

# **BUILDING BONDS THROUGH PLAY: A COMMUNITY SERVICE IN ENHANCING SOCIAL SKILLS AND TEAMWORK IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AT TK RETNO ASIH TUBAN, EAST JAVA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This community service project aimed to enhance the social skills and teamwork of preschool children at TK Retno Asih in Tuban, East Java, through interactive team-building activities. The focus was on developing key social competencies such as collaboration, empathy, and communication among young learners. The activities, including games like “Hap Hap Air,” “Estafet Jedag Jedug,” and “Kepekaan Pikiran,” were designed to engage children in cooperative tasks that promote motor coordination, concentration, and teamwork. The project followed a participatory approach, involving teachers, parents, and children in the planning and implementation phases. Data collection included post-intervention observations, teacher feedback, and parent surveys to assess the impact of the activities. Results indicated an improvement in children's social interactions, communication skills, and teamwork, demonstrating the effectiveness of play-based learning in fostering essential developmental skills. This initiative underscores the value of collaborative efforts in early childhood education to cultivate a well-rounded, socially competent future generation.

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Education, Team-Building, Social Skills, Community Service, Play-Based Learning*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical period for the development of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competencies that provide an important foundation for children's subsequent learning and interpersonal relationships. During the preschool years, children increasingly learn to communicate with peers, participate in shared activities, regulate their emotions, negotiate roles, follow social rules, and respond to the needs of others. Social competence at this stage encompasses a range of behaviors, including cooperation, communication, empathy, self-regulation, peer interaction, and the ability to participate appropriately in group activities. A systematic review of research involving early childhood and primary school students confirms that social skills constitute an important developmental domain and that early educational experiences can provide meaningful contexts for cultivating these competencies (Salimi & Fauziah, 2023). Consequently, early childhood education should not focus exclusively on cognitive and academic preparation but should also provide systematic opportunities for children to develop the interpersonal skills required for positive relationships and collaborative learning.

Play provides a particularly appropriate context for supporting these developmental processes because it allows young children to learn through direct experience, interaction, experimentation, and communication. Unlike highly formal instructional activities, play enables children to engage with peers in situations that require them to share resources, negotiate roles, follow rules, solve problems, manage disagreements, and respond to changing circumstances. Recent evidence increasingly supports the relationship between play and children's social competence. A 2024 meta-analysis of 34 empirical studies found a positive relationship between pretend play and social competence among children aged 3–8 years, with the quality of play appearing to be particularly important. The findings suggest that play can provide a meaningful social context in which children practice behaviors associated with cooperation, communication, and interpersonal competence (Smits-van der Nat et al., 2024).

Game-based learning represents one structured form of play that can be intentionally designed to support developmental and educational objectives. In early childhood settings, games can combine enjoyment with clearly defined rules, challenges, interaction, feedback, and opportunities for children to work individually or collectively. Importantly, game-based learning does not

necessarily require digital technology. Physical, traditional, cooperative, and classroom-based games can also function as developmentally appropriate learning experiences when their activities are connected to specific learning goals. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Alotaibi (2024), covering studies involving children aged 3–8 years, found that game-based learning was associated with positive outcomes across cognitive, social, emotional, motivational, and engagement domains. The analysis reported a moderate effect for social development, indicating the potential of appropriately designed games to support cooperation, communication, and empathy in early childhood education.

The social value of play is particularly relevant when activities require children to interact with peers rather than participate individually. Cooperative games provide situations in which children must coordinate actions, communicate intentions, share responsibilities, and work toward a common objective. Such experiences can create opportunities for children to practice social behaviors in authentic and enjoyable contexts. Recent experimental research involving preschool children found that actively supporting social pretend play was associated with improvements in children's social behavior and positive peer relationships, although effects were not uniform across all social-cognitive and emotional outcomes (2023). Similarly, research on teacher–child interaction and peer play indicates that the quality of peer play is related to preschool children's social competence, emphasizing the importance of supportive interactions within early childhood learning environments. These findings suggest that play should be viewed not merely as recreational activity but as an important medium through which children encounter and practice social relationships.

