

The effectiveness of traditional games in improving emotional intelligence in children aged 3–6 years: a literature review

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Abstract

Background and Study Aim Early childhood is a critical period for the development of emotional intelligence, which influences a child's future ability to build relationships and adapt socially. Rapid technological changes and reduced opportunities for direct social interaction have affected how children experience emotional growth. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of traditional games in improving emotional intelligence in children aged 3 to 6 years through a literature review approach.

Material and Methods A systematic literature review was conducted according to PRISMA guidelines. Articles were collected from multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ResearchGate, SINTA, and Garuda. The search used keywords in Indonesian and English, such as “traditional games”, “emotional intelligence”, and “early childhood”. The inclusion criteria were: (1) studies published between 2014 and 2024, (2) full-text peer-reviewed articles, (3) participants aged 3 to 6 years, and (4) clear focus on emotional intelligence and traditional play. Eight eligible studies were analyzed qualitatively. The analysis focused on emotional indicators such as empathy, self-control, and cooperation.

Results The reviewed studies demonstrated that traditional games contribute to both general emotional development and measurable improvements in emotional intelligence. Specifically, 6 out of 8 studies reported enhancements in empathy, self-regulation, and cooperative behavior. For instance, one intervention study reported a 76% improvement in emotional intelligence scores. Traditional games such as congklak, Balogo, and Cublak-cublak Suweng served not only as entertainment but also as structured learning tools that foster interpersonal engagement and emotional growth.

Conclusions The reviewed studies confirm that traditional games can effectively support emotional intelligence in early childhood. These games should be considered for integration into early childhood education programs. Their use may enhance emotional awareness, strengthen peer relationships, and support collaborative behavior among children.

Keywords: traditional games, emotional intelligence, early childhood, emotional development, cooperative play

Introduction

In early childhood, the foundations of emotional, social, and behavioral development are formed through direct interaction with the surrounding environment. As children grow, their ability to recognize, express, and manage emotions plays a central role in shaping interpersonal relationships, learning readiness, and long-term psychological well-being. Emotional development in this period is influenced by multiple factors, including family dynamics, cultural practices, and the types of play experiences available to the child.

Sport can be understood as a form of physical training aimed at preparing the body to function more effectively, maturely, and efficiently [1, 2]. In the educational context, sport plays a critical role in building character, promoting physical health, and

supporting psychosocial development, particularly among children and adolescents. Participation in physical activities contributes to the growth of life skills such as resilience, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy, which are central components of youth development programs [3, 4, 5, 6].

Despite having more discretionary time for physical activity, many children today face restricted access to safe sports facilities and healthy recreational spaces. This limits their opportunities for physical and emotional growth [7, 8]. Moreover, conventional physical education programs do not always respond adequately to students' emotional needs. This shortfall is further worsened by the rise in children's dependence on digital devices. As a result, the quality of face-to-face interaction has decreased. Research has shown that frequent technological interference in parent-child interaction, particularly involving mobile phones, can disrupt emotional regulation and contribute to behavioral difficulties in young children [9, 10]. This

disruption may reduce opportunities for emotional learning through direct social engagement.

Emotional intelligence has emerged as a core aspect of a child's holistic development [11]. It involves recognizing, understanding, and managing one's own emotions, as well as responding appropriately to others. This includes skills like empathy, communication, and cooperation. According to several studies, emotional intelligence supports mental and physical well-being, contributes to non-aggressive behavior, and correlates positively with academic success and the quality of social relationships [11, 12]. However, the rapid pace of technological and social change has contributed to the erosion of children's emotional interactions. Many now lack opportunities for authentic and meaningful social engagement.

Traditional games represent one natural and culturally relevant method to improve emotional intelligence. These games encourage teamwork, empathy, and face-to-face communication, all of which are critical for social-emotional growth [13]. In contrast to digital games, which tend to isolate children and limit interaction, traditional games require physical involvement and adherence to shared rules. Children learn to express emotions such as joy, frustration, and disappointment in a social setting that feels safe and familiar. These interactions nurture social skills such as cooperation and self-regulation [8].

Several studies have examined how traditional games support emotional development. For instance, children engaged in regular traditional play have demonstrated enhanced emotional regulation and empathy [14], while culturally specific games like engklek, gobak sodor, and petak umpet have been associated with improved conflict resolution and social cooperation skills in Indonesian contexts [15]. Together, these findings suggest a consistent role of traditional games in nurturing emotional competencies across settings.

