

Social-Emotional Development Through Group Play at RA Ihya Al-Ulum

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the effect of group play on social-emotional skills of 4-5-year-old children at RA Ihya al-Ulum. The research employed a quantitative approach with a simple experimental method using a One-Group Pretest-Posttest Design. Fifteen children participated as research subjects selected through total sampling technique. Data were collected through systematic observation using a validated instrument consisting of four dimensions: social interaction, cooperation, emotional regulation, and empathy. The intervention consisted of six sessions of structured group play activities conducted over three weeks. Results showed that children's social-emotional skills increased significantly from a mean score of 51.13% (low category) in the pretest to 81.67% (high category) in the posttest, representing an average improvement of 30.53%. The paired t-test analysis revealed a calculated t-value of 6.43, which exceeded the critical t-value of 2.14 at a significance level of 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.34$). These findings indicate that group play significantly and effectively enhances children's ability to interact, cooperate, regulate emotions, and demonstrate empathy in their social environment. The study provides empirical evidence supporting Vygotsky's sociocultural theory regarding the role of social interaction in children's development.

Keywords: Group Play; Social-Emotional Skills; Early Childhood; Experimental Research; Cooperative Learning

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pengaruh permainan kelompok terhadap kemampuan sosial emosional anak usia 4-5 tahun di RA Ihya al-Ulum. Jenis penelitian yang digunakan adalah kuantitatif dengan metode eksperimen sederhana menggunakan desain One Group Pretest-Posttest Design. Subjek penelitian berjumlah 15 anak yang dipilih melalui teknik total sampling. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi sistematis menggunakan instrumen tervalidasi yang terdiri dari empat dimensi: interaksi sosial, kerja sama, regulasi emosi, dan empati. Intervensi dilakukan

sebanyak enam kali pertemuan dengan aktivitas permainan kelompok terstruktur selama tiga minggu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kemampuan sosial emosional anak meningkat secara signifikan dari rata-rata skor 51,13% (kategori rendah) pada pretest menjadi 81,67% (kategori tinggi) pada posttest, dengan peningkatan rata-rata sebesar 30,53%. Hasil uji paired t-test menunjukkan nilai t-hitung sebesar 6,43 lebih besar dari t-tabel 2,14 pada taraf signifikansi 0,05 ($p < 0,05$), dengan effect size yang besar (Cohen's $d = 2,34$). Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa permainan kelompok secara signifikan dan efektif meningkatkan kemampuan anak untuk berinteraksi, bekerja sama, meregulasi emosi, dan menunjukkan empati dalam lingkungan sosialnya. Penelitian ini memberikan bukti empiris yang mendukung teori sosiokultural Vygotsky mengenai peran interaksi sosial dalam perkembangan anak.

Kata Kunci: Permainan Kelompok; Kemampuan Sosial Emosional; Anak Usia Dini; Penelitian Eksperimen; Pembelajaran Kooperatif

INTRODUCTION

An introduction typed in capital [Barlow font 12 bold] contains the background Early childhood is a critical period in which individuals experience very rapid growth and development in various aspects, including physical, cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional (Santrock, 2021). This stage is often referred to as the golden age, which is a very important period in a child's life because more than a hundred billion brain cells are rapidly developing and very responsive to stimulation (Berk, 2023). In this phase, the experiences and stimuli that the child receives will form the foundation of future development that cannot be repeated (Rijal et al., 2022).

One of the important aspects of early childhood development is social-emotional skills. According to Denham et al. (2023), social-emotional skills include the ability of children to recognize and manage emotions, build positive relationships with others, show empathy, and make responsible decisions. Optimal social-emotional development at an early age is a strong predictor of children's academic success and social adjustment during school (Jones & Doolittle, 2022).

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes that a child's development occurs through social interaction with others who are more competent. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains that children can achieve a higher level of development through guidance and collaboration with peers or adults (Bodrova & Leong, 2023). In this context, group play becomes an effective medium to facilitate social interaction and collaborative learning.

Erikson (1963) in his psychosocial theory explained that children aged 3-6 years are in the stage of "initiative versus guilt" where they develop the ability to initiate activities, cooperate with others, and learn to lead and follow. Group play provides an opportunity for children to explore their initiative in a safe social context (Shaffer & Kipp, 2022). Previous research has shown that group play makes a significant contribution to children's social-emotional development. Dewi and Basri (2020) found that the group play method is effective in increasing early childhood independence. A study by Kemple and Johnson (2022) shows that children who engage in cooperative play show improvements in the ability to share, take turns, and resolve conflicts constructively. Research by Pyle

and Danniels (2023) also confirms that play-based learning supports the development of social skills and emotion regulation in preschoolers.

