

**INTEGRATION OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AS A
FUNCTIONAL PEDAGOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS
AMONG LOWER BASIC PUPILS IN CROSS RIVER STATE.**

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ABSTRACT

In today's rapidly changing society, where digital technology and academic pressure have taken over children's daily experiences, the importance of play-based learning has become more crucial than ever. Modern education systems are increasingly recognizing that academic success alone does not guarantee the holistic development of a child. Instead, social skills are now viewed as equally essential for thriving in the 21st century. Play-based learning has increasingly gained recognition as a fundamental pedagogical approach that supports the holistic development of children in primary education. It bridges the gap between academic learning and social growth, creating well-rounded learners who can communicate effectively, empathize with others, and navigate social complexities. Play-based learning refers to an educational approach where play is the central vehicle for teaching and learning. It integrates children's natural curiosity, creativity, and imagination into meaningful learning experiences. Such environments help children reconnect with authentic human relationships and learn essential social competencies through shared experiences. One of the most significant benefits of play-based learning is its role in developing social skills. Social skills are the abilities that enable learners to interact effectively, communicate appropriately, and build positive relationships with others. It is believed that these skills form the foundation upon which children learn to navigate social environments such as home, school, and community. This paper attempts to highlight play – based learning, its benefit, aspects of social skills developed through play, challenges and its implementation strategies. Relevant recommendations were made.

Keywords: play learning, social skills, learners.

INTRODUCTION

From the earliest stages of childhood, humans are inherently social beings. They learn to interact and communicate with others both verbally and non-verbally through speech, gestures, facial expressions, and body language. The early years of a child's life are especially crucial for the development of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social skills. These formative experiences provide the foundation upon which a strong educational system is built. Primary education, a key component of basic education, is designed for children aged 6 to 11 and above. According to Section Four of the *National Policy on Education* (FRN, 2014), its objectives include fostering in children a spirit of inquiry and creativity through exploration and play such as using toys to encourage cooperation and teamwork and teaching foundational concepts of numbers, letters, colors, shapes, and forms in playful ways. This reflects the Nigerian government's commitment to functional education, emphasizing the use of play as a method for achieving the child's holistic development. Play is recognized as one of the essential needs and natural interests of children, vital for the development of social skills.

The foundations of play are based on the classical childhood development theorists, including Vygotsky and Froebel (Macdonald, 2022). Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) saw children as active, curious, creative learners who learn best through activity, play, talk and self-reflection. He created the first kindergarten school, rejecting the traditional roles of the teacher that viewed the children as passive learners. He advocated that activity, inquiry and play were central to the education and development of young children. Froebel said that 'play is the highest level of child development' (Tovey, 2020). Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) attributed neurological development to play, through his belief that learning requires relationships and interaction, elements that can be found within play. In his 1967 work, he outlines how interactions build the brain pathways responsible for the development of socio-emotional and self-regulation skills. Vygotsky also connected creativity with the imagination element of play. Maria Montessori famously said “Play is the work of the child” The Montessori approach was developed by Maria Montessori in the early 1900's. She believed that children learn best when they use all their senses. She promoted self-chosen activities, collaboration and exploring the environment around them. She observed that children learn from a hands-on approach. She created materials and encouraged self-care and independence skills like dressing and cooking. Children were encouraged to play with toys, designed to learn while engaging their senses. (Montessori School Education, 2016).

According to Nexus (2025) play based learning is an approach that provides opportunities for learners to actively and imaginatively engage with others and their environments. Play-based learning prepares children for their future and extends beyond intellectual skills.

Play is an indispensable component of childhood, serving as the engine of development across multiple domains. Through play, children refine their motor skills, enhance their language abilities, and cultivate social and emotional intelligence. It is through these playful interactions that children learn to negotiate, collaborate, and empathize with others, laying the foundation for healthy emotional and cognitive development. The integral role of play in

child development is universally acknowledged, underscoring its value across different cultures and educational system (Monashvale,2025)

In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified by the United Nations (UN). Within this, play is a mandated right for all children under Article 31, saying that 'it is the right of the child... to engage in play'. It defines the right of play as an essential element of childhood, integral to a child's development. It recognizes that a child having fun in the way in which they want to is a fundamental right that contributes to the holistic development of children – their physical, cognitive, social and emotional wellbeing. This recognition of the importance of play for children's learning, however, has not been reflected in global education systems, accountability structures, assessment and pedagogical approaches or curricula design, even for the countries that developed the UNCRC (Baker et al., 2024). This fracture between the rights of the child, education policy and research findings is seen globally, and it is acknowledged that in the UK context, 'play has been historically poorly researched in education, misrepresented in extreme forms such as “discover only learning” and generally bound to the early years of primary education' (Rolls et al., 2024, p. 67).