Despite the developmental importance of social skills, young children may experience difficulties when participating in group activities. Some children may hesitate to communicate with peers, have difficulty sharing materials, struggle to wait for their turn, or respond inappropriately when disagreements occur. Such behaviors are not necessarily indicators of persistent developmental problems; rather, they may reflect the gradual process through which young children acquire and practice social competencies. This situation highlights the importance of providing supportive learning experiences in which children can repeatedly practice cooperation and communication with appropriate adult guidance. Peer-mediated interventions and structured play approaches have received attention in early childhood education because they provide

opportunities for children to interact with peers within naturally occurring play contexts (Ledford & Pustejovsky, 2021).

At TK Retno Asih, Tuban, East Java, preliminary observations and discussions with teachers indicated that some children experienced challenges in interacting effectively with peers during group activities. These challenges included limited communication, reluctance to share, difficulties in coordinating with classmates, and minor disagreements during collaborative activities. The situation indicates a practical need for learning experiences that provide children with structured yet enjoyable opportunities to practice social interaction. Rather than addressing these behaviors through formal instruction alone, the community service program adopted cooperative and team-based games as an accessible approach that is consistent with the characteristics of early childhood learning.

The activities implemented in this initiative were designed around cooperation, communication, coordination, and shared problem-solving. Relay games, collaborative challenges, group puzzles, and other age-appropriate activities required children to participate with peers and contribute toward common goals. Such activities can create repeated opportunities for children to practice taking turns, listening to others, communicating intentions, sharing responsibility, managing frustration, and supporting teammates. The physical dimension of the activities may also provide opportunities to practice gross and fine motor coordination, while the social dimension encourages children to regulate their behavior in relation to others. Recent literature on game-based learning further indicates that the potential benefits of games in early childhood extend beyond academic learning to social development, emotional development, motivation, and engagement (Alotaibi, 2024).

An important consideration in implementing play-based interventions is the role of teachers and facilitators. Young children may require clear instructions, modeling, encouragement, and appropriate guidance to participate successfully in cooperative activities. A game that is enjoyable but poorly structured may not necessarily generate meaningful opportunities for social learning. Therefore, the present program positioned teachers and facilitators as active supporters who explained the rules, modeled appropriate interaction, encouraged children to communicate, helped resolve minor conflicts, and ensured that activities remained inclusive and developmentally appropriate. This approach is consistent with contemporary perspectives emphasizing that the educational value of play

depends not only on the activity itself but also on the quality of the learning environment and adult support provided during play.

The relevance of this approach is further supported by recent evidence concerning play-based and game-based interventions. Alotaibi (2024) found that game-based learning can contribute to social and emotional development while simultaneously increasing children's engagement and motivation. Meanwhile, Smits-van der Nat et al. (2024) demonstrated that the quality of children's pretend play is positively associated with social competence. Together, these findings indicate that carefully structured play can provide a meaningful environment for practicing interpersonal behaviors. However, the literature also suggests that outcomes may vary according to the type of game, duration of intervention, developmental characteristics of participants, and quality of implementation. Therefore, games should be designed according to clearly identified developmental objectives rather than introduced simply as recreational activities.

Based on this context, the present community service initiative was conducted at TK Retno Asih, Tuban, East Java, with the primary objective of providing children with meaningful opportunities to practice social skills and teamwork through structured play-based activities. The program focused particularly on communication, cooperation, turn-taking, sharing, coordination, empathy, and collective problem-solving. By integrating educational objectives with enjoyable team-based games, the initiative sought to create a supportive environment in which children could interact with peers, experience shared challenges, and practice appropriate social behaviors. Rather than positioning games solely as entertainment, the program treated play as a pedagogical medium through which social interaction and teamwork could be intentionally encouraged.