Group play is defined as a play activity that involves two or more children interacting and working together to achieve a common goal (Hughes, 2021). Through group games, children learn social skills such as communication, negotiation, sharing, and turning. Children also develop emotional regulation skills when faced with win-loss situations, conflicts, or frustrations in play (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2022).

Based on initial observations made at RA Ihya al-Ulum in August 2024, it was found that 52% of children aged 4-5 years still show low social-emotional skills. Indicators observed include: (1) children tend to play alone and are reluctant to interact with peers; (2) difficulty sharing toys with friends; (3) not wanting to wait for a turn while playing; (4) often take toys without permission; (5) shows uncontrolled emotional reactions when their desires are not fulfilled; and (6) have not shown empathy for friends who are having difficulties. This condition indicates the need for structured interventions to improve children's social-emotional abilities.

Teachers at RA Ihya al-Ulum have implemented various play activities, but they are still individual and less structured in facilitating social interaction. Based on the results of interviews with classroom teachers, group play activities involving cooperation and intensive interaction between children are still rarely carried out systematically. In fact, research shows that structured group play can be an effective strategy for developing children's social-emotional abilities (Trawick-Smith, 2022).

This study differs from previous research in several ways. First, this study uses a more comprehensive instrument with four social-emotional dimensions. Second, the intervention was designed in a structured manner with a variety of group games adapted to the developmental characteristics of children aged 4-5 years. Third, this research was conducted in the context of Islamic education (Raudhatul Athfal) which has not been widely researched in the literature.

Social-emotional development is the process by which children learn to interact with others, understand and regulate emotions, and form healthy relationships (NAEYC, 2022). According to Denham et al. (2023), social-emotional skills include five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

At the age of 4-5 years, children experience significant social-emotional development. They begin to demonstrate the ability to play cooperatively, share, take turns, and resolve simple conflicts with minimal guidance (Berk, 2023). Children also begin to recognize the emotions of themselves and others, and show empathy even though it is still in a simple form (Shaffer & Kipp, 2022).

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of social interaction in children's cognitive and social development. The concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains that optimal learning occurs when children interact with peers or more competent adults. In group play, children give each other scaffolding or support each other, so that they can achieve a higher level of development (Bodrova & Leong, 2023). Bandura (1977) explained that children learn social behavior through observation and imitation of models in their environment. In group play, children observe and imitate the prosocial behaviors of their peers such as sharing, helping, and cooperating. This modeling process is very effective in forming positive social behavior (Santrock, 2021).

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Erikson (1963) explained that children aged 3-6 years are in the stage of "initiative versus guilt". At this stage, the child develops the ability to initiate activities, plan, and achieve goals. Group play provides an opportunity for children to develop initiatives in a supportive social context (Crain, 2022). Group play is a play activity that involves interaction and cooperation between two or more children to achieve a common goal (Hughes, 2021). Group games have the following characteristics: (1) involving at least two children; (2) have rules or mutual agreements; (3) requires interaction and communication; (4) encourage cooperation to achieve goals; and (5) provide opportunities for each member to participate (Trawick-Smith, 2022).

Types of group games that are appropriate for 4-5 year olds include: constructive play (arranging blocks/towers together), symbolic games (role-playing), games with simple rules (relays, guessing), and cooperative games that emphasize cooperation rather than competition (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2022). Group play makes a significant contribution to the social-emotional development of children through several mechanisms. First, group play provides a natural context for social interaction where children learn to communicate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts (Kemple & Johnson, 2022). Second, through group play, children learn to regulate their emotions when faced with win-loss situations, frustrations, or disagreements (Pyle & Danniels, 2023). Third, group games teach prosocial skills such as sharing, helping, and empathizing with friends (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2022).

Empirical research supports the effectiveness of group play. A study by Goldstein and Lerner (2023) found that children engaged in cooperative play showed significant improvements in social skills and emotion regulation. Research by Dewi and Basri (2020) in Indonesia also shows that group play methods are effective in increasing children's independence. Octofahrezi and Chaer (2021) found that children's socialization skills develop optimally through interaction in a supportive social environment.