The play based learning environment is a child-centered pedagogy which promotes the development of children by following their natural inquisitive and explorative disposition. “Young children are naturally predisposed to exploring that which draws their interest and engages them. In order for them to continue to grow this disposition, they must feel connected to their learning environment and confident in their abilities as a learner” (Aiono, 2015, p.2)

Play allows learners to explore, interact, experiment, and make sense of the world around them in a fun and engaging way. It recognizes that children learn best through active, hands-on experiences that are meaningful and relevant to their interests and abilities (Lay, 2019). Through play, children develop social skills such as empathy, creativity, communication, collaboration, and self-regulation. Play-based learning also enhances motivation, engagement, and intrinsic curiosity, setting a strong foundation for lifelong learning and development.

The development of social skills constitutes a major area of child development. Deficits, delays or disturbance in social behaviors may either be the cause or consequence of developmental disabilities in learners. Social skills are the skills that are used by human beings to interact and communicate with others to assist status in the social structure and other motivations.

Suswandari , Siswandari , Sunardi & Gunarhadi (2020) opines that Fostering harmonious social relationships with other individuals is a skill that must be prepared from the early years of an individual's life. This skill, however, is not a theoretical concept that can simply be conveyed through teaching and guidance but rather a practical skill that must be directly learned by an individual through his or her interactions with others and the forming of

relationships with other learners at school. Social skills then become an important aspect in the realization of students'

Social skills are an important part of the socialization process between students, with them affecting their manner of interacting, both in terms of communication and their behavior toward others. These skills are essential for the future lives of students, who will continue developing to overcome various conflicts that occur in the community and learn from real situations. Possessing the knowledge, understanding, and skills to engage in social relationships is a must for everyone (Dinh, 2019; Kotluk & Kocakaya, 2018; Ririh Pintoko Jati, 2018)

Concept of play based learning

Play based learning refers to a holistic approach to learning and development. Through play, children learn valuable skills that support their social, physical and cognitive development. Through engaging with others, objects and symbols, children learn to make sense of the world around them. (Gowrie, 2022). Play based learning promotes a child's holistic development. They learn cognitive, physical, emotional, social and creative skills that set them up for success in further education. Learning through playing with others helps build emotional and social skills. When children play, they learn to share, cooperate, communicate and solve problems with their peers. They become part of a community. According to. Habip (2025) Play is an activity that allows a child to learn independently through experience, driven by fun and intrinsic motivation. It consists of behaviors that include emotions such as happiness, excitement, curiosity, and joy, and can sometimes have predetermined rules or develop spontaneously. Play can help children express and understand their emotions. Helping build your child's awareness of their own emotions and empathizing with others in different scenarios. As well as, fostering positive relationships with others. It can help your child relate to others and feel connected through shared experiences. Play based learning activities can also help children work through stressful scenarios in a healthy way.

Aguilar (2024) opines that there are two different types of play that have been the primary focus: free play, which is directed by the children themselves, and guided play, which is play that has some level of teacher guidance or involvement. Free play is typically described as play that is child-directed, voluntary, internally motivated, and pleasurable. One type of free play frequently endorsed is sociodramatic play, where groups of children practice imaginative role-playing through creating and following social rules such as pretending to be different family members. the term guided play refers to play activities with some level of adult involvement to embed or extend additional learning opportunities within the play itself. A range of terminology has been used to refer to types of guided play activities (e.g., centre-based learning, purposefully framed play), however, one distinction that can be made is who has control over the play activity: Some activities are described as teacher-directed, such as intentionally planned games, while others are described as mutually directed, where teachers

get involved without taking over or transforming the activity so that both teachers and learners exercise some control over the play.

Benefits of play based learning

Play-based methods of learning emphasize the idea that children learn best through active engagement, exploration, and interaction with their environment. Rather than relying solely on formal instruction, these methods integrate play as a natural and meaningful part of the learning process. Through play, learners develop curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking while building social and emotional connections with others. This approach transforms the classroom into a dynamic space where learning is both enjoyable and effective, laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and holistic development. Hills (2022) highlighted the following as the benefits of play based learning;

1. Improves Language and Literacy Skills

Children learn to express themselves through play. With themselves, teachers, other children or adults. Play can improve and build their language skills so that they can communicate and listen effectively. Play also helps children find connections between hearing, speaking, writing and reading words. They build associations between words and connections in their mind for how words can be used. This is crucial in early childhood when children's vocabularies are growing rapidly.

