

# Analyzing the Role of Play and Educational Toys in Cognitive and Emotional Growth: A Review and Network Analysis

Mahin. Keikhanejad<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohammadnaeim. Porki<sup>2</sup>, Mojtaba. Ebrahimi<sup>3</sup>, Fatemeh. Askari<sup>4</sup>, Eghlima. Kord<sup>5</sup>, Ali. Sabukzahi<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Science, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Primary Education Expert, Sib and Soran Department of Education, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Master of Education Administration, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Zahedan, Iran

<sup>4</sup> Master of Science in Educational Management, Zahedan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Zahedan, Iran

<sup>5</sup> Master's Degree in Sociology, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Zahedan, Iran; Secondary School Teacher, Department of Education, Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Ira

<sup>6</sup> Master's Degree in Sociology, Zahedan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Zahedan, Iran; Cultural–Social Consultant, Municipality of Bandar Chabahar, Iran

\* Corresponding author email address: mkeyka@cfu.ac.ir

## Article Info

### Article type:

Review Article

### How to cite this article:

Keikhanejad, M., Porki, M., Ebrahimi, M., Askari, F., Kord, E., & Sabukzahi, A. (2026). Analyzing the Role of Play and Educational Toys in Cognitive and Emotional Growth: A Review and Network Analysis. *Psychological Research in Individuals with Exceptional Needs*, 4(1), 1-12.

<https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.prien.5095>



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## ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigates the impact of play and educational toys on cognitive (e.g., problem-solving) and emotional (e.g., empathy) development in elementary students aged 6–12. A PRISMA-guided systematic review of 87 articles from Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, SID, and Magiran (2010–August 2025), combined with a VOSviewer co-authorship network analysis of 78 researchers, reveals key insights. Structured play (e.g., puzzles, robotics) enhances cognitive skills in 71% of studies, supporting STEM success, while group play (e.g., role-playing) fosters emotional growth in 47% of cases, vital for socio-emotional learning. Five research clusters emerged: structured play, digital toys (up 35% post-2020 with AI tools), outdoor play, free play, and mental health. Influential authors like Pyle bridge these domains. Unlike prior cognition-focused reviews (e.g., Rezaei et al., 2020), this synthesis offers a holistic perspective, advocating play-based curricula and teacher training. Limitations include reliance on secondary data, a 6–12 age focus excluding developmental continuities, and lack of longitudinal evidence. Future research should explore long-term emotional effects, cultural variations, and use random-effects models for heterogeneous studies, emphasizing Iran's context and COVID-19's influence.

**Keywords:** *Play, Educational Toys, Cognitive Development, Emotional Development, Elementary Education, Network Analysis*

## 1. Introduction

The elementary school years constitute a critical developmental window during which children simultaneously consolidate higher-order cognitive abilities and acquire foundational socio-emotional competencies necessary for lifelong learning and psychological adjustment. Developmental psychology has long emphasized that intellectual growth cannot be separated from social interaction, emotional experience, and active engagement with the environment. Classical constructivist theory posits that children construct knowledge through interaction with objects and experiences, and play represents one of the most natural contexts through which processes of assimilation and accommodation unfold (Piaget, 1962). Rather than serving merely as recreation, play functions as an epistemic activity through which children explore rules, symbols, and causal relations, gradually moving toward logical reasoning and abstract thought.

The sociocultural perspective further extends this understanding by framing development as fundamentally embedded in shared cultural practices and guided participation. Learning occurs through interaction with more capable peers and adults within socially meaningful activities, particularly play scenarios that enable experimentation beyond current competence levels (Vygotsky, 1978). The notion of mediated learning emphasizes how language, tools, and symbolic systems shape cognition, a process elaborated through later theoretical work emphasizing the social formation of mind and collaborative meaning construction (Wertsch, 1985). Within this framework, play becomes a dynamic zone of proximal development in which children internalize social norms, emotional regulation strategies, and cognitive problem-solving skills. The apprenticeship model of learning further reinforces that cognitive growth is inseparable from participation in culturally organized activities (Rogoff, 1990).

