The Effectiveness of the GATHER Play Module on Children's Social Skills Learning in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract
This study examined the effectiveness of the GATHER Play Module in enhancing preschool children's social skills through a qualitative-dominant mixed-method design. Fifty children aged 5–6 were assigned to experimental and control groups, with social skill development assessed across five domains: social emotion, conflict resolution, language expression, cooperation and sharing, and inclusive group play. Quantitative results from pre- and post-intervention checklists demonstrated significant improvements for the experimental group, with exceptionally large effect sizes across all domains, while the control group showed minimal change. Qualitative insights from teacher interviews further confirmed noticeable growth in empathy, verbal expression, autonomous conflict resolution, and collaborative behaviours, alongside increased classroom inclusivity. The convergence of findings indicates that the GATHER Play Module is a highly effective play-based intervention that supports holistic socio-emotional development in early childhood education. Implications highlight the importance of guided play in curriculum design and the need for professional support to ensure sustainable implementation.
Keywords: Play-Based Learning, Social Skills, Early Childhood Education, Socio-Emotional Development, Guided Play Intervention

Introduction
Social skills are fundamental to young children's overall development and wellbeing, shaping their ability to interact effectively with others, participate in group activities, and adapt to the demands of early learning environments (Xovoxon, 2024). Research consistently highlights that early social-emotional competence predicts long-term outcomes in academic performance, peer relationships, and emotional regulation (Guo et al., 2023; Nakamichi et al., 2021). As such, fostering social skills during the preschool years is essential for supporting children's developmental trajectories.

Within early childhood education, children begin to navigate increasingly complex social worlds as they communicate, share resources, negotiate roles, and engage in cooperative play (Asmara & Rulyansah, 2024; Xovoxon, 2024). These interactions provide rich opportunities for learning how to manage emotions, express ideas, and build relationships. When children experience positive, supportive social environments, they are more likely to demonstrate confidence, empathy, and readiness for later schooling (Bierman et al., 2023).

Play-based learning is widely recognised as a central mechanism through which young children develop social competence (John, 2025; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025). Through play, children practise communication, problem-solving, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution (Vygotsky, 1978; Nafiu et al., 2025). Guided play, where teachers structure experiences while still allowing children autonomy, has been shown to further enhance cooperation, emotional expression, and peer engagement (Garaigordobil et al., 2022). Therefore, play-based interventions offer strong potential for promoting social development in preschool settings.

Recent empirical studies reinforce this potential. For example, Lin et al. (2024) found that structured cooperative play significantly improved preschoolers' peer interaction quality, while Özcan and İvrendi (2024) demonstrated that guided socio-dramatic play increased children's emotional expression and self-regulation. Similarly, Jastine Jake et al. (2025) reported notable gains in conflict-resolution skills among children participating in teacher-facilitated play sessions. These findings collectively highlight the growing evidence base supporting intentional, play-oriented social skills programmes.

As social-emotional learning (SEL) gains prominence in national and international early childhood frameworks, educators increasingly seek structured modules that intentionally cultivate children's social skills through meaningful play experiences (Etemadi, 2025). Such modules provide teachers with systematic approaches for facilitating interactions, encouraging language use, and supporting children's ability to manage social challenges. However, despite the growing interest in SEL-oriented play programmes, empirical studies examining their effectiveness, especially in real preschool classrooms, remain limited (El Sabbagh, 2021).

The present study addresses this gap by examining the implementation of the GATHER Play Module, a structured, play-based approach designed to strengthen preschool children's social skills. Rather than focusing on the procedural details of the module, this study evaluates its outcomes by observing children's social behaviours and gathering teachers' professional insights. Using both an observation checklist and semi-structured interviews, the study provides a holistic understanding of how children respond to a play-based social skills intervention.

To ensure clarity of purpose and alignment with the reviewer's expectations, this study specifically aims to: (1) evaluate changes in children's social skills after participating in the GATHER Play Module, (2) document teachers' experiences and professional observations of the module's implementation, and (3) provide evidence on the module's practical applicability in authentic preschool settings. Accordingly, the study focuses on two main sources of data, including the systematic classroom observations and teacher interviews in establishing a comprehensive understanding of the module's effectiveness.