The reduced presence of traditional games in school curricula further contributes to their marginalization. Children's preferences are increasingly shaped by global digital trends. While digital games offer certain cognitive benefits, they rarely provide the kind of emotional and social stimulation found in traditional play [16]. Research has shown that children who engage in traditional games use the internet less and demonstrate better social adjustment [17].

Analysis of research findings has shown that traditional games contribute to the development of emotional regulation, empathy, and cooperation among children. Researchers emphasize that these games foster interaction in socially meaningful contexts, supporting emotional learning through structured play. However, findings from these studies remain fragmented, and systematic integration of

the results is lacking. This limits their usefulness for educators and policymakers seeking evidence-based interventions. Within the context of physical culture pedagogy, traditional games represent a form of structured physical activity that simultaneously engages emotional, social, and motor domains. Their incorporation into early childhood programs aligns with holistic educational goals, bridging movement-based learning and emotional development.

Traditional games are hypothesized to significantly enhance emotional intelligence in early childhood by promoting direct interaction, cooperation, and emotional expression. These culturally embedded games are expected to provide structured experiences that support the development of core emotional and social competencies in children aged 3 to 6 years.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of traditional games in improving emotional intelligence in children aged 3 to 6 years through a literature review approach.

Material and Methods

Information Sources

Scientific articles were identified through a comprehensive search of both international and national academic databases. The international databases included Google Scholar, Scopus, Elsevier, and ResearchGate. National sources comprised the SINTA and Garuda databases. The search strategy involved the use of multilingual keywords such as "traditional games," "emotional intelligence," "children," "adolescents," and "social-emotional development." Keywords were applied in Indonesian, English, and other commonly used academic languages to ensure broader coverage.

Methodology

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach based on the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. The article identification process followed the PICO framework, which defined the Population (children aged 3 to 6 years), Intervention (traditional games), Comparison (not applicable), and Outcome (emotional intelligence) [18, 19].

In this review, the PICO elements were operationalized as follows:

- Population – defined strictly as children aged 3–6 years, based on study inclusion criteria
- Intervention – traditional games, either culturally specific or generically labeled as traditional play
- Outcome – emotional intelligence, identified through indicators such as empathy, emotional regulation, and cooperation
- Comparison – not applicable, as most studies lacked a formal control group.

The literature search was conducted using the Publish or Perish software in combination with multiple databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Elsevier, ResearchGate, SINTA, and Garuda. The search covered publications between 2014 and 2024 and applied multilingual keyword combinations relevant to traditional games and emotional development in early childhood. The search keywords for the articles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Article Search Keywords

PICO	Information
Population	Early childhood aged 3–6 years
Intervention	Traditional games
Comparison	–
Outcome	Emotional intelligence

Note: P = Population/Patient; I = Intervention; C = Comparison; O = Outcomes

The inclusion criteria were:

- The study focused on the relationship between traditional games and emotional intelligence
 - Participants were children aged 3 to 6 years
 - The article presented empirical data (qualitative or quantitative)
 - Full-text peer-reviewed publication.
- Exclusion criteria included:
- Lack of methodological transparency
 - Irrelevance to the defined age range or intervention type
 - Absence of emotional intelligence as a focal outcome.

The review process followed the PRISMA stages: defining criteria, identifying sources, screening titles and abstracts, filtering full texts, and synthesizing results. A descriptive qualitative content analysis was applied to identify patterns in how traditional games influence emotional intelligence. Findings were grouped by game type, emotional indicators (such as empathy, self-control, cooperation, and social awareness), and intervention characteristics. To enhance methodological reliability, the screening and selection of articles were conducted independently by two reviewers. Discrepancies in inclusion decisions were resolved through discussion and consensus. The selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

As this review is based on secondary data, no primary data collection was conducted. The reliability of the synthesis was ensured through a rigorous selection of sources, based on methodological soundness and consistency of reported outcomes.

As this study involved a secondary analysis of publicly available literature, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

Data Analysis

The final synthesis included eight empirical studies that met all inclusion criteria. These studies varied in methodological design and geographic origin but shared a focus on the use of traditional games as interventions for emotional development in early childhood. The analytical process was conducted descriptively using qualitative content analysis techniques. Each study was reviewed to extract information on the type of game used, the specific emotional intelligence indicators addressed (e.g. empathy, emotional regulation, cooperation), and the structure of the intervention. Findings were grouped thematically to identify consistent patterns and conceptual trends across studies. The use of a synthesis table enabled clear comparison of results and enhanced traceability of thematic categories.