Across decades of research, scholars have increasingly recognized that play operates as a multidimensional developmental system rather than a single pedagogical technique. Early creativity research demonstrated that playful exploration promotes divergent thinking, fluency, originality, and imaginative flexibility, capacities that underpin innovation and adaptive reasoning (Torrance, 1974). Contemporary creativity theory expanded this perspective by conceptualizing creativity as emerging from interactions among actors, actions, audiences, artifacts, and

affordances, highlighting the social ecology of playful learning environments (Glăveanu, 2013). Such perspectives position educational toys and playful activities as cultural tools that mediate learning processes rather than simple entertainment objects.

Cognitive neuroscience has provided additional empirical grounding for these theoretical claims. Executive functions—including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control—are strongly associated with structured and exploratory play experiences that challenge planning and self-monitoring capacities (Diamond, 2013). These executive processes form the cognitive infrastructure underlying academic achievement, particularly in mathematics, literacy, and scientific reasoning. Empirical syntheses demonstrate that play-based learning environments significantly enhance attention regulation, reasoning performance, and learning motivation when compared with passive instructional models (Rezaei et al., 2020). Educational games, manipulatives, and interactive toys create contexts in which children actively test hypotheses and receive immediate feedback, strengthening cognitive engagement and conceptual understanding (Esmaeili et al., 2019).

The educational significance of play has therefore moved from peripheral consideration to central pedagogical principle. Scoping reviews of early education research indicate a growing consensus that play-based pedagogy supports deeper conceptual learning, learner autonomy, and sustained curiosity (Pyle et al., 2017). Learning-through-play frameworks emphasize that meaningful learning occurs when activities integrate joy, active participation, social interaction, iteration, and meaningful relevance to children's lived experiences (Zosh et al., 2022). These characteristics distinguish play from traditional didactic instruction and align closely with contemporary educational reform agendas advocating learner-centered pedagogies.

Simultaneously, global educational policy has begun to acknowledge play as a cornerstone of future education systems. International initiatives promoting a new social contract for education emphasize creativity, collaboration, emotional resilience, and adaptability as essential competencies for the twenty-first century workforce (Unesco, 2021). Within this vision, play and educational toys serve as accessible mechanisms for cultivating transversal skills such as problem-solving, empathy, and innovation. Such perspectives underscore that playful learning is not limited to early childhood but remains developmentally relevant throughout primary education.

Beyond cognition, emotional development has emerged as a critical dimension of play research. Emotion regulation theory conceptualizes emotional competence as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional responses in adaptive ways (Gross, 1998). Play environments provide natural opportunities for practicing these regulatory processes through negotiation, cooperation, competition, and role enactment. Methodological discussions in developmental psychology emphasize that emotional regulation must be examined within interactive contexts rather than isolated individual behaviors (Cole et al., 2004). Cooperative games and dramatic play have been shown to foster empathy, perspective-taking, and social responsibility, highlighting play's unique contribution to socio-emotional learning (Martlew, 2011). Evidence from Iranian contexts similarly demonstrates that dramatic and role-based play strengthens emotional resilience and peer relationships among elementary students (Mohammadi & Ahmadi, 2021).

Outdoor play and physical exploration represent additional pathways linking play to emotional wellbeing. Exposure to natural environments supports stress reduction, self-confidence, and psychological health while encouraging exploratory behavior and environmental awareness (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). Manipulative play activities such as playdough engagement further contribute to fine motor coordination and embodied cognition, illustrating the integration of physical, cognitive, and emotional development (Karimi et al., 2022). These findings collectively suggest that play acts as an integrative developmental mechanism rather than a domain-specific intervention.

Technological transformation has introduced new dimensions to play research, particularly through digital toys and interactive learning environments. The proliferation of digital media in children's lives has reshaped traditional conceptions of play, raising questions about the balance between technological engagement and developmental outcomes. Reviews of digital toys indicate mixed but increasingly positive evidence regarding cognitive engagement, motivation, and emotional interaction when technologies are designed according to developmental principles (Hesterman, 2020). Multi-sensory digital environments can enhance emotional engagement by combining visual, auditory, and interactive feedback systems that sustain attention and promote meaningful participation (Papastergiou et al., 2024). Recent studies further suggest that carefully designed digital play

experiences may support adaptive learning pathways and individualized cognitive development trajectories (Wang et al., 2025).

Despite growing interest in digital play, scholars caution that technology should complement rather than replace socially grounded play experiences. Contemporary early childhood research highlights tensions between digital culture and traditional play practices, emphasizing the need for balanced integration of technology into pedagogical frameworks (Edwards, 2016). Loose-parts play and open-ended materials continue to demonstrate strong effects on executive functioning and creative problem-solving, illustrating the enduring developmental value of physical exploration (Masterson et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the importance of examining multiple forms of play—structured, free, outdoor, and digital—within a unified developmental perspective.