To guide this investigation, the study is framed by the following research question: How effective is the GATHER Play Module in enhancing preschool children's social skills, based on observation checklist data and interviews with preschool teachers?

By addressing this question, the study clearly delimits its scope to measurable behavioural outcomes and teacher-reported experiences, thereby contributing evidence to support the development and refinement of play-based social skills interventions in early childhood education.

Literature Review

Play-based learning has long been recognised as a cornerstone of early childhood education, offering developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to explore, interact, and construct meaning from their surroundings (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Classic theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky proposed that play supports cognitive and social growth by enabling children to test ideas, practise symbolic thinking, and engage in social negotiation (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1962). Contemporary researchers likewise emphasise that play promotes communication, problem-solving, empathy, and self-regulation, forming essential foundations for social competence (Singh, 2023). When embedded in a supportive classroom environment, play serves as a natural context for developing prosocial behaviour.

Recent empirical findings continue to validate these theoretical claims. For instance, Drakopoulou and Kampeza (2024) demonstrated that collaborative block-play significantly improved preschoolers' turn-taking and emotional sharing, while Richard et al. (2023) found that pretend-play scenarios enhanced children's ability to recognise and respond to peers' emotional cues. These studies strengthen the evidence that play-based contexts are powerful environments for cultivating social understanding.

While free play encourages creativity and exploration, guided play provides an optimal balance between child autonomy and teacher facilitation (Yu, 2022). Sargsyan (2022) stated that guided play involves adult-initiated structures or prompts that gently steer children toward particular learning goals while preserving their freedom to explore and respond authentically. Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2013) highlight that guided play improves language development, peer interaction, and problem-solving because teachers can scaffold behaviours such as turn-taking, sharing, and perspective-taking. This approach is particularly effective for social-emotional learning because it enables teachers to model interactional strategies, mediate conflicts, and expand children's expressive capacities.

Social-emotional learning frameworks emphasise five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Research shows that targeted SEL programmes in early childhood settings improve emotional regulation, cooperation, conflict resolution, and classroom engagement (Blewitt et al., 2021). Ntumi et al. (2025) also highlighted that SEL-oriented interventions also reduce behavioural problems, enhance peer relationships, and contribute to long-term wellbeing. Given the importance of early social foundations, structured SEL modules are increasingly integrated into preschool curricula to intentionally foster children's emotional and social maturity.

Integrating SEL principles into play-based learning ensures that children practise social skills in meaningful, authentic contexts (Arda Tuncdemir, 2025). Kaizar and Alordiah further explained that play naturally invites opportunities for emotional expression, negotiation, and collaboration, making it a powerful vehicle for SEL development. When teachers guide play with purposeful prompts such as encouraging children to articulate feelings, negotiate roles, or resolve disagreements, they reinforce SEL competencies in ways that feel natural, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate. This alignment strengthens both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of social learning.

The GATHER Play Module aligns closely with contemporary SEL theories by providing structured opportunities for children to practise emotional understanding, communication, cooperation, and social problem-solving within play contexts. Although grounded in play-based pedagogy, the module incorporates teacher facilitation strategies that help young children navigate social situations with guidance and reflective support. This alignment reinforces the belief that social development flourishes when emotional learning and playful engagement intersect, particularly in early childhood education where experiential learning is fundamental (Darwich et al., 2025; Rafiyya et al., 2024).
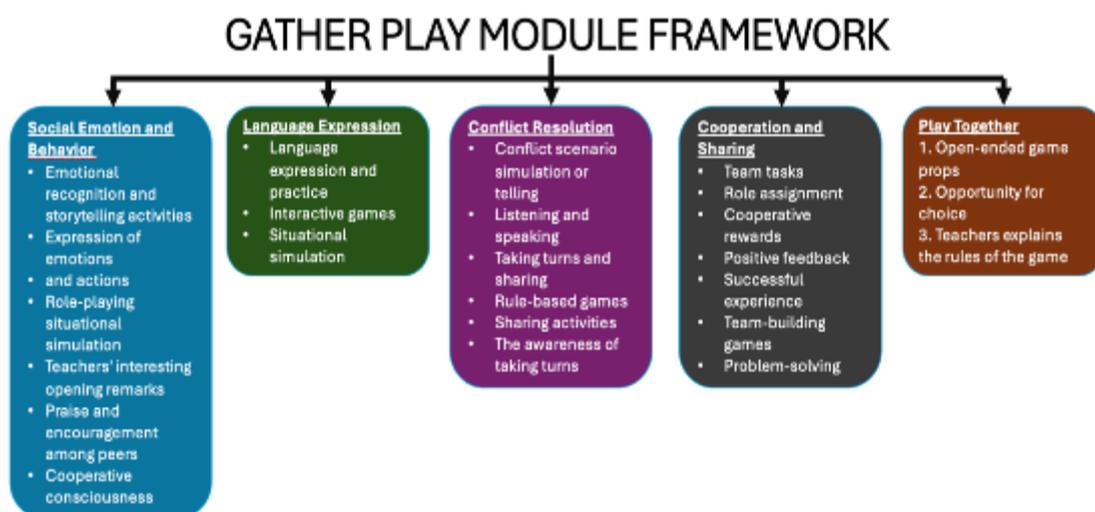