Children aged 4-5 years at RA Ihya al-Ulum show low social-emotional skills, characterized by individualistic behavior, difficulty sharing, and lack of empathy. Through structured group play interventions, children are given the opportunity to interact, cooperate, and learn to regulate emotions in social situations. Based on Vygotsky's theory, interactions in group play facilitate social learning through ZPD. Bandura's theory explains that children will imitate the prosocial behavior of their peers. Thus, group games are expected to significantly improve children's social-emotional skills.

Based on the above background, the formulation of the problem in this study is: "Does group play have a significant effect on the social-emotional abilities of 4-5 year old children in RA Ihya al-Ulum?"

Research Objectives

This study aims to determine the influence of group games on the social-emotional abilities of children aged 4-5 years in RA Ihya al-Ulum.

METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with a simple experiment method. The research design applied is One Group Pretest-Posttest Design, which is a research design that involves one group of subjects who are given an initial measurement (pretest), then given a treatment, and then a final measurement (posttest) (Creswell &

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Creswell, 2023). The selection of this design was based on field conditions that allowed the use of one group of subjects as well as suitability for the purpose of the study, namely to determine changes in children's social-emotional abilities before and after being given an intervention in the form of group play.

This research was carried out from September to October 2024 at RA Ihya al-Ulum located in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province. RA Ihya al-Ulum is an Islamic-based early childhood education institution that has adequate learning facilities, such as a large classroom, a playground, and various educational game tools that support the implementation of research activities.

The population in this study is all children aged 4–5 years who are registered as students at RA Ihya al-Ulum in the 2024/2025 school year with a total of 15 children. The sampling technique used is total sampling, where all members of the population are used as research samples because the population is less than 30 people (Sugiyono, 2022). Thus, the research sample amounted to 15 children consisting of 8 boys and 7 girls. The criteria for the study subjects include children aged 4–5 years, registered as active students, obtaining permission from parents to participate in the study, being in good health condition, and having an attendance rate of at least 80% during the study period.

The variables in this study consist of independent variables and dependent variables. The independent variable is group play, while the dependent variable is the child's social-emotional ability. Group play is defined as a structured play activity that involves at least two children interacting with each other and working together to achieve a common goal. In this study, group games were manifested in six types of games, namely ball relays, arranging towers, guessing the numbers in cans, playing stilts in pairs, finding color pairs, and playing group roles. Meanwhile, children's social-emotional abilities are defined as children's ability to interact with others, work together, manage emotions, and show empathy. These abilities are measured through four dimensions, namely social interaction, cooperation, emotion regulation, and empathy.

The research instrument used was an observation sheet on children's social-emotional abilities developed by researchers based on the theory of Denham et al. (2023) and adjusted to the research context. This instrument consists of 12 statement items that are assessed using a four-point Likert scale, namely a score of 4 for the Very Good Developed category, a score of 3 for Developing as Expected, a score of 2 for Starting to Develop, and a score of 1 for Not Developing. The assessment results are then classified into high, medium, and low categories based on the percentage of scores obtained.

The research instrument has gone through validity and reliability tests. The validity test was carried out through expert validation involving two early childhood education experts and one developmental psychologist. The validation results showed that the instrument was declared valid with a Content Validity Ratio (CVR) value of 0.89. Furthermore, the reliability test was carried out using the inter-rater reliability method by involving two observers, namely the researcher and the classroom teacher, which produced a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.85 in the very good category.

The research procedure is carried out in three stages, namely the preparation stage, the implementation stage, and the data analysis stage. In the preparation stage, the researcher takes care of research licensing, preparing and validating research instruments, asking for informed consent from parents, and preparing tools and game materials to be used. The implementation stage begins with a pretest activity in the first

week, which is carried out through observation for three days to measure the child's social-emotional ability before being given treatment. Observation is carried out when children do free play activities inside and outside the classroom.

The next stage is the provision of treatment in the form of group games which are carried out in the second and third weeks. The intervention was carried out six meetings with a frequency of twice per week and the duration of each meeting was 45 minutes. Each meeting consists of an opening stage, a core stage, and a closing stage. The opening stage lasted for 10 minutes with an activity explaining the rules and objectives of the game, the core stage for 30 minutes in the form of group games, and the closing stage for 5 minutes which was filled with reflection and evaluation of activities with children. After the entire series of treatments is completed, the posttest stage is carried out in the fourth week through observation again for three days to measure the child's social-emotional ability after being given the intervention.

