

Optimizing Early Childhood Mental Health Through Social–Emotional Stimulation Using Educational Play Equipment (APE)

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ABSTRACT Early childhood mental health is a fundamental aspect that determines the quality of children's social, emotional, and cognitive development in later stages. One of the strategies to support early childhood mental health is through the use of Educational Play Tools (APE). This study aims to analyze the optimization of early childhood mental health through social–emotional stimulation by utilizing APE. The method used in this research is a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. Data were obtained from various relevant national journal articles through a systematic process of selection, evaluation, and synthesis of research findings related to the use of APE in supporting children's social–emotional development. The results of the study indicate that: (1) social–emotional stimulation plays an important role in shaping healthy mental development in early childhood, particularly in terms of emotional regulation, empathy, and social interaction skills; (2) APE has proven effective in stimulating social skills, improving emotional regulation, strengthening empathy, and helping children cope with stress through play activities; and (3) the mechanism for optimizing mental health through APE occurs through structured learning environments, positive peer interactions, and play processes that facilitate the development of resilience, self-confidence, and problem-solving skills.

KEYWORDS: *Educational Play Tools (APE), Mental Health, Emotional Development*

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood mental health has become an increasingly important issue because of its broad impact on children's psychological well-being, social development, and long-term life outcomes. Mental health problems that emerge during early childhood can influence emotional regulation, social relationships, and learning readiness. Research indicates that emotional and behavioral problems can appear as early as the preschool years, with a significant proportion of children showing symptoms of anxiety, behavioral disobedience, and limited social skills (Yonaevy & Prananingrum, 2023). These conditions highlight the urgency of early intervention, as children who experience social-emotional difficulties during early childhood are more likely to face ongoing mental health challenges throughout later childhood and adolescence (Albariq et al., 2023). Without appropriate support, delays in social-emotional development may lead to maladaptive behaviors, academic difficulties, and an increased risk of psychological problems in

later life.

Mental health education is one of the key strategies for promoting psychological well-being among young children. Educational programs that incorporate mental health awareness and emotional development can help reduce the likelihood of mental health problems, including stress, anxiety, and depression (Fang, 2023). Schools and early childhood education centers play an essential role in providing emotionally supportive environments where children can develop self-confidence and social competence. A supportive learning environment allows children to express their emotions, interact positively with peers, and develop coping skills for dealing with challenges. Despite its importance, mental health education is often overlooked and not treated as a priority in early childhood education programs. In many cases, academic readiness receives more attention than emotional development, even though both aspects are equally important for children's overall well-being.

Early childhood education is designed to stimulate and support children's development through guidance, care, and structured learning activities. During early childhood, often referred to as the "golden age," children experience rapid growth and development across multiple domains. These domains include physical-motor development, cognitive development, language development, artistic expression, social-emotional development, and moral development (Rusmiati & Muthalib, 2021). Because development occurs rapidly during this period, appropriate stimulation is essential to ensure optimal growth. Delays in one developmental domain, particularly social-emotional development, can negatively affect other areas of development. For example, children who struggle with emotional regulation may find it difficult to focus on learning activities or maintain positive relationships with peers.

Social-emotional stimulation is particularly important because it helps children develop essential life skills such as empathy, cooperation, and self-control. Children who develop strong social-emotional skills are better able to adapt to new environments and handle stressful situations. Conversely, children who lack these skills may experience difficulties in social interaction and emotional expression. These difficulties can increase the risk of behavioral problems and mental health issues later in life (Albariq et al., 2023). Therefore, early childhood education programs should include structured activities that support social-emotional development as part of a comprehensive approach to mental health promotion.

One effective way to support children's social-emotional development is through the use of educational play tools, commonly referred to as Educational Play Equipment (APE). Educational play tools are designed specifically for young children to support developmental growth according to their age and developmental stage (Jazariyah & Durtam, 2021). These tools provide opportunities for children to explore, experiment, and interact with their environment in ways that support learning and development. Educational play tools can be used to develop various aspects of development, including physical, cognitive, language, and social skills (Nasirun et al., 2021). By engaging in play-based learning activities, children can develop emotional resilience and improve their ability to interact with others.