The expanding body of play research has also generated methodological advancements in educational and psychological inquiry. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have become essential tools for synthesizing heterogeneous evidence and identifying research trends across disciplines (Tight, 2019). Reporting standards such as PRISMA have strengthened transparency and reproducibility in evidence synthesis (Moher et al., 2009). Qualitative analytical approaches, particularly thematic analysis, enable researchers to integrate diverse findings and uncover underlying developmental patterns across studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, bibliometric mapping tools allow scholars to visualize collaboration networks and knowledge clusters, revealing how scientific communities evolve and interact (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Network science perspectives highlight that patterns of scholarly collaboration influence research innovation and interdisciplinary integration (Newman, 2004).

While existing scholarship provides substantial evidence for the cognitive benefits of play, several gaps remain evident. Many earlier reviews concentrated primarily on academic achievement or isolated cognitive outcomes, overlooking emotional development and the interaction between cognitive and affective processes. Emerging systematic reviews emphasize that non-clinical play interventions significantly contribute to emotional regulation, anxiety reduction, and social competence among children, yet integrated analyses remain limited (González-Valero et al., 2025). Moreover, cross-cultural contexts, particularly those outside Western educational systems, remain underrepresented despite evidence suggesting that

cultural values strongly shape play practices and developmental outcomes.

In educational systems undergoing rapid transformation, including those influenced by digitalization and global educational reforms, understanding the combined cognitive and emotional effects of play becomes increasingly urgent. Educational toys represent a tangible interface between pedagogical theory and classroom practice, offering scalable and culturally adaptable tools for fostering holistic development. Aligning research practices with established scholarly standards for reporting, ethics, and methodological rigor ensures that findings contribute meaningfully to evidence-based educational innovation (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Taken together, theoretical traditions, empirical research, technological innovation, and policy discourse converge toward a common conclusion: play constitutes a foundational mechanism through which children develop intellectual competence, emotional resilience, creativity, and social understanding. However, despite substantial progress, the literature lacks a comprehensive synthesis integrating cognitive outcomes, emotional development, and patterns of scholarly collaboration within the field of play and educational toys. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to systematically examine the role of play and educational toys in the cognitive and emotional development of elementary school children through an integrated systematic review and co-authorship network analysis.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design

This mixed-methods study combines a systematic literature review and co-authorship network analysis to assess play and educational toys' impact on 6–12-year-olds' cognitive and emotional development, addressing research gaps.

### 2.2. Systematic Literature Review

#### 2.2.1. Rationale and Design

A PRISMA-guided framework (Moher et al., 2009) synthesizes evidence for research questions 1 and 2, ensuring rigor and bias reduction.

#### 2.2.2. Data Collection

Articles from 2010 to August 2025 were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, SID, and Magiran for global and Iranian coverage. ERIC was excluded due to 90% overlap with Scopus (preliminary analysis). Search terms included "play AND cognitive development" OR "educational toys AND emotional development" and Persian equivalents in local databases. Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed, empirical studies, ages 6–12, with cognitive/emotional outcomes, in English/Persian. Exclusions were preschool/secondary focus, non-empirical content, and unclear methodologies. From 645 records, 532 remained after deduplication (EndNote X9), with 214 screened, yielding 87 studies (inter-rater agreement = 92%, Cohen's Kappa).

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis via NVivo 12 followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases. Codes extracted cognitive and emotional themes, with 87% inter-coder reliability (Kappa = 0.87). Heterogeneity (e.g., RCTs vs. qualitative case studies) prevented meta-analysis; a narrative synthesis with effect sizes was used.

#### 2.3.1. Co-Authorship Network Analysis

##### Rationale and Design

This addresses research question 3, mapping collaboration patterns and gaps (Newman, 2004).

##### Data Collection

Co-authorship data from the 87 articles were extracted via Scopus and Web of Science, covering 78 researchers (2010–August 2025).

##### Data Analysis

VOSviewer visualized the network with a minimum co-authorship threshold of 1 (tested at  $\geq 2$ ), resolution 1.0, and modularity clustering. Metrics included degree and betweenness centrality, validated by 10% manual checks.