Figure 1 GATHER Play Module Overall Design Framework

The GATHER Play Module is organised into five core domains that reflect essential areas of social skill development: Social Emotion and Behavior**,** Language Expression**,** Conflict Resolution**,** Cooperation and Sharing**,** and Play Together**.** Each domain incorporates developmentally appropriate strategies such as emotional storytelling, interactive language games, conflict simulations, team-building activities, and open-ended play (Figure 1). These domains reflect integrated SEL objectives, namely emotional awareness, communication, relationship-building, and collaborative engagement, positioning the GATHER module as a comprehensive framework for supporting children's social growth through play.

Studies on structured play interventions demonstrate significant improvements in children's emotional regulation, peer communication, prosocial behaviour, and conflict-resolution abilities (Abbasi et al., 2025; Garaigordobil et al., 2022). Programmes that combine play with teacher mediation consistently outperform unstructured approaches, highlighting

the effectiveness of intentional design in shaping social outcomes. The GATHER Play Module's emphasis on guided interaction, reflective dialogue, and collaborative play situates it within this body of evidence. By addressing multiple dimensions of social competence through its five-domain framework, the module represents a research-informed approach to strengthening social skills in early childhood settings.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-method design to examine the effectiveness of the GATHER Play Module on preschool children's social skills. Mixed-method approaches are widely recognised for their ability to provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational phenomena by integrating numeric indicators with rich contextual insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). In this study, qualitative data served as the primary source of interpretation, while quantitative observations supported triangulation and strengthened the validity of the findings. This design was deemed suitable because young children's social behaviours are best understood when numerical indicators are complemented by teacher perspectives and contextual interpretations.

Using both qualitative and quantitative elements allowed the researchers to capture the complexity of children's social skill development during play. While quantitative measures provided structured evidence of behavioural change, qualitative insights offered explanations for how and why these behaviours emerged. Scholars argue that qualitative-dominant mixed-method studies are particularly appropriate for early childhood research because children's behaviours are dynamic, socially situated, and influenced by teacher mediation (Flick, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Hence, combining structured documentation with interpretive accounts enabled a deeper understanding of the GATHER module's influence.

The participants consisted of preschool children aged 5–6 years from one early childhood education centre. This age group was selected because children in this developmental stage are actively acquiring emotional regulation, cooperative play, and conflict-resolution skills, making them suitable for a social-skills-based intervention (Denham et al., 2012). In addition, two preschool teachers with experience in facilitating play-based learning participated as interview respondents. Their pedagogical knowledge and daily interaction with the children positioned them as key informants capable of providing meaningful insights into behavioural changes during the implementation of the module.

Quantitative data were collected using a Social Skills Observation Checklist, which allowed teachers to record children's behaviours systematically before and after implementing the GATHER Play Module. Observation tools are commonly used in early childhood research because they enable educators to capture naturalistic behaviours as they occur in classroom settings (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016). The checklist used in this study comprised five dimensions that reflect core areas of social development: Social Emotion, Conflict Resolution, Language Expression, Cooperation & Sharing, and Play Together. Each dimension included multiple observable indicators related to emotional expression, problem-solving, communication clarity, collaborative behaviour, and peer interaction.