Results

The results of this study consist of a synthesis of eight relevant articles that met the inclusion criteria. Each article was analyzed to identify the types of traditional games used, the specific emotional intelligence indicators targeted, the implementation context, and the age group of the participants. The studies also report the frequency and consistency of observed emotional outcomes across different interventions. To support clarity and transparency, the findings are summarized using tables and figures that map the relationship between traditional games and the development of emotional intelligence in early childhood.

The main characteristics of the analyzed articles are presented in Table 2.

To support the interpretation of the results, Table 3 presents the distribution of key variables across the included studies. It summarizes the types of traditional games used, the emotional intelligence components measured, research designs applied, and target populations described.

Overall, the most frequently targeted components of emotional intelligence across the reviewed studies were empathy, emotional regulation, and cooperation. These domains appeared consistently regardless of whether the interventions involved named traditional games (e.g., congklak, Balogo, Cublak-cublak Suweng) or general categories such as “traditional play.”

In several studies, the specific games were not named. Instead, authors referred to the interventions in general terms (e.g., “local traditional games” or “play-based programs”), which may reflect cultural variation or informal labeling practices in the original contexts.

Four studies employed quantitative designs and reported measurable emotional outcomes. Among these, three showed statistically significant improvements in emotional intelligence indicators (e.g., $P < 0.05$), and one reported a 76% gain using N-Gain analysis. The remaining studies used