2. Play learning Fosters Imagination and Creativity

Creativity and imaginative play come naturally to children. When fostered in early childhood, these skills can help children become adults that are resilient and think outside the box. Imaginative play develops children's ability to think fast and to think for themselves. It helps them navigate real and made-up scenarios. By exploring their creativity, children learn to adapt and solve problems when things don't go to plan. It gives them skills to proactively work with boredom.

3. Expands Fine and Gross Motor Skills

Play builds children's physical awareness, coordination and tactile responses. By moving small and large muscle groups in their body, children expand their gross and fine motor skills. Motor skills are developed through crawling, walking, running, jumping, climbing and throwing. These activities help children learn hand-eye coordination and balance. As well as building strength in their body's muscles. Play activities such as drawing, grasping, touching and moulding things help children master the use of their hands, fingers and wrists. This also includes exploring objects of different textures and surfaces, such as sand, wet paint, wooden blocks and soft toys.

4. Reinforces Confidence and Positive Attitudes Towards Learning

Play based activities help children build their self-confidence from hands-on learning. With increased confidence, children feel more inclined to take risks and try new things. They learn

to make decisions for themselves and feel a sense of accomplishment. Each child learns differently. Learning becomes a positive experience when children are left to explore at their own pace. The freedom to figure things out on their own alleviates any stress they may feel about an outcome. Motivating children to learn through their own inquiry processes

Concept Of Social Skill

Social skills are the skills we use every day to interact and communicate with others. They include verbal and non-verbal communication, such as speech, gesture, facial expression and body language. A person has strong social skills if they have the knowledge of how to behave in social situations and understand both written and implied rules when communicating with others. Aguilar (2024) sees Social skills are vital in enabling an individual to have and maintain positive interactions with others. Many of these skills are crucial in making and sustaining friendships. Social interactions do not always run smoothly and an individual needs to be able to implement appropriate strategies, such as conflict resolution when difficulties in interactions arise. It is also important for individuals to have 'empathy' (i.e. being able to put yourself into someone else's shoes and recognize their feelings) as it allows them to respond in an understanding and caring way to how others are feeling. Social skills are defined as interpersonal behaviors that help the individual in society.

Zhang (2011) sees Social skills as specific behaviors, exhibited by children in free play or academic situations, which initiate or maintain social interactions with others. Social skills are discrete, teachable behaviors that are associated with direct measures of social competence, and as such serve as 'building blocks' for the establishment of interpersonal relations, effective social participation, and cooperation or affiliation with peers and others.

Social skills are one of the basic skills that should be acquired in primary school, which aims to improve children's lives, roles and responsibilities in society by imparting basic skills to them. Social skills are components of behavior that help an individual get along and adapt in a variety of social environments and they are defined as a set of competencies that allow an individual to initiate and maintain positive social relationships, contribute to peer acceptance and satisfactory school adjustment, and enable an individual to cope effectively with the larger social environment (Kam, 2019)

Aspects Of Social Skills Developed Through Play

According to Denholm (2021) Social skills are abilities learned over time that allow us to collaborate and relate to each other more effectively. By strengthening learners' social skills, children begin to interact together positively, develop their cognitive abilities, boost their self-esteem, and improve their overall mental health. The author further outlined four

aspects of social skills that can be developed through play:

1. **Communication skills:** When young children enter a childhood environment, they are usually most comfortable speaking with their immediate family. As a result, they may be withdrawn and lack the confidence to communicate with teachers and peers. Play helps children learn how to communicate their ideas, needs, and wants verbally and non-verbally, explore non-disruptive ways to get the attention of adults and peers and show interest in engaging with others appropriately.
2. **Collaboration:** Early learners tend to be self-centered. Therefore, they sometimes have difficulty working together when they have different ideas. Pretend play gives children opportunities to share resources, reach goals, and adopt various roles with others. Play helps children explore the concept of fairness, practice taking turns and learn how to solve problems.
3. **Conflict resolution:** Conflict resolution goes hand in hand with collaboration. While children are learning to work together, conflicts will inevitably arise no matter how well they get along with one another. During collaborative dramatic play, young learners will often have minor disagreements. These instances are excellent learning opportunities. Play helps children express their frustrations and listen to others, explore natural consequences and reach agreements.
4. **Empathy:** As we have established earlier, children are naturally ego-centric. As a result, it can be challenging for them to keep the feelings of others in mind. When children pretend play, they observe the behavior of others and pick up on social cues and body language, an important part of their emotional and social development. Play helps children notice how others are feeling, realize how their behavior directly impacts others and see situations from the perspectives of others.

