially grapple with anxiety and stress-related symptoms. Yet, with the passage of time, they acquire coping mechanisms by reshaping their environment into a familiar setting through participation in play, imaginative activities, and parental interaction.

Nurturing Creativity and Emotional Expression via Free Play

Free play as a method to encourage emotional development, focuses on the exploration of imaginative and creative aspects of a child's personality. According to the American psychological association, creativity is the ability of an individual to produce original work, ideas, methods or theoretical frameworks. As the purpose of free play is to enable the child think freely and act without any restriction, it's impossible for the child not to be creative or fantasize and learn through the process. Children's innate creativity is the impetus behind this independent form of learning where there are no external directions by a teacher or caregiver. There is however, a significant role played by teachers in fostering creativity in children. According to a recent study conducted by Tok (2022), educators can maintain the role of "Co-player" and "Stage Manger" contributing to the development and growth of creativity in early childhood. The role of teachers was only to arrange the relevant material and get rid of any hindrances before or during the play. This led to an enhanced creativity on part of the children.

Traditional modes of learning where adult control and leads the activities, suppress the creativity of children as everything is controlled and already prepared. It reduces the usage of the creative side of their brain, thereby hindering the autonomous learning by children (Skene, et al., 2022). Hence, it is of utmost importance to be aware of how an adult influences a child's play activities, in order to lessen the detrimental effects on their emotional development. Observing the impact of his earlier-developed guide for educators that encourages them to adopt a supportive and indirect role rather than a domineering and traditional one, Loizou (2017) noted positive outcomes. This new role helps children practice independence and develop an autonomous identity as learners, fostering accountability for their actions. According to Anderson and Spainhower (2012), adult-led activities can suppress children's creativity by exerting control and pre-determining everything, limiting the use of the creative side of their brain and curtailing free play time. Recognizing the influence adults have on a child's play activities, is crucial to mitigate negative impacts on their emotional development. A careful observation should also be in place by the teachers in order to understand the emotions expressed through and during play.

Owing to a commonly held viewpoint, children in their early ages struggle to express their emotional selves. Consequently, parents are required to actively engage with their children through physical play. Unstructured play can serve as a valuable avenue to connect with children and gain insights into their world. As children mature, they acquire language as a means of communication; however, they may still find it challenging to convey their emotions effectively without conscious insights from adults. Landreth (2012) in his book *Play Therapy: The art of relationship*, remarks that through free play children can

express their emotions non-verbally allowing them to convey feelings that may be difficult to put into words.

Research highlights the supportive role of teachers in nurturing emotional expression during free play. Pyle and Daniels (2017) underscore the importance of close monitoring of children during such play and later developing a reflection of their emotional expression in order to utilize the effectiveness of free play. Children utilize this time to independently convey their feelings through non-verbal engagement, which may appear irrelevant to an outsider. Therefore, teachers should be attentive towards children's activities and the emotions they express. The extent to which adults comprehend and engage with the emotional aspect of children significantly influences the children's ability to openly and independently express themselves. While researchers have recognized the role of parents and caregivers (Halberstadt & Lozada, 2011), the involvement of teachers in enriching children's emotional expression remains an area of continued investigation.

Given the substantial amount of time children spend in preschool centers and schools, it is imperative to recognize the impact of their interactions with teachers on emotional development. The quality of education in childcare centers can adversely affect children's emotional development, underscoring the pivotal role of educators in a child's life. Consequently, the implementation of free play is vital to ensure the ongoing emotional growth of children, even in the absence of such settings. In a more recent study, Luo, et al. (2022) discerned that culture plays a substantial role in teachers' provision of emotional support to encourage children's expression. Their research compared the pedagogies and beliefs of American and Italian teachers, highlighting that the type of culture, whether collectivist or individualist, profoundly shapes the role educators play in fostering emotional expression and its impact on children. Hence, these findings emphasize the importance of educating teachers about their role in children's emotional development, considering factors such as age, experience, and cultural context.

Fostering Emotions through refining Motor Skills using Free play

The first 1,000 days of a child's life, highlighted by UNICEF, significantly influence their long-term health, growth, and neurodevelopment (Mputle, 2019). During this early period, various dimensions of development, including physical, social, emotional, and cognitive aspects, all contribute to establishing a foundation for healthy infant development. Notably, the way a child is treated during the first 1000 days of their life—from the time they are conceived to their second birthday—greatly influences their growth and development in later years (Bundy, et al., 2017).

