

# **THE CONTRIBUTION OF PLAY TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS IN THE EARLY YEARS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW**

**<sup>1</sup>Stamatoglou, Maria and <sup>2</sup>Zampelou Christina**

<sup>1</sup>Adjunct Lecturer, International Hellenic University and <sup>2</sup>Early Childhood Educator

[maria.stamatoglou@gmail.com](mailto:maria.stamatoglou@gmail.com)

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**Abstracts:** In an era of constant change, the education sector must adapt to new needs as they arise. In this systematic literature review, it is evident that the relationship between play and learning has been emphasized by numerous researchers, and in recent years, play has been recognized as an important tool in education and children's development. The soft skills promoted alongside play are equally important because they are an important area for their later academic development and personality formation. In Greece, practices for the development of soft skills are beginning to spread as significant efforts are being made to integrate them through various -programs.

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**Keywords:** early childhood education, play, soft skills

## **Introduction**

Play plays a central role in a child's life, and for this reason, many educators and researchers have conducted research to present the relationship between play and learning and the contribution of play to the social and emotional development of preschool children. However, the definition of play is still a complicated process because it is a complex activity and consists of many subcategories, so a clear definition cannot be given (Lillard, 2015).

The educator must interact with his/her students, engage them in play, and feed their thinking to enrich the children's knowledge. When the process of play contributes to children's socialization, it means that the children themselves have developed their critical thinking and can interact and participate in the events occurring around them. As students discuss their activities, they discover different emotions, settle on opinions and interests, and set their own boundaries (Birbili, 2016).

Taking the above into account, this paper aims to examine the contribution of play in the development of soft skills in early childhood through a systematic literature review, first presenting the theories around it, as well as its types, characteristics, and social dimensions.

## **Play in early childhood**

Based on the Teacher's Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum and the Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (IEP, 2014; Prenderi et al., 2021), play contributes to the all-round development and learning of preschool

children. Moreover, play helps children interact with both their peers and teachers and helps children externalize their feelings and express their experiences through construction or personification. In addition, through play, children become responsible, develop their perceptions, document their answers, create different questions, and try to solve the issues they face. Finally, play helps children recall old experiences so that they can use their knowledge in new situations.

Fleer (2011) states that while play is defined in many ways by teachers and researchers, some characteristics of play are defined in the same way by them. One of these characteristics is that play is primarily child-directed. Another characteristic is the stages of play development in which it appears that children initially play with their fingers, then solitary play develops and, finally, parallel play appears. On the other hand, Botsoglou (2010) separated toy into a word with a dual dimension, where in the first-dimension toy denotes the process (play) and in the second-dimension toy denotes the object (toy).

### **Play, learning, and soft skills**

Depending on how play is defined in each country, the relationship between play and learning is modified. Thus, the way a teacher perceives play influences the way he or she acts during a game. For example, if the teacher argues that play automatically leads to learning, he or she will have a neutral attitude as an observer during a game. However, if the teacher claims that play contributes to the development of emotions and social values, then the teacher's contribution is differentiated (Van Oers, 2013).

Fesseha and Pyle (2016) consider that several researchers have attempted to identify learning through play engagement and how teachers use their experiences during activities. Play has the same importance as all of the child's actions from the moment of birth and throughout their development, as it makes a crucial contribution to both the physical and cognitive functions of children. As mentioned above, the definition of play becomes quite difficult, with Freud emphasizing that play provides children with the opportunity to express themselves, even if they are overwhelmed by negative or positive emotions (Koukounaras & Liagis, 2016). Play functions as an aid to children's cognitive and intellectual development, as children are asked to think, supervise, process information, set goals, and solve any problems (Burris & Burris, 2011).

Through play, children can learn about human rights such as respect for other people, equality, dignity, and cooperation. By creating an ideal environment and using educational tools, children are offered experiences that stimulate children's interest in order to acquire a positive attitude toward learning (Koutsouvanou, 2012). In the process of playing, the child learns to recognize what can make play simpler or more complex, how play becomes individual or group play, and how to enrich their play with different objects (Tsapakidou, 2014). Free play occurs most often during the preschool years, as through it children are given the opportunity to participate, develop emotionally, and process the world around them. Learning occurs through free play activities, as it is based on the child's own abilities and experiences (Avgitidou et al., 2014).

Social and emotional skills are an important factor in the smooth integration of children into the society in which they live (Fung & Cheng, 2012). Social skills, which children cultivate in preschool, are necessary for successful cooperation with other children, cultivating empathy and self-confidence to solve problems in harmony (Brekke-Stangeland, 2017). Through social skills, children learn to act in the school environment and in the wider social environment, obeying rules that shape good social behavior (Rusmayadi & Herman, 2019). Finally, Rentzou et al. (2018) consider that play, depending on the culture, presents both common and different characteristics; specifically, the following characteristics are presented: play contributes to social-emotional development, develops learning and provides pleasure. Finally, with regard to the development of soft skills in early childhood,

in the United States, there are programs that promote them, such as the Tools of the Mind Model. A program implemented in early childhood aims to train teachers and develop children's cognitive and social-emotional skills through an integrated approach that includes planned play, reflection, and fundamental academic skills (Solorzano et al., 2018).