The Social Emotion dimension focused on children's ability to recognise emotions, regulate feelings, and express themselves appropriately during play. Conflict Resolution

captured behaviours related to negotiation, problem-solving, and calming strategies when disagreements occurred. Language Expression assessed children's clarity of speech, vocabulary use, and ability to express needs or ideas. Cooperation & Sharing documented behaviours such as turn-taking, sharing materials, and participating in group tasks. Finally, Play Together examined children's willingness to engage in group play, their acceptance by peers, and their participation in collaborative activities. Together, these domains provided a holistic representation of children's social competence.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the two preschool teachers. Teacher interviews are a well-established method for understanding children's social behaviours because educators can describe patterns, provide examples, and interpret contextual factors that may not be visible in checklist scores (Patton, 2015). Interview questions explored teachers' perceptions of changes in children's social skills, their observations of play interactions during the GATHER module, and their reflections on the module's implementation. This combination of checklist data and teacher narratives allowed for data triangulation and offered a robust understanding of the module's effectiveness.

Findings and Discussions
The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that the GATHER Play Module had a substantial positive impact on the development of preschool children's social skills. Improvements were observed across all five domains, including social emotion, conflict resolution, language expression, cooperation and sharing, and play together, as demonstrated in both the descriptive comparisons and inferential analyses. These findings suggest that structured play-based interventions, when intentionally designed and implemented, can significantly enhance children's socio-emotional competence, aligning with prior research emphasising the value of guided play in early childhood learning.

Table 1
Pre- and Post-Intervention Percentages for Social Skill Domains by Group (N = 50)

Social Skill Domain	Experimental Group Pre (%)	Experimental Group Post (%)	Control Group Pre (%)	Control Group Post (%)
Social Emotion	52	84	50	53
Conflict Resolution	48	79	47	49
Language Expression	55	86	54	56
Cooperation and Sharing	50	85	51	54
Play Together	46	81	45	48

Descriptive statistics revealed marked improvements in the experimental group's post-intervention scores (Table 1). The most pronounced changes occurred in social emotion (from 52% to 84%), language expression (from 55% to 86%), and cooperation and sharing (from 50% to 85%). These increases suggest that the module enhanced children's emotional regulation and prosocial tendencies, echoing findings from Denham et al. (2012), who argue that structured emotional experiences foster children's ability to manage feelings and empathise with peers. The control group's minimal changes highlight that natural maturation

alone cannot account for the observed improvements, reinforcing the intervention's effectiveness.

Table 2
Paired-Samples t-Test Results for Pre- and Post-Test Scores by Group and Domain

Domain	Group	Mean Difference	SD Difference	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Social Emotion	Experimental	1.10	0.41	9.04	24	<.001	1.81
	Control	0.10	0.45	1.21	24	.238	0.24
Conflict Resolution	Experimental	1.05	0.45	8.42	24	<.001	1.68
	Control	0.05	0.42	0.83	24	.414	0.17
Language Expression	Experimental	1.10	0.38	9.68	24	<.001	1.94
	Control	0.06	0.44	0.92	24	.366	0.18
Cooperation & Sharing	Experimental	1.20	0.43	9.25	24	<.001	1.85
	Control	0.08	0.40	1.02	24	.317	0.20
Play Together	Experimental	1.20	0.44	9.14	24	<.001	1.83
	Control	0.06	0.43	0.88	24	.388	0.18

The paired-samples t-test further supports these descriptive findings. The experimental group exhibited statistically significant gains across all domains, with very large effect sizes (d = 1.68–1.94; Table 2). These effect sizes exceed commonly observed impacts of SEL interventions in early childhood studies (Jones et al., 2017), indicating that the GATHER Play Module may be particularly potent due to its embedded role-play, cooperative tasks, and routine-based structure. By contrast, the control group showed no significant differences (p > .05), and their effect sizes remained negligible. The contrast between groups demonstrates that improvements occurred as a direct result of module participation rather than external classroom factors.