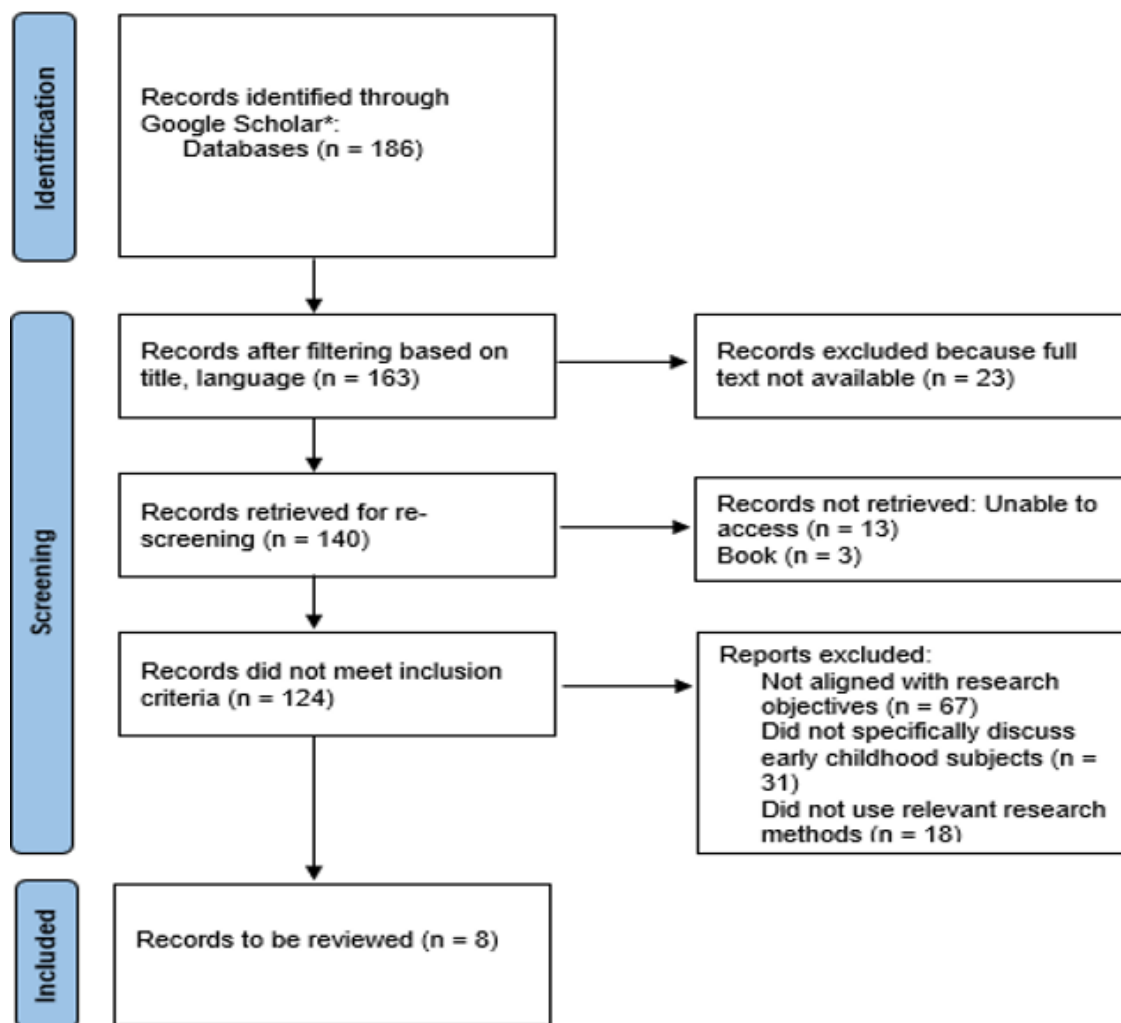


Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram Showing a Flow of the Study Selection

Table 2. Summary of Reviewed Studies on Traditional Games and Emotional Intelligence in Children Aged 3–6 Years

No	Author and Year	Type of Traditional Game	EQ Components Targeted	Age Group	Intervention Format / Duration
1	[21]	<i>Congklak</i>	Emotion recognition, expression, self-control, social bonding	Early childhood	Repeated play cycles with observation-based assessment
2	[22]	<i>Balogo</i>	General EQ score (measured via N-Gain)	Kindergarten children	Experimental design; N-Gain analysis (76%)
3	[23]	Not specified	Overall emotional intelligence	Elementary school	Single-group intervention
4	[24]	Multiple (not named)	Emotional intelligence (with statistical comparison)	Preschoolers	16 sessions; pretest-posttest control group design
5	[25]	Not specified	Emotional regulation, empathy, social interaction	Early childhood	Qualitative synthesis of game-based programs
6	[26]	Traditional Play Programs (TPPs)	Self-awareness, relationship management, regulation	Children in care centers	Mixed methods; focus on subdomains of EQ
7	[27]	<i>Cublak-cublak Suweng</i>	Empathy, cooperation, emotional regulation	Generation Alpha (early childhood)	Observational intervention
8	[28]	Not specified	Interpersonal intelligence (teamwork, emotional support)	School-aged children	Descriptive approach based on community practices

Table 3. Thematic Distribution of Key Variables Across Reviewed Studies

Variable	Frequency (n = 8)	Notes
Named Traditional Games	3 studies	Congklak, Balogo, Cublak-cublak Suweng
Unnamed/Generic Game Interventions	5 studies	Described as «traditional play» without specifying the exact game
Most Frequent EQ Components	6 studies	Empathy, self-control, emotional regulation
Use of Quantitative Measures	4 studies	Includes N-Gain scores, pre- post test comparisons (e.g., $P < 0.05$)
Descriptive/Qualitative Designs	4 studies	Observational or thematic analysis approaches
Experimental Design with Control Group	2 studies	Clear comparison between intervention and control groups
Focus on Early Childhood (3–6 years)	6 studies	Aligned with inclusion criteria of the review
Studies Conducted in Indonesia	5 studies	Cultural relevance and use of local games

qualitative assessments that highlighted observed gains in interpersonal behavior and emotional expression.

Discussion

This systematic review aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of traditional games in fostering emotional intelligence in children aged 3 to 6 years. Across the eight eligible studies, consistent patterns emerged showing that such games support the development of empathy, self-regulation, cooperation, and self-awareness. Despite variations in game types and research designs, the findings converge to highlight traditional games as meaningful contexts for early emotional learning.

Previous research has shown that structured traditional play can serve as an effective medium for emotional development in children. For example, [29] demonstrated that an integrative program called Harmonious Physical Education, which combines traditional games, sports, and group movement, enhances both intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional skills. These findings indicate that traditional games can be used not only for recreation but also as emotionally meaningful educational interventions.

The findings of this review are supported by theoretical and empirical frameworks in developmental and educational psychology. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of play in the internalization of social and emotional functions, provides a foundational perspective for understanding how children learn through interaction and symbolic activity [30]. This theoretical basis is clearly reflected in traditional games that require negotiation, turn-taking, and emotional feedback processing. These mechanisms are present in the games described in [21, 25, 26].