One significant aspect of early healthy child development is motor skill development, which involves the coordination of organs and sensory development. A child's ability to engage in various activities like play, locomotion, and dressing depends on their capacity to execute precise and coordinated motions that adapt to their surroundings. This in turn allows for not only physical dexterity but also significantly influences emotional development. Achieving mastery in motor skills fosters a sense of accomplishment and confidence, contributing to a positive self-perception. The independence gained through the development of motor skills nurtures autonomy, cultivating a growing sense of self-control and self-reliance. Social interactions inherent in motor activities further enhance emotional well-being by fostering a sense of belonging and cooperation. Additionally, certain motor activities serve as outlets for emotional expression, allowing children to communicate and process their feelings creatively. Therefore, the motor skill development of a child in these formative years sets the stage for their ability to participate and function effectively in activities as they continue to grow and mature.

The concept of motor ability has been proposed to describe a person's level of performance when carrying out various motor activities. This includes both gross motor skills, which entail the coordinated participation of vast muscle groups and the movement of the entire body, and fine motor skills, which involve the coordination of minute muscle movements, such as those of the fingers. For children, gross motor activities include running, jumping, sitting, etc., whereas fine motor movements consist of writing, holding something, pinching, etc. (Meylia, et al., 2022). Recent studies, such as the one conducted by Veldman et al. (2021), where the researchers aimed to investigate the association between physical activity and health and development in children under 5 years. One of the findings has shown that physical activity has a significant impact on motor development outcomes in young children. They found

moderate evidence supporting the positive effects of physical activity on motor development in children under the age of 5, ultimately increasing self-confidence and self-reliance in children. This highlights the importance of physical activity in promoting emotional development during these critical years.

Play at times may not be perceived as a separate learning task but serves as the primary way young children engage in physical activity (Prioreshi et al., 2020). Along with the opportunities for early learning and responsive caring, free play is an excellent approach that allows children to experiment with and practice a variety of motor skills (Flores, et al., 2019). This type of play stimulates the body's muscles, promoting improved blood circulation and facilitating smooth blood flow to the brain. The fun that emerges as a result of play reinforces children to engage in the same activity over and over again, hence they do not realize that they are developing their muscles in the process (Sutapa, et al., 2021). This intertwining of pleasure and physical engagement not only supports the enhancement of motor skills but also plays a crucial role in emotional development. The positive emotions associated with enjoyable play experiences contribute to a child's overall well-being, fostering a sense of joy, satisfaction, and self-confidence. In this way, the seemingly simple act of play becomes a powerful catalyst for the holistic development of a child, encompassing both physical and emotional dimensions.

By indulging in Free play, children dynamically adjust their motor responses to the specific demands of each task and situation. Exposure to diverse play environments enables them to adapt their motor skills to the challenges presented by various activities. Through these varied play experiences, children undergo continuous development concurrently influencing their emotional development. This intersection between free play and motor skills underscores the intricate relationship between a child's active engagement, adaptive responses and the ongoing evolution of their developmental capabilities encompassing the emotional dimension of free play.

CONCLUSION

Owing to a comprehensive review of the existing literature on free play, it can be concluded that free play as a method of teaching and learning represents a groundbreaking paradigm shift in the domain of early childhood education. Free play nurtures emotional growth, enables children to express freely, navigate their emotions, cultivate social skills, bolster resilience, and express their feelings within a supportive learning environment. It empowers children to learn exclusively, administering increased engagement and intrinsic motivation. With the teacher being a facilitator only, the approach digs into the exploration of child's creativity and the development of inner-self. However, the findings of the review point out towards the amalgamation of free play with teacher directed learning exposure, in order to extract out the potential benefits of the method. By exploring existing policies and practices in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), it enhances our understanding of how play-based approaches can foster children's overall development, improve educational experiences, and support the learning outcomes.

This study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of play-based teaching methods, guiding educators and policymakers in designing appropriate curriculum and instructional strategies. Additionally, the lack of proper training for the teachers can also reduce the effectiveness of free play. As a result, it is essential to address educational needs prior to implementing free play. In order to assist stakeholders in making decisions about whether or not to include the technique in the preschool educational framework, the analysis also offers empirical information. This review makes clear that free play can serve as an extremely helpful tool for children to enhance their academic and emotional development, preparing them to function at their best as they grow into adolescent. Future studies may examine other crucial aspects including psychological, cognitive and social development as the focus of the present study was restricted to emotional development only. As the literature on Free play continues to elucidate the advantages of free play in early childhood education, it is evident that it signifies a potential in the cultivation of emotional development, laying the foundation stone for an extended learning experience.

Competing Interest

The authors had no competing interests.

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