Educational play tools are widely used in early childhood education settings such as preschools and kindergartens. These tools offer numerous benefits, including stimulating concentration, introducing basic concepts such as colors and shapes, developing logical thinking skills, and improving coordination between the left and right hemispheres of the brain (Purnawati et al., 2022). Play-based activities also encourage creativity and imagination, which are essential for cognitive and emotional development. Through play, children can express their feelings and develop problem-solving skills in a natural and enjoyable way.

Various types of educational play tools, such as building blocks, puzzles, dolls, and finger puppets, can serve as effective media for stimulating children's social-emotional development. These play tools encourage interaction and cooperation among children, helping them develop communication skills and emotional awareness. Research suggests that educational play activities can help reduce the risk of social-emotional problems by providing opportunities for children to

practice positive behaviors and emotional regulation (Rakhmawati, 2022). For example, role-playing activities using dolls or puppets can help children understand different emotions and learn appropriate ways to respond to social situations.

The development of social-emotional skills through educational play tools also plays a crucial role in strengthening children's emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence helps children recognize and manage their emotions while understanding the feelings of others. Strong emotional intelligence can reduce the risk of anxiety and depression and improve children's ability to cope with challenges such as peer conflict or bullying (Sudaryanti et al., 2024). Educational play tools provide a safe and supportive environment where children can practice these skills and develop confidence in their abilities.

Despite the benefits of educational play tools, their use in early childhood education programs is not always optimized. Some educators may lack knowledge about how to use play tools effectively to support mental health development. In other cases, limited resources may restrict access to appropriate play materials. To maximize the benefits of educational play tools, educators need to select materials that are appropriate for children's developmental levels and learning needs. Educational play tools should be safe, engaging, and adaptable to different learning activities.

Effective educational play tools should meet several important criteria. First, they should be appropriate for the child's age and developmental stage. Second, they should support multiple aspects of development, including cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Third, they should be safe and made from materials that do not pose risks to children's health. Finally, they should encourage creativity and imagination by allowing children to explore different ways of playing and learning (Jazariyah & Durtam, 2021). When these criteria are met, educational play tools can serve as powerful tools for promoting early childhood mental health.

In conclusion, early childhood mental health is a critical aspect of development that requires careful attention and appropriate intervention. Educational play tools offer a practical and effective strategy for supporting social-emotional development and promoting mental well-being among young children. By integrating educational play tools into early childhood education programs, educators can create supportive learning environments that foster emotional growth and resilience. This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of educational play tools in optimizing early childhood mental health and to identify factors that influence the success of such interventions. Strengthening early childhood mental health through play-based learning can help build a strong foundation for children's future development and overall well-being.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. The purpose of this method was to systematically, structurally, and comprehensively examine previous studies related to the optimization of early childhood mental health through social-emotional stimulation using educational play tools. A Systematic Literature Review is a research approach that involves identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing findings from relevant studies in order to produce a comprehensive understanding of a particular topic (Çakmak, 2024; Putri et al., 2025). This method enables researchers to integrate findings from multiple studies and identify patterns, gaps, and trends in the literature. Through this approach, the researcher analyzed various scientific findings to obtain a comprehensive picture of the role of educational play tools in supporting early childhood social-emotional development and mental health.

The data sources used in this study were derived from national journal articles published in the Google Scholar database. The selected articles focused on early childhood mental health, social-emotional development, and the use of educational play tools as learning media. Social-emotional development is considered an important foundation for children's mental health, as it supports emotional regulation, social interaction, and adaptive behavior (Hosokawa et al., 2024). Previous studies have shown that early stimulation of social-emotional skills plays a significant

role in promoting children’s well-being and preventing future behavioral and emotional problems (Devine et al., 2025). Therefore, the use of educational play tools is considered an effective medium to stimulate children’s social and emotional abilities through structured and meaningful play activities.