### Research method and data collection

In this literature review, the effectiveness of soft skills in early childhood children and the extent to which teachers acknowledge the usefulness of soft skills in learning are examined. For this reason, a systematic literature review was conducted as this is an organized process to record the methods used, objectives, issues, and barriers encountered, and conclusions drawn. The primary objective of the literature review is to separate the critical issues and then to group various published studies together. Once the clustering is complete, the next step is to extract common characteristics from the literature. In the literature review, there is a rigorous way in which research references are recorded and as much research as is believed to be fit the review can be used. Categorization of key concepts and relevant work understanding of content commentary brief or extended depending on the references (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Creswell, 2016; Stamatoglou, 2024).

### Data analysis

The table below analyses seven different studies (2 studies on teachers' views and 5 on early childhood children's experiences) that have in common the exploration of the contribution of soft skills to early childhood learning through play. The surveys were collected methodically and using the deductive process, as some surveys lacked important characteristics, especially in the samples and results. Therefore, the number of surveys is relatively small. In all seven studies, it was found that soft skills contribute to the educational process through play during preschool (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary table of the studies

Authors/D ate	Aim	Sample	Methodology	Results
<i>Ramadhan and Yuniarti (2020)</i>	The purpose of this study was to improve children's oral performance through soft skills.	Twenty-one preschool students in the classroom of Universitas Muhammadiyah Pontianak.	The data collection tools were observation sheets for speaking and soft skills, questionnaires, and videos.	The results showed that there was a significant improvement in students' performance with speech increasing from 58% in the first cycle to 71% and soft skills increasing from 62% in the first cycle to 81%. The soft skills that stood out were teamwork, responsibility, and confidence.
<i>Avriani et al. (2022)</i>	The purpose was to determine the effectiveness of soft and hard skills in early childhood using an	Early childhood children were divided into three age groups. The first group of infants up to 2 years old, the second group from 3 to 5 years	The study was conducted in class A1 at TK Bina Prestasi Surabaya.	The results show that through the water tube, there is improvement in fine and gross skills in early childhood children.

	educational tool (water tube).	old, and children aged 6 to 8 years old.		
<b>Goldstein &amp; Lerner, (2018)</b>	A survey was conducted in order to cultivate empathy.	Ninety-seven preschool children.	For a duration of 8 weeks, the children were divided into three groups. In the first section, the children were taught and participated in drama games; in the second section, the children participated in a story reading program followed by a discussion; and in the third section, the children played with blocks.	The findings of the research made it evident that the children in the first section at the end of the research had increased empathy rates. They were followed by the children- who participated in the program by reading stories. The children who were in the third segment and played with blocks did not show an increase in their empathy rates.
<b>Sihotang et al. (2021)</b>	The aim was to measure the impact of soft skills on early childhood teachers.	Sample of 300 teachers	Data were collected by random sampling through an online platform and targeted all early childhood teachers using a quantitative survey method.	The results of the survey showed that soft skills had a significant influence on teachers through learning innovation.
<b>Olan et al. (2013)</b>	This study investigated teachers' readiness to integrate soft skills into Malay learning.	The sample consisted of Malay teachers from 44 schools, of which 23 were randomly selected. A total of 200 teachers responded.	This study used quantitative analysis to examine the level of soft skills knowledge. The research instruments were questionnaires with topics including simple questions based on the understanding of soft skills.	The results show that teachers have a high level of understanding of the importance of soft skills as the mean score of the questions was 4.1.
<b>Sutapa et al. (2021)</b>	The purpose of this study was to determine whether targeted play activity in early childhood improves motor skills. To pass each	Forty children aged 4.5-6 years were recruited and participated in a set of educational activities divided into Sets 1-5.	Data collected included running 25 m, walking on the balance beam, throwing the ball as far as possible, motor movement, arranging blocks, and bouncing the ball. Paired t-tests and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used for analysis. Training was	Results showed that there were significant differences in motor skills assessed before and after training with $p < 0.05$ .

	pole, the child had to run, walk on a balance beam, move sticks, throw and catch the ball, and arrange the blocks.		performed three times a week for 12 weeks.	
<i>Foulkes et al. (2017)</i>	This study examined the effectiveness of an active play intervention on the fundamental motor skills of children aged 3–5 years from disadvantaged communities. Six comparison kindergartens received only one resource pack.	One hundred and sixty-two children (mean age = 4.64 ± 0.58 years; 53.1% boys) were included in the final analyses.	In a group randomized controlled trial design, six kindergartens received a resource packet and a 6-week local authority program that included staff training with assistance in implementing weekly 60-minute sessions and post-program support. Twelve skills were assessed at baseline, post-intervention, and at the 6-month follow-up using the Child Activity and Movement Protocol in the Preschool Movement Skills Study.	There were no significant differences between the groups for overall fundamental movement ability, object control ability, or motor skill scores, indicating the need for program modification to facilitate greater skill improvement.

## Conclusions and Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the contribution of play to the educational process and the effectiveness of soft skills in children's development. The game is presented as an indispensable educational tool for preschool children.

The present literature review shows the importance and power of play, which is constantly adapted to children's needs and contributes positively to their development and knowledge (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018). Play helps children develop social skills through cooperation (Yuniarti & Riszky Ramadhan, 2020) and group games; in the cognitive domain, as learning is promoted through play; in the motor domain, with different games of fine and gross motor skills; and in the emotional domain, with actions aimed at self-regulation and improving behavior (Avriani et al, 2022; Foulkes et al., 2017; Sutapa et al., 2021). Therefore, we conclude that early childhood teachers should integrate play into the daily curriculum to contribute to their development. Furthermore, they should find ways to provide feedback when necessary, so that play becomes fun while motivating educational processes.

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