Accordingly, this article discusses the implementation of the community service initiative "Building Bonds Through Play: A Community Service in Enhancing Social Skills and Teamwork in Early Childhood at TK Retno Asih Tuban, East Java." The article examines how structured cooperative play was implemented, describes the children's participation and observable social behaviors during the activities, and discusses the potential contribution of play-based learning to social interaction and teamwork in early childhood. The initiative is expected to provide practical insights for teachers, early childhood educators, and community-service practitioners seeking accessible, participatory, and developmentally appropriate strategies for supporting children's social development.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this community service program was based on a participatory and collaborative approach involving educators, parents, and children at TK Retno Asih, Tuban, East Java. This approach was chosen to ensure that the intervention addressed the unique needs and expectations of the target community. TK Retno Asih was selected as the location due to its observed challenges in fostering teamwork and social skills among early learners, as well as its openness to adopting innovative learning methods. The participants consisted of children aged 4–6 years, along with their teachers and parents, who played active roles in the planning and execution of the activities. The program aimed to enhance children's social skills and teamwork through a structured sequence of cooperative games and problem-solving tasks.

The planning process began with focus group discussions (FGDs) involving teachers and parents to identify the primary challenges in children's social development and to set clear objectives for the program. These discussions revealed that playful, team-building activities would be most effective in enhancing communication, empathy, and collaboration among the children. During the implementation phase, children participated in activities such as group puzzles and relay games designed to promote these skills. Teachers were trained through workshops to facilitate these activities effectively, aligning with the principles of play-based learning (Fisher et al., 2011). Monitoring and evaluation were conducted throughout the program by observing children's behavior and collecting feedback from teachers and parents. This iterative process ensured that the activities were adapted to the children's developmental needs and cultural context. Such participatory methods have been shown to enhance program sustainability and community ownership (Meyer et al., 2014).

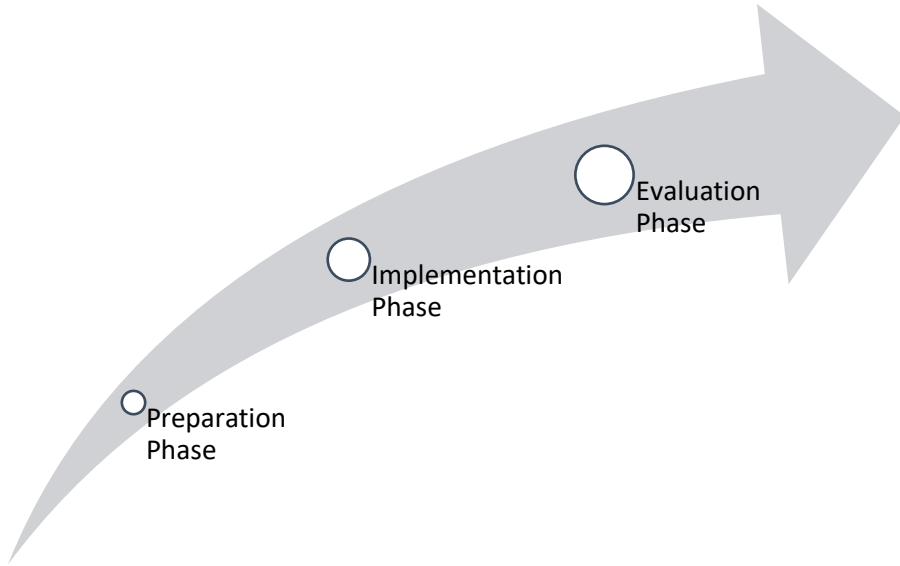


Figure 1. Phases in Conducting the Community Service

### III. RESULTS

The preparation phase of the community service program was crucial in ensuring its alignment with the needs and expectations of TK Retno Asih. This phase began with establishing a collaborative partnership with the school, involving key stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and school administrators. Initial meetings focused on discussing the program's objectives, understanding the school's existing challenges in fostering social skills and teamwork, and identifying the resources available for implementation. These discussions laid the groundwork for trust and mutual commitment to the program's success.

Following the establishment of partnerships, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with teachers and parents to gather insights into the children's behavioral patterns, social interactions, and areas for improvement. FGDs also provided an opportunity for stakeholders to share their expectations and suggest culturally and contextually relevant activities. Based on the findings, an action plan was developed collaboratively, outlining the goals, timelines, and methodologies for the program. The action plan included detailed descriptions of the cooperative games and problem-solving tasks to be implemented, along with a schedule for teacher training sessions and evaluation activities. This

participatory planning process ensured that all stakeholders were engaged and that the program was tailored to the unique needs of TK Retno Asih. As supported by Meyer et al. (2014), involving the community in the planning phase fosters ownership and sustainability of interventions.