The research procedure was conducted through several systematic stages. The first stage was the identification of articles through database searching using relevant keywords such as early childhood mental health, social–emotional development, and educational play tools. Systematic searching is an essential step in an SLR because it ensures that the collected studies are relevant and comprehensive (Kitchenham et al., 2024). The second stage involved screening articles based on titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the research topic. Articles that did not match the research focus were excluded at this stage. The third stage consisted of an eligibility assessment through a full-text review of the selected articles to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria. These criteria included relevance to early childhood mental health, discussion of social–emotional stimulation, and the use of educational play tools as part of the learning process. The final stage was data synthesis, in which the findings from the selected articles were combined and analyzed to generate meaningful conclusions. This structured procedure ensures that the review process is transparent, systematic, and replicable (Çakmak, 2024; Putri et al., 2025).

The data analysis technique used in this study involved grouping, comparing, and synthesizing findings from the selected articles. The grouping process was conducted by categorizing studies based on themes such as emotional development, social interaction, and play-based learning. The comparison process allowed the researcher to identify similarities and differences among the findings of previous studies. Finally, the synthesis process integrated the findings into a coherent explanation of how educational play tools can optimize early childhood mental health through social–emotional stimulation. This analytical approach enabled the researcher to identify the mechanisms through which play activities contribute to children’s emotional regulation, social competence, and psychological well-being.

Overall, the use of a qualitative Systematic Literature Review method provided a comprehensive understanding of the importance of social–emotional stimulation through educational play tools in supporting early childhood mental health. By synthesizing findings from multiple studies, this research highlights the significant role of structured play environments in fostering emotional resilience, social competence, and positive mental health outcomes in young children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on optimizing early childhood mental health through social–emotional stimulation using Educational Play Tools (APE). The findings are organized into three main themes: (1) the concept of early childhood mental health and the urgency of social–emotional stimulation, (2) the role of educational play tools in social–emotional stimulation, and (3) the mechanisms through which educational play tools optimize mental health in early childhood.

Table 1 Summary of Systematic Literature Review Findings on Early Childhood Mental Health Optimization through Social–Emotional Stimulation Using Educational Play Tools

Subsection	Focus of Discussion	Main Findings (SLR Results)
3.1 Concept of Early Childhood Mental Health and the Urgency of Social–Emotional Stimulation	Definition, urgency, and impact of lack of stimulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Children require emotional regulation from an early age. b. Empathy and social interaction are indicators of mental health. c. Lack of social–emotional stimulation increases the risk of anxiety, depression, and

3.2 The Role of Educational Play Tools (APE) in Social-Emotional Stimulation	Functions of APE, forms of stimulation, and effects on children	<p>maladaptive behavior.</p> <p>d. A responsive caregiving environment strongly determines the quality of mental health in the future.</p> <p>a. APE improves social skills such as sharing, cooperation, and communication.</p> <p>b. APE helps emotional regulation through play activities.</p> <p>c. Role-playing with APE enhances empathy and the ability to understand others' emotions.</p> <p>d. APE provides a safe space for children to explore without pressure.</p> <p>a. APE creates structured learning environments that facilitate positive social interaction.</p> <p>b. Play activities help children manage stress and channel negative emotions adaptively.</p> <p>c. Play interactions improve resilience, self-confidence, and problem-solving skills.</p> <p>d. Educational play activities serve as protective factors against future mental health risks.</p>
3.3 Mechanisms for Optimizing Mental Health Through APE and Social-Emotional Stimulation	Processes, mechanisms, and long-term impacts	

The Concept of Early Childhood Mental Health and the Urgency of Social-Emotional Stimulation

Early childhood mental health refers to a state of emotional, psychological, and social well-being that enables children to function effectively within their developmental environment. Mentally healthy children demonstrate the ability to regulate emotions, form relationships, and adapt to social contexts appropriately (Hosokawa et al., 2024). Early childhood mental health is not limited to the absence of psychological disorders but includes the capacity to grow, interact socially, and achieve developmental potential (Ji et al., 2025). This broader understanding emphasizes that mental health is an active developmental process shaped by environmental interactions and learning experiences.