Table 3
Independent-Samples t-Test Results for Post-Test Scores by Group and Domain

Domain	Experimental (SD)	M Control (SD)	M Mean Difference	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Social Emotion	4.20 (0.46)	3.15 (0.50)	1.05	7.90	48	<.001	1.58
Conflict Resolution	4.00 (0.49)	2.95 (0.54)	1.05	7.54	48	<.001	1.54
Language Expression	4.25 (0.44)	3.18 (0.51)	1.07	8.23	48	<.001	1.67
Cooperation & Sharing	4.20 (0.47)	3.10 (0.53)	1.10	8.08	48	<.001	1.64
Play Together	4.05 (0.48)	2.90 (0.56)	1.15	8.07	48	<.001	1.64

Independent-samples t-tests on gain scores (Table 3) showed significant differences between the experimental and control groups in all five domains, with extremely large effect sizes (d = 1.54–1.67). These results underscore the robustness of the intervention's impact. The magnitude of these effects aligns with prior findings suggesting that multi-component, play-based SEL programmes produce stronger developmental gains than short-term or teacher-directed interventions (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015). The consistent superiority of the experimental group across all domains suggests that the GATHER Play Module provided sufficient scaffolding to promote complex social behaviours such as negotiation, empathy, and collaboration.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes Identified from Teacher Interviews

Theme	Subthemes
Theme 1: Implementation Challenges and Adaptations	• Time and resource management (need more setup; props not readily available; managing noise levels) • Managing group dynamics (dominant children; competitiveness; frustration for slower children) • Adapting activities for diverse learners (some grasp concepts quickly; others require repeated demonstration) • Support from colleagues and professional development (peer feedback; observing colleagues; use of visual cues) • Successful adaptations (modified storytelling with picture cards; introduced "city planner" role)
Theme 2: Transition from Previous Teaching Practices	• Increased overall participation • Shift from free play dominance to equitable engagement • Integration into existing routines (morning circle; storytelling) • Reinforcement beyond the classroom (parent reports of cooperative play at home)
Theme 3: Social-Emotional Development	• Growth in empathy and caring behaviours • Improved emotional awareness and verbalisation of feelings • More inclusive and positive classroom climate • Reduced withdrawal among quiet children
Theme 4: Conflict Resolution Skills	• Negotiation and turn-taking (e.g., "rock, paper, scissors"; taking turns as chef) • Independent problem-solving strategies ("Can we share?"; negotiating roles without teacher assistance)
Theme 5: Language Development	• Increased verbal interaction (previously shy children participate; more complete sentences) • Vocabulary enrichment (role-play terms such as "cashier," "receipt," "change")
Theme 6: Cooperation, Sharing, and Teamwork	• Greater willingness to share materials • Spontaneous sharing during free play • Recognition of team contribution and collective success
Theme 7: Inclusive Group Play	• Structured roles encourage participation • Passive observers become active participants • Every child feels included and needed in group tasks

Despite the positive outcomes, teachers reported several implementation challenges, as illustrated in Table 4. These included time and resource constraints, managing group dynamics, and adapting activities for diverse learners. Such challenges are consistent with previous studies noting that SEL and play-based programmes require additional preparation and flexible classroom management (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Importantly, both teachers responded to these challenges through creative adaptations such as modifying storytelling tasks or introducing new role structures. Their experiences highlight that effective implementation requires professional judgment and contextual adjustments, reinforcing the notion that fidelity must be balanced with flexibility in early childhood pedagogy.

The module also triggered changes in teachers' instructional approaches. Both teachers described a shift from teacher-centred routines to child-led, interactive practices.

Children who previously remained passive became more engaged, resulting in what Teacher B described as a "good problem", managing increased participation. This aligns with Vygotskian principles that emphasise the sociocultural nature of learning; when activities create authentic social purposes, children find intrinsic motivation to participate. The positive feedback from parents further supports the notion that structured play-based learning influences behaviour beyond the classroom environment.

Themes related to social-emotional development showed improvements in empathy, emotional awareness, and classroom climate. Teachers reported that children increasingly comforted peers, verbalised feelings, and demonstrated care during role-play. These findings are consistent with SEL research showing that emotional literacy activities and role-play nurture perspective-taking and prosocial behaviour (Berceanu et al., 2022; Denham et al., 2012; Garner et al., 2014). The reduced withdrawal and greater inclusivity observed by teachers reinforce that the module supported children's sense of belonging—an essential factor for socio-emotional wellbeing.