The implementation phase of the team-building activities at TK Retno Asih in Tuban, East Java, was designed to foster social skills, teamwork, and emotional development among early childhood learners. This phase included structured and engaging activities tailored to the developmental needs of young children while promoting essential skills such as communication, collaboration, empathy, and problem-solving. Each week focused on a different aspect of social interaction, incorporating games and tasks that blended fun with educational value.



Figure 2. Conducting Hap Hap Air Game

One of the key activities was the Hap Hap Air game, which involved individual representatives from each class. Participants were tasked with blowing a small ball across the surface of water in a cup using their breath. The objective was to keep the ball afloat and guide it to a designated spot without letting it sink or leave the cup. This game developed motor coordination, concentration, and controlled breathing. It also introduced healthy competition in a structured environment, allowing children to experience the importance of focus and persistence. Each session culminated in a friendly competition between classes, fostering camaraderie and mutual encouragement.

The second activity, Estafet Jedag Jedug, was a team relay game emphasizing collaborative effort and precision. Teams competed by transferring rubber bands using straws and completing the task by eating bread within a limited time. This activity demanded teamwork, as children had to work together to complete the relay, and also strengthened their fine motor skills and problem-solving abilities. The sequential nature of the game allowed every team member to contribute to the group's success, instilling a sense of shared responsibility and achievement.



Figure 3. Students of TK Retno Asih were playing Estafet Jedag Jedug Game

The final activity, Kepekaan Pikiran, focused on building emotional connections and improving concentration through playful interaction between mothers and their children. In this game, children were hidden among their peers, covered with sarongs and masks, while their mothers were tasked with identifying their child using non-verbal cues. The game concluded with a race to dress their child in a shirt while blindfolded, further testing their coordination and emotional bond. This activity emphasized trust, recognition, and attentiveness, strengthening the parent-child relationship in a playful context. It also highlighted the importance of emotional sensitivity and the ability to interpret non-verbal communication.



Figure 4. Both Students and Parents were Playing Kepekaan Pikiran Game

The structured design of these activities ensured that children could gradually develop the targeted skills in a supportive and enjoyable environment. The use of competitive elements combined with teamwork encouraged active participation while minimizing pressure, allowing children to learn at their own pace. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, the games provided an opportunity for children to apply learned behaviors in practical settings, consistent with experiential learning theories that advocate for active, hands-on engagement as a core component of skill development (Kolb, 1984). By engaging children in these activities, the program successfully created a platform where learning and play intersected, fostering essential life skills in a meaningful and memorable way.

The evaluation phase was a critical component of the team-building program at TK Retno Asih, ensuring that the objectives of fostering social skills, teamwork, and emotional development among children were effectively met. This phase involved a multi-faceted approach to measure the program's impact, utilizing a combination of post-intervention observations, teacher feedback, and parent surveys.

After the conclusion of the activities, the children were observed during regular classroom and play sessions to identify changes in their behavior and social interactions. The focus was on assessing improvements in communication, cooperation, empathy, and problem-solving skills. Observations were conducted systematically by the teaching staff, who used predefined indicators such as the

children's ability to share, take turns, resolve conflicts amicably, and work collaboratively in group tasks. The observational data provided qualitative insights into how the children applied the skills gained from the activities in real-life scenarios, aligning with Dewey's experiential learning framework, which emphasizes learning through active engagement and reflection (Dewey, 1938).

Teachers, as the primary facilitators and daily observers of the children, played a pivotal role in evaluating the program's effectiveness. Structured feedback sessions were conducted to gather their input on the children's progress. Teachers were asked to provide examples of behavioral changes they noticed, such as increased participation in group activities, better emotional regulation, and improved peer relationships. Their feedback also included suggestions for enhancing the program to address specific developmental needs and any challenges encountered during implementation.