Children with positive mental health typically demonstrate emotional regulation, empathy, social competence, and adaptive behavior. These competencies enable children to build meaningful relationships and cope effectively with environmental challenges. Emotional regulation, for example, allows children to control impulses, manage frustration, and respond appropriately to stressful situations (Sop, 2024). Empathy enables children to understand others' feelings and perspectives, which is essential for forming positive social relationships.

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that social-emotional stimulation plays a critical role in shaping early childhood mental health. Social-emotional development begins early in life and continues to evolve through interactions with caregivers and peers (Ji et al., 2025). Early childhood represents a sensitive period during which emotional and social competencies develop rapidly. During this period, children learn to interpret social cues, regulate

emotions, and establish social relationships.

Social–emotional stimulation is particularly important because it supports the development of emotional regulation and empathy. Positive social interaction and emotional support from caregivers and educators help children develop these essential skills. Emotional regulation skills allow children to respond appropriately to challenging situations and reduce emotional distress. Children who develop strong emotional regulation skills are more likely to demonstrate adaptive behavior and resilience.

Conversely, insufficient social–emotional stimulation can negatively impact children’s mental health. Children who lack emotional support or opportunities for social interaction may experience difficulties in emotional regulation and social competence. These difficulties increase the risk of anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems later in life (Tutkun & Eskidemir Meral, 2025). Research has shown that deficits in social–emotional skills are associated with academic difficulties, peer rejection, and behavioral challenges (Hosokawa et al., 2024).

The caregiving environment plays a crucial role in shaping early childhood mental health. Responsive caregiving environments that provide emotional support and consistent interaction contribute to positive developmental outcomes. Children who grow up in supportive environments are more likely to develop strong emotional regulation and social skills (Pratiwi et al., 2023). These skills serve as protective factors against mental health problems.

The findings also indicate that early intervention is essential for preventing long-term mental health problems. Social–emotional development in early childhood predicts later mental health outcomes and social functioning (Ji et al., 2025). Therefore, providing appropriate stimulation during early childhood is critical for promoting positive mental health and preventing psychological difficulties.

The Role of Educational Play Tools in Social–Emotional Stimulation

Educational Play Tools (APE) play a significant role in supporting social–emotional development in early childhood. Educational play tools are learning materials specifically designed to stimulate development through structured play activities. These tools provide opportunities for children to explore concepts and develop skills in a playful and engaging way (Hikmah et al., 2024). In early childhood education, play is considered the primary method of learning. Play-based learning allows children to develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills simultaneously. Educational play tools enhance this process by providing structured opportunities for interaction and exploration (Widjayatri et al., 2023). Through play activities, children learn to communicate, cooperate, and share with others.

One of the most significant contributions of educational play tools is the development of social skills. Play activities encourage children to interact with peers and develop communication skills. Social interaction during play helps children learn cooperation, sharing, and conflict resolution (Acar & Kaya, 2024). These skills are essential for building positive relationships and maintaining social well-being. Block play is one example of an educational play activity that supports social–emotional development. Research indicates that block-building activities enhance cooperation and social interaction among children (Sari et al., 2025). During block play, children learn to negotiate roles, share materials, and collaborate to achieve shared goals. These experiences help children develop teamwork and communication skills.

Role-playing activities also contribute significantly to social–emotional development. Role-playing allows children to explore different perspectives and understand the emotions of others (Irmayanti et al., 2025). Through role-playing, children develop empathy and emotional understanding. They learn to interpret emotional cues and respond appropriately to social situations. Educational play tools also support emotional regulation. Play activities provide opportunities for children to express emotions in a safe and supportive environment. Emotional expression during play helps children understand and regulate their emotions (Acar & Kaya, 2024). Children who engage in play-based learning demonstrate improved emotional intelligence and peer interaction.

Empathy development is another important benefit of educational play tools. Activities such as storytelling and role-playing encourage children to consider the feelings and perspectives of others (Hikmah et al., 2024). Empathy is a key component of social competence and mental health. Educational play tools also provide a safe environment for exploration. Play environments allow children to experiment with social interactions without fear of failure. This sense of safety encourages children to take risks and develop confidence (Widjayatri et al., 2023). Children who feel safe are more likely to explore new experiences and develop independence.