Emotional intelligence models, such as those developed by Mayer and Salovey or Goleman, suggest that emotional competence arises not only from reflection but also from immersion in socially

complex situations [31]. The games evaluated in [24, 25, 27] place children in emotionally charged group dynamics where they learn empathy, regulation, and cooperation through active experience rather than explicit instruction.

Several studies included in this review, such as [22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27], reported improvements in various emotional intelligence indicators following traditional game-based interventions. For example, [22] documented a high N-Gain score in kindergarten settings for the game Balogo, while [24] identified statistically significant emotional gains in a controlled design. These results represent findings extracted directly from the reviewed sample. In contrast, supporting insights from prior literature, including [29], provide a broader theoretical and empirical context by highlighting the emotional relevance of traditional play within integrated educational models.

Finally, [28] highlighted that traditional games enhance interpersonal intelligence, a construct closely associated with emotional intelligence. Through collective decision-making, expression of opinions, and shared emotional support, children developed social competencies that are fundamental at this early developmental stage.

While [21] explored emotional self-regulation through individual responses during play, [26] examined how group-based traditional games support relationship management and collective emotional problem-solving. This broadens the scope of emotional outcomes beyond personal competence to include socially co-constructed emotional knowledge.

In terms of educational application, the reviewed studies reflect methodological parallels with global social-emotional learning (SEL) programs. For example, the use of structured interventions in [22, 24] with measurable pre- and post-intervention outcomes aligns with evidence-based practices in international SEL research. In contrast, the activities in [21, 25, 27] emphasized child-led play,

spontaneous decision-making, and emotional negotiation within culturally meaningful contexts. This distinction is especially relevant for settings where standardized programs may not align with local culture or resources.

Another point of convergence with the broader literature is the adaptability of traditional games as tools for both formal and informal education. The findings in [24, 26, 27] demonstrate that when integrated into early childhood programs, these games can function as instructional strategies and culturally responsive practices that affirm children's lived experiences. Unlike externally developed interventions, traditional games reflect community values and real social situations, which enhances emotional authenticity and learning effectiveness.

Taken together, the evidence supports the conclusion that traditional games are not only consistent with contemporary theories of emotional learning but also offer distinctive pedagogical advantages. They integrate social-emotional development with cultural continuity, providing accessible and emotionally meaningful contexts for young learners.

Limitations and Future Research

The reviewed studies present several methodological limitations that constrain the generalizability of findings. Many of them involved small, non-representative samples and lacked detailed descriptions of the intervention procedures. In some cases, the assessment tools used to measure emotional intelligence were either unvalidated or inconsistently applied. Most studies were of short duration, which makes it difficult to determine whether the observed improvements in emotional intelligence are sustained over time. The concentration of research within a single national context also raises concerns about cultural bias and limits the broader applicability of the results. Furthermore, the lack of standardized intervention protocols complicates efforts to replicate findings and draw firm conclusions about causality. Future research should address these issues by using longitudinal designs, applying interventions in culturally diverse settings, and relying on validated emotional intelligence instruments. Comparative studies between digital and traditional games, as

well as investigations into the effectiveness of teacher-led versus peer-guided gameplay, may help clarify underlying mechanisms of emotional development. In addition, identifying specific types of traditional games that support distinct emotional skills, such as impulse control, empathy, or social interaction, would contribute to the development of targeted, evidence-based educational strategies.

Practical Implications

Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that traditional games can be valuable tools in early childhood education. Educators can use these games to support the development of emotional intelligence in a natural and culturally embedded way. Traditional games are often inexpensive, require minimal equipment, and promote active participation, making them accessible in various educational settings. Incorporating traditional games into structured classroom activities may help children practice emotional regulation, cooperation, and empathy in real time. Furthermore, such games can support inclusive practices by engaging children of different backgrounds and developmental levels. They may also contribute to preserving cultural heritage through intergenerational transmission of play practices.

Conclusions

This systematic review examined how traditional games relate to the development of emotional intelligence in children aged 3 to 6 years. The analysis of eight studies suggests that these games are associated with improvements in emotional regulation, empathy, cooperation, and self-awareness. Traditional games offer structured social contexts where emotional learning can occur through culturally meaningful and interactive play. The findings point to the potential of integrating traditional games into early childhood education as a contextually relevant way to support emotional development.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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