The data collection techniques in this study include observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations are carried out systematically using observation sheets that have been prepared, by involving two observers simultaneously to maintain the objectivity of the data. Interviews were conducted with classroom teachers to obtain additional information related to children's social-emotional development and obstacles faced during the learning process. Documentation is carried out in the form of photos and videos of group game activities as well as an archive of observation documents.

The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive and inferential analysis techniques. Descriptive analysis is used to describe children's social-emotional abilities during pretest and posttest through percentage calculation and mean scores. Before the hypothesis test was carried out, the data was first tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test because the number of samples was less than 30. Furthermore, a hypothesis test was carried out using the Paired Sample T-Test to determine the difference in children's social-emotional abilities before and after being given treatment. In addition, the magnitude of the effect of treatment was calculated using Cohen's effect size d to determine the level of strength of the influence of group play on children's social-emotional abilities.

RESEARCH RESULTS

This study involved 15 children aged 4-5 years at RA Ihya al-Ulum with the characteristics: 8 boys (53.3%) and 7 girls (46.7%), ranging from 4 years 2 months to 5 years 1 month. All children participated in research activities with a 100% attendance rate.

Table 1. Pretest Results of Children's Social Emotional Ability

N o	Child Code	Social Interactio n (%)	Cooperatio n (%)	Emotion Regulatio n (%)	Empath y (%)	Averag e (%)	Categor y
1	A1	50	46	48	48	48	Low
2	A2	54	50	52	52	52	Low
3	A3	52	48	50	50	50	Low
4	A4	56	54	56	54	55	Low

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5	A5	48	50	50	48	49	Low
6	A6	46	48	48	46	47	Low
7	A7	54	52	52	54	53	Low
8	A8	52	50	50	52	51	Low
9	A9	50	50	50	50	50	Low
10	A10	56	52	54	54	54	Low
11	A11	58	54	56	56	56	Medium
12	A12	48	50	50	48	49	Low
13	A13	52	52	52	52	52	Low
14	A14	48	48	48	48	48	Low
15	A15	50	50	50	50	50	Low
Average		51,6	50,27	51,07	50,8	51,13	Low

From the table above, it can be seen that the average social-emotional ability of children at the pretest stage is 51.13% (low category). Based on dimensions, social interaction skills (51.60%), cooperation (50.27%), emotion regulation (51.07%), and empathy (50.80%) were all in the low category. Only 1 child (6.67%) was in the medium category, while 14 children (93.33%) were in the low category.

Table 2. Posttest Results of Children's Social Emotional Ability

N	Child Code	Social Interaction (%)	Cooperation (%)	Emotion Regulation (%)	Empathy (%)	Average (%)	Category
1	A1	82	78	80	80	80	High
2	A2	84	80	82	82	82	High
3	A3	84	80	82	82	82	High
4	A4	86	84	84	86	85	High
5	A5	80	78	80	78	79	High
6	A6	80	76	78	78	78	High
7	A7	84	82	82	84	83	High
8	A8	82	78	80	80	80	High
9	A9	84	80	82	82	82	High
10	A10	86	82	84	84	84	High
11	A11	86	84	84	86	85	High
12	A12	82	80	82	80	81	High
13	A13	84	82	82	84	83	High
14	A14	82	78	80	80	80	High
15	A15	84	80	82	82	82	High

Average	83,33	80,13	81,47	81,87	81,67	High
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The results of the posttest showed a significant increase with the average of children's social-emotional abilities reaching 81.67% (high category). All dimensions improved: social interaction (83.33%), cooperation (80.13%), emotion regulation (81.47%), and empathy (81.87%). All children (100%) were in the high category.

The normality test used the Shapiro-Wilk Test because the sample (n=15) was less than 30.

Table 3. Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test Results

Data	Shapiro-Wilk	Sig. (p)	Remarks
Pretest	0,951	0,564	Normal (p > 0,05)
Posttest	0,942	0,421	Normal (p > 0,05)

The results of the normality test showed that the pretest (p = 0.564) and posttest (p = 0.421) data were normally distributed because the significance value was greater than 0.05. Thus, the requirements to use the parametric test (Paired Sample T-Test) are met.