Mechanisms for Optimizing Mental Health Through Educational Play Tools

The optimization of early childhood mental health through educational play tools occurs through several interconnected mechanisms. These mechanisms involve structured learning environments, emotional expression, stress management, and social interaction.

First, educational play tools create structured learning environments that support social interaction. Structured play activities provide opportunities for children to practice social skills in meaningful contexts. Social interaction during play helps children develop cooperation and communication skills (Tutkun & Eskidemiir Meral, 2025). Children learn to negotiate, share, and collaborate through structured play experiences. Second, play activities support emotional expression and regulation. Play provides a natural outlet for emotional expression. Children use play to process experiences and express feelings. Emotional expression during play contributes to emotional regulation and psychological well-being (Sop, 2024). Children who engage in play-based activities are better able to regulate their emotions and cope with stress.

Third, play activities help children manage stress. Play provides opportunities for relaxation and enjoyment. Stress reduction through play contributes to positive mental health outcomes (Acar & Kaya, 2024). Children who engage in play activities are less likely to experience emotional distress. Fourth, play activities promote resilience. Resilience refers to the ability to adapt to challenges and recover from difficulties. Play-based learning supports resilience by providing opportunities for problem-solving and coping (Hosokawa et al., 2024). Children who develop resilience are better able to handle stress and adversity.

Educational play tools also promote self-confidence. Children who engage in play-based learning develop a sense of competence and achievement. This sense of competence contributes to positive self-esteem and mental health (Tutkun & Eskidemiir Meral, 2025). Problem-solving skills are another important outcome of play-based learning. Educational play tools encourage children to think critically and find solutions to challenges. Problem-solving skills contribute to adaptive functioning and resilience. Educational play tools also serve as protective factors against mental health problems. Children who develop strong social-emotional skills are less likely to experience mental health difficulties later in life (Hosokawa et al., 2024). These findings highlight the importance of educational play tools in promoting long-term mental health.

Play-Based Learning in Social-Emotional Development

Play-based learning is widely recognized as an effective approach for supporting holistic development in early childhood. Play activities provide opportunities for children to develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills simultaneously (Widjayatri et al., 2023). Through play, children learn to interact with others and develop social competence. Social competence includes skills such as communication, cooperation, and empathy. These skills are essential for successful social interaction (Ji et al., 2025). Play-based learning also supports emotional development. Emotional development includes emotional expression, emotional regulation, and empathy. Emotional skills are essential for mental health and well-being (Hosokawa et al., 2024). Educational play tools enhance play-based learning by providing structured opportunities for interaction. Structured play environments support social interaction and emotional development (Hikmah et al., 2024). Role-playing activities are particularly effective for developing empathy. Role-playing allows children to explore different perspectives and understand the emotions of others (Irmayanti et al., 2025). Play-based learning also supports creativity and imagination. Creative activities encourage children to express ideas and emotions. Emotional expression

contributes to emotional well-being.

Educational Play Tools as Media for Emotional Regulation and Stress Management

Educational play tools play a significant role in supporting emotional regulation and stress management in early childhood. Emotional regulation refers to a child's ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotional responses in appropriate ways (Sop, 2024). Through play activities, children are provided with opportunities to express their feelings naturally and constructively. Emotional expression during play helps children identify different emotions and learn how to regulate them effectively. As a result, emotional regulation contributes positively to overall mental health and well-being. Play-based interventions have been shown to improve emotional intelligence and peer interaction (Acar & Kaya, 2024). Emotional intelligence includes important skills such as emotional awareness, self-control, and the ability to respond appropriately to social situations. These skills help children build positive relationships and adapt to their environments. In addition, play activities can reduce stress by providing enjoyable and relaxing experiences. When children engage in play, they are able to release tension and process their emotions in a healthy way. Educational play tools also provide a safe and supportive environment for emotional expression. A secure play environment encourages children to explore their feelings without fear or pressure. This sense of safety helps children develop confidence and emotional stability, which are essential for maintaining positive mental health during early childhood development.