Factors affecting the effectiveness of play in schools.

The type of play children get involved in, the play materials used, the content of their play and the time they are able to spend in play are influenced by many factors. Ignou (2025) outlined the following as factors that affect the effectiveness of play.

1. **Age:** The age of the child influences the kind of play activity chosen, content of the play and the amount of time spent in a particular play activity. This is because the child's physical, motor, social, cognitive and language abilities change and develop with age.
2. **Gender:** While many of the play activities of boys and girls are similar, many play activities are also widely different. Boys and girls play different types of games. The amount of physical activity, the type of play material and toys used for play and the theme of the game are some of the ways in which the play activities of boys and girls differ.
3. **Culture:** This influences one's way of life, which also includes child-rearing practices.

While we share many commonalities, there are also practices which are specific to a particular community. Children's play reflects the culture of their community.

4. **Social Class:** A learner's social class influences the time available for play, the type of toys and play materials available to children, the kind of play, the space available for play.
5. **The environment:** An environment which offers little or no space for play poses as a barrier. Although children will still manage to find space. You can see them playing in the narrow lanes, on the roads alongside the traffic and on the terraces of houses. While children should not be denied their opportunity to play, a constant endeavor is required to ensure that children play in safe and secure environment. Rural and tribal areas provide more open space for play and the children are closer to nature.
6. **Media:** The print media, i.e. books and magazines, as well as the audio-visual media. i.e. radio and television, have a strong influence on children's play. There is an increase in the availability of many illustrated books and magazines and a variety of programmes for children on radio and television. Children eagerly act out a story they have read, sing a tune heard on the radio and enthusiastically watch the programs on the television and imitate the characters.
7. **Technology:** Technology acts as a barrier to play by reducing opportunities for physical, creative, and social development through excessive screen time.

How Teachers Can Implement Play in Schools

Teachers have a direct responsibility towards pupils in school, and are the most important school-based factor in their education (Barrow & Sander, 2017). They play a pivotal role in children's active construction of knowledge. They intentionally provide the environments and experiences that support children in actively building concepts and skills. The teacher is responsible for offering children play spaces where they can construct concepts and ideas, preferably in the company of friendly peers; designing daily routines that invite children to be active participants and to use emerging skills and concepts; supporting children's learning through interactions and conversations that prompt using language and ideas in new ways and that promote sharing meaning with others. According to Alex (2025) To enable them carry out these responsibilities, teachers should, 1) Create Play-Based Learning Centers 2) Use Manipulatives 3) Play Games 4) Take Play Breaks 6) Take Your Learning Outside 7) Act it Out 8) Play with Your Students 9) Make Learning an Adventure. Learners can investigate what happens when they put these materials together or arrange them in new ways, experiencing the delight of discovering possibilities for building with them, transforming them, or using them to represent an experience.

Conclusion

Play-based learning has a profound impact on the social development of children, serving as a natural and effective means of fostering interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and collaboration. Through structured and unstructured play, children learn to communicate, share, negotiate, and resolve conflict skills essential for positive social interaction. Play environments encourage children to express their thoughts and feelings, understand others' perspectives, and develop empathy. In group play, learners experience teamwork and cooperation as they work toward shared goals, which strengthens their ability to build and maintain relationships. Role-playing and imaginative play further enhance social awareness by allowing children to explore different social roles and cultural contexts. Moreover, play supports self-regulation, patience, and respect for rules, all of which are vital for functioning effectively within a community. Educators have found that play-based learning not only improves social competence but also creates inclusive classroom environments where every child feels valued and connected. Overall, play-based learning provides a holistic foundation for children's social growth, preparing them for successful participation in school and society.

Recommendation

1. **Integrate Play into Daily Learning Activities:** Schools and educators should intentionally include structured and unstructured play in the daily curriculum to give children regular opportunities to practice cooperation, sharing, and communication.
2. **Provide a Supportive and Inclusive Environment:** Teachers should create a safe and inclusive classroom atmosphere where every child feels valued and confident to express themselves, interact, and build friendships through play.
3. **Encourage Collaborative Play:** Activities that promote teamwork—such as group games, role play, and problem-solving tasks—should be emphasized to help children develop empathy, negotiation, and conflict-resolution skills.
4. **Train Teachers in Play-Based Pedagogy:** Educators should receive professional development on how to effectively use play-based strategies to nurture social, emotional, and cognitive growth in learners.
5. **Engage Parents and Caregivers:** Parents should be encouraged to support play at home by providing time, space, and simple materials for interactive play, reinforcing the social skills learned in school settings.

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