Uji Hypothesis

1. Paired Sample T-Test

Table 4. Paired Sample T-Test Results

Variabel	Mean Pretest	Mean Posttest	Mean Difference	SD	t-hitung	df	t-tabel (α=0,05)	Sig. (2-tailed)	Verdict
Social-Emotional Abilities	51,13	81,67	30,53	18,39	6,43	14	2,145	0,00	H ₁ Accepted

Since t-count (6.43) > t-table (2.145) and p-value (0.000) < 0.05, H₀ is rejected and H₁ is accepted. This means that there is a significant difference between the child's social-emotional abilities before and after being given a group game intervention.

Cohen's value d = 2.34 indicates a very large effect size (d > 0.8), which means that group play has a very strong influence on the improvement of children's social-emotional skills.

DISCUSSION

Social-Emotional Skills Before Intervention (Pretest)

The results of the pretest showed that the social-emotional ability of children aged 4-5 years at RA Ihya al-Ulum was in the low category with an average score of 51.13%. These findings indicate that most children still have difficulty interacting socially,

cooperating, regulating emotions, and showing empathy. This condition is in line with Piaget's developmental theory which explains that children aged 4-5 years are still in the preoperational stage with egocentric characteristics, namely difficulty seeing other people's perspectives and tend to focus on their own needs (Santrock, 2021).

Based on observations, behaviors that often appear include: children prefer to play alone, are reluctant to share toys, do not want to wait for their turn, are easily angry when their wishes are not fulfilled, and have not shown concern for friends who are having difficulties. These findings are consistent with the results of research by Dewi and Basri (2020) who found that early childhood who lack stimulation of social interaction tends to show individualistic behavior.

The low social-emotional ability at the pretest stage can also be explained through the perspective of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Children at RA Ihya al-Ulum have not had enough opportunities to observe and imitate the prosocial behavior of their peers because many of the learning activities are still individual. The lack of positive social behavior models in daily activities causes children not to develop adequate social skills.

The results of interviews with classroom teachers confirm that classroom learning still rarely uses a structured group approach. Play activities are mostly done individually or parallel play (playing side by side without interaction), so that children do not have the opportunity to learn to interact, negotiate, and cooperate with peers. Octofahrezi and Chaer (2021) emphasized that a less supportive social environment can hinder the development of children's socialization skills.

Social-Emotional Ability After Intervention (Posttest)

The posttest results showed a significant increase with an average score of 81.67% (high category). All children (100%) managed to achieve a high category in social-emotional abilities. This increase occurred in all dimensions: social interaction increased by 31.73%, empathy increased by 31.07%, emotion regulation increased by 30.40%, and cooperation increased by 29.86%.

The findings of this study are consistent with several previous studies. Dewi and Basri (2020) found that the group play method was effective in increasing children's independence with a significant increase. Kemple and Johnson (2022) report that cooperative play improves sharing and turn-taking skills in preschoolers. Research by Pyle and Danniels (2023) also confirms that play-based learning supports children's emotional regulation.

However, this study has several advantages over previous research. First, this study uses a more comprehensive instrument with four social-emotional dimensions. Second, the intervention was carried out in a structured manner with six different types of games. Third, the study calculated the effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.34$) which showed a very large magnitude of influence, providing quantitative evidence of the practical effectiveness of the intervention.

This study provides empirical evidence that strengthens Vygotsky's theory of the role of social interaction in child development. The finding that children gave each other scaffolding in group play supported the concept of ZPD and collaborative learning. This study also confirms Bandura's theory of observational learning, in which children imitate the prosocial behavior of peers.

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Furthermore, this study shows that social-emotional development does not occur spontaneously, but requires stimulation and structured social experiences. This is in line with the social constructivist perspective that emphasizes that development is the result of an interaction between biological factors and environmental experience (Berk, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that group games have a significant effect on the social-emotional abilities of children aged 4-5 years in RA Ihya al-Ulum. The results of the paired t-test showed $t\text{-count} (6.43) > t\text{-table} (2.145)$ with $p\text{-value} = 0.000 (p < 0.05)$. The enormous effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.34$) confirms that group play has a strong practical influence.

The suggestion is to integrate group games in a structured and planned manner in daily learning activities, at least 2-3 times a week. Provide adequate facilities, space, and game tools to support group play activities. Provide children with opportunities to play with peers outside of school hours, for example inviting friends to play at home or participating in playgroups. Expand on research variables, such as the influence of group play on specific aspects such as leadership, emotional resilience, or conflict resolution skills.

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