To capture the program's impact beyond the school environment, surveys were distributed to parents. These surveys focused on changes in their children's behavior at home, including their willingness to cooperate with siblings, communicate effectively, and demonstrate empathy in family settings. Parents were also asked to share their perceptions of the activities, including their child's enthusiasm for participation and any noticeable improvements in social and emotional skills. The inclusion of parental input provided a holistic perspective, bridging the gap between school and home environments.

Preliminary analysis indicated that the program significantly enhanced children's social skills and teamwork abilities. Teachers noted greater classroom harmony and collaboration, while parents reported positive behavioral changes at home. These results underscore the importance of interactive, play-based learning in early childhood education and affirm the value of involving both educators and parents in the developmental process.

By adopting a structured and inclusive evaluation strategy, the program ensured that its goals were met and provided valuable insights for refining future interventions. This comprehensive approach aligns with best practices in program assessment, emphasizing continuous improvement and evidence-based outcomes (Patton, 2015).

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The team-building program implemented at TK Retno Asih provided valuable insights into the role of interactive activities in fostering social skills and teamwork among early childhood learners. The post-intervention analysis, supported by observations, teacher feedback, and parent surveys, demonstrated that the activities significantly enhanced children's abilities to collaborate, communicate, and empathize. These findings align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive and emotional development (Vygotsky, 1978). Through structured and playful interactions, children developed critical interpersonal skills that are foundational for lifelong learning and adaptability.

The observations highlighted improvements in communication and cooperation, with children showing greater ease in sharing, resolving conflicts, and taking turns. These outcomes resonate with Piaget's theory of play, which suggests that cooperative activities encourage cognitive and moral development by enabling children to navigate social norms and perspectives (Piaget, 1962). Activities like "Hap Hap Air" and "Estafet Jedag Jedug" provided opportunities for children to practice these skills in an engaging and low-pressure environment, consistent with research by Whitebread et al. (2012), which emphasizes the role of play in fostering self-regulation and social competence.

The program also demonstrated a positive influence on emotional regulation and empathy. Games that required teamwork, such as "Kepakaan Pikiran," helped children recognize and respond to the emotions of their peers, aligning with the findings of Denham et al. (2012), which highlight the link between play-based activities and the development of emotional intelligence in young children. The collaborative nature of these activities encouraged children to support one another, promoting a sense of community and mutual understanding.

Feedback from parents and teachers revealed a shared perception of positive behavioral changes, indicating that the skills learned during the program extended beyond the classroom. This outcome underscores the importance of involving families in early childhood interventions, as highlighted by Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement (Epstein, 2001). The alignment of home and school environments created a supportive ecosystem that reinforced the program's objectives.

The program's success mirrors findings from previous studies, such as those by Frost et al. (2012), which underscore the importance of structured play in developing motor, cognitive, and social skills. Additionally, a study by Pellegrini and Smith (1998) supports the idea that physical and collaborative activities, like those included in this program, are instrumental in promoting prosocial behavior and reducing aggression among peers.

While the program achieved its objectives, challenges such as varying levels of participation and initial resistance from some children highlighted the need for adaptive strategies. These findings align with studies by Bodrova and Leong (2007), which emphasize the importance of scaffolding in supporting children who may struggle with new social contexts.

The team-building program at TK Retno Asih effectively demonstrated the transformative power of play-based learning in early childhood education. By integrating theory with practical application, the program not only enhanced the children's social and emotional skills but also reinforced the critical role of collaboration between educators and families. These findings provide a robust foundation for future interventions, emphasizing the need for scalable, inclusive, and culturally responsive approaches in early childhood development.

## **V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The team-building program at TK Retno Asih provided meaningful opportunities for children to practice communication, cooperation, empathy, emotional regulation, and teamwork through interactive and age-appropriate play activities. Observations, teacher feedback, and parent responses indicated positive engagement and observable development in children's social interactions during and after the activities, while the involvement of teachers and parents supported the continuity of these learning experiences. The program therefore demonstrates the potential of structured play as a practical approach to supporting social skills and teamwork in early childhood. Future programs are recommended to provide longer-term and more inclusive activities, strengthen teacher and parent involvement, and use systematic pre- and post-intervention assessments to more accurately evaluate changes in children's social and emotional development.

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