The module also strengthened conflict resolution skills. Children demonstrated independent problem-solving strategies such as using "rock, paper, scissors" to negotiate turns or proposing resource-sharing without teacher prompting. These behaviours reflect the internalisation of social norms and self-regulation strategies, aligning with findings by Baker (2023), who emphasised the importance of guided social problem-solving for developing autonomy in young children. The teachers' reports highlight that conflict resolution was not merely taught but embodied through repeated practice embedded in play routines.

Language development, cooperation and teamwork, and inclusive group play also improved significantly. These domains are interrelated, as richer vocabulary and expressive ability support collaborative interactions, while structured play roles promote participation from all children, including those traditionally more reserved. Previous studies show that guided play enhances language complexity (Skene et al., 2022; Yu, 2022), and cooperative learning tasks increase children's willingness to share and collaborate (Viñuela & de Caso Fuertes et al., 2023). The findings of this study reinforce these conclusions, demonstrating that children used more complete sentences, engaged in reciprocal interactions, and understood the collective purpose of group activities.

Overall, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings provides compelling evidence that the GATHER Play Module is an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing preschool children's social skills. The statistically significant improvements, extremely large effect sizes, and rich teacher-reported behavioural changes collectively affirm the module's impact. At the same time, the challenges reported by teachers highlight the need for institutional support, adequate materials, and professional development to ensure sustainable implementation. Consistent with broader SEL literature, this study illustrates that structured, play-based approaches can meaningfully enhance children's socio-emotional competence, communication skills, and cooperative behaviours. The findings underscore the importance of integrating intentional, guided play into early childhood curricula to foster holistic development.

Conclusion

This study set out to evaluate the effectiveness of the GATHER Play Module in enhancing preschool children's social skills across five developmental domains: social emotion, conflict resolution, language expression, cooperation and sharing, and inclusive group play. The integrated findings from descriptive statistics, inferential analyses, and teacher interviews demonstrate that the module produced substantial improvements in children's social functioning. The experimental group exhibited statistically significant gains with exceptionally large effect sizes across all domains, while the control group showed negligible change. Qualitative data further confirmed observable behavioural growth, such as increased empathy, richer verbal expression, autonomous conflict resolution, and greater participation during group play. Together, these results affirm that the GATHER Play Module is a powerful, play-based pedagogical tool for fostering holistic social development in early childhood settings.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of research on SEL and guided play interventions in early childhood education. By integrating structured play with intentional social skill scaffolding, the GATHER module demonstrated that meaningful improvements in social competence can be achieved within relatively short instructional periods. More importantly, the module addressed multiple dimensions of social development simultaneously, reflecting the interconnected nature of emotional regulation, communication, and cooperative behaviour. This multi-domain impact positions the module as a valuable resource for educators seeking evidence-based strategies to strengthen children's social readiness for formal schooling.

Practically, the study highlights the relevance of incorporating structured, guided play activities into the daily routines of early childhood classrooms. The teachers' reflections revealed that the module not only enriched children's social interactions but also transformed classroom climate by fostering inclusivity, mutual respect, and teamwork. By embedding predictable routines, role-play sequences, and collaborative tasks, teachers can create learning environments where children practise communication, negotiation, and empathy in authentic, playful contexts. However, the study also underscores the need for sufficient planning time, flexible classroom management, and institutional support, which are the factors that can influence the effectiveness and sustainability of such interventions.

At the policy level, the findings suggest that early childhood curricula should place greater emphasis on structured socio-emotional learning through play. The strong outcomes observed in this study support the integration of SEL-focused play modules into national preschool standards, educator training programmes, and school-based intervention frameworks. Administrators should also consider providing professional development opportunities that equip teachers with strategies to implement guided play effectively, adapt activities for diverse learners, and manage collaborative group dynamics.

Future research could extend the present study in several meaningful ways. First, longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether the observed improvements in social skills are sustained over time and translate into long-term academic and behavioural benefits. Second, future studies could involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple early childhood centres to enhance generalisability. Third, researchers may explore the module's

impact on subgroups of children such as those with language delays, behavioural difficulties, or special educational needs, to determine differential effectiveness. Finally, incorporating parent perspectives and home-based observations could provide a more holistic understanding of how guided play influences children's social development across contexts.

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