The Role of Teachers and Parents in Supporting Social–Emotional Stimulation

Teachers and parents play essential roles in supporting children's social–emotional development. Teachers provide structured learning environments that promote interaction, emotional expression, and positive behavior, which support children's overall development (Hosokawa et al., 2024). Through classroom activities and guided play, teachers help children learn to cooperate, manage emotions, and build relationships with peers. Meanwhile, parents provide consistent emotional support and caregiving at home, creating a secure environment where children feel valued and understood. This emotional support contributes significantly to positive developmental outcomes, including improved self-confidence and emotional regulation. Collaboration between teachers and parents further enhances children's social–emotional development. When teachers and parents communicate regularly and work together, children receive consistent guidance and reinforcement in both school and home environments. This collaboration helps children adapt more easily to social situations and develop positive behaviors. Supportive environments created through strong partnerships between teachers and parents encourage meaningful social interaction and healthy emotional development. As a result, children are better prepared to manage their emotions, build positive relationships, and face developmental challenges effectively.

Long-Term Impact of Social–Emotional Stimulation Through Educational Play Tools

Social–emotional stimulation in early childhood has significant long-term impacts on mental health and overall development. Early childhood experiences play a crucial role in shaping later emotional and social outcomes, as positive stimulation during this period supports healthy psychological growth (Ji et al., 2025). Play-based learning is one of the most effective approaches for fostering social–emotional development because it allows children to explore emotions, interact with peers, and practice problem-solving in meaningful contexts. The social skills developed during early childhood, such as cooperation, empathy, and emotional regulation, are strong predictors of later academic success and psychological well-being. Educational play tools contribute to these outcomes by helping children develop resilience, which is an important protective factor for mental health. Resilience enables children to cope with challenges, manage stress, and adapt to new situations more effectively. Early intervention through structured play activities can also help prevent the emergence of mental health problems later in life. In this context, educational play tools function not only as learning media but also as protective factors that support children's emotional stability. Overall, educational play tools play a crucial role in

optimizing early childhood mental health through social–emotional stimulation. By encouraging interaction, emotional expression, and problem-solving, these tools help children build emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience that support positive mental health outcomes over time.

CONCLUSION

Research and relevant literature consistently demonstrate that socio-emotional stimulation through the use of Educational Play Tools (APE) is a highly effective and crucial strategy for optimizing early childhood mental health. Play-based learning supported by APE not only facilitates children’s holistic development including cognitive, language, and motor aspects but also plays a particularly important role in building strong emotional intelligence and adaptive social skills. Through interaction with APE and peers, children learn to recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions, develop empathy, and build collaboration and problem-solving skills. These mechanisms directly contribute to reducing levels of stress, anxiety, and depression while enhancing children’s emotional well-being. The active role of parents and educators in creating a supportive play environment, selecting appropriate APE, and guiding children’s interactions is a key factor in the successful implementation of this approach. Furthermore, the impact of early socio-emotional stimulation through APE is long-term, as it helps build a strong foundation of resilience and serves as a protective factor against future mental health problems. Play-based interventions in early childhood have been shown to significantly influence social interaction skills, prosocial behavior, and sustained mental health into adulthood. Therefore, optimizing early childhood mental health through socio-emotional stimulation using APE is an important investment that benefits not only children’s immediate development but also their long-term psychological well-being and readiness to face life’s challenges.

In addition, parents and educators are encouraged to optimize the use of Educational Play Tools (APE) as a medium for socio-emotional stimulation in early childhood. The selection of APE should be adjusted to children’s developmental stages and designed to encourage social interaction, emotional regulation, and prosocial behavior. Moreover, educators in early childhood education institutions need continuous training in play-based learning strategies so that the use of APE is not merely recreational but also directed toward clear educational objectives. For educational institutions and policymakers, the findings of this study can serve as a basis for curriculum development and the provision of learning facilities that emphasize the importance of socio-emotional stimulation from an early age. Policy support in the form of providing high-quality APE and safe, inclusive learning environments is essential to support children’s mental health. Meanwhile, future researchers are encouraged to examine more deeply the effectiveness of specific types of APE on children’s socio-emotional development using empirical and longitudinal research methods, in order to obtain more comprehensive and contextual evidence.

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