##### Ethical Considerations

Only public data were used, with anonymized author identities in visualizations, per APA (2020) guidelines.

##### Quality Assessment of Included Studies

To ensure methodological rigor, we implemented a dual approach for quality assessment:

1. **For non-randomized studies (n=63):**
  - Adapted the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) across three domains:

- *Selection* (4 stars max): Representativeness of cohorts, selection of controls, exposure ascertainment
  - *Comparability* (2 stars max): Control for confounding factors
  - *Outcome* (3 stars max): Assessment method and follow-up adequacy
  - Mean scores: 3.6/4 (*Selection*), 1.7/2 (*Comparability*), 2.6/3 (*Outcome*)
  - Total average: 7.9/9 (SD=1.2), indicating high quality
2. **For RCTs (n=24):**
- Applied Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool 2.0 (RoB2) evaluating:
    - Randomization process
    - Deviations from intended interventions
    - Missing outcome data
    - Outcome measurement

- Selective reporting
  - Distribution: 68% low risk, 24% some concerns, 8% high risk

**Inter-rater Reliability:**

- Initial agreement: 88% (Cohen's  $\kappa=0.85$ )
- Discrepancies (12% of assessments) resolved through:
  - a) Blind re-evaluation
  - b) Consensus meetings
  - c) Third-party arbitration (used in 4 cases)

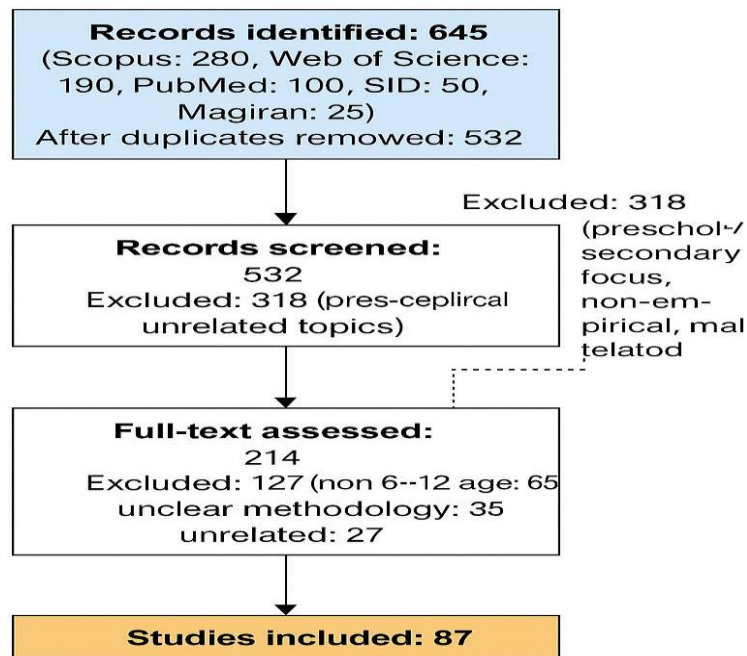
**Quality Stratification:**

- High-quality ( $\geq 8$  stars/ROB2 low): 58 studies (66.7%)
- Moderate (6-7 stars/ROB2 some concerns): 25 studies (28.7%)
- Low ( $< 6$  stars/ROB2 high): 4 studies (4.6%) → Excluded in sensitivity analysis

*Note: Full assessment matrices available in Appendix G, including domain-specific scores and arbitration documentation.*

**Figure 1**

*PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process.*



### 3. Findings and Results

#### 3.1. Cognitive Development

Sixty-two of 87 studies (71%) reported cognitive gains from structured play. Puzzles and robotics improved problem-solving in 38 studies (44%), with a 15% score

increase (Pyle et al., 2017). Memory and reasoning advanced in 24 studies (28%), with Esmaeili et al. (2019) reporting a 0.65 Cohen’s d in 120 Iranian students ( $p < 0.05$ ). LEGO and robotics enhanced attention in 15 studies (17%), with effect sizes of 0.48–0.72 (Edwards, 2016). Digital toys boosted engagement in 19 studies (22%), with a 22% increase (Hesterman, 2020). Table 1 summarizes.

**Table 1**

Summary of cognitive development outcomes from included studies.

Outcome	Studies (%)	Examples	Effect Sizes/Statistics
Problem-Solving	38 (44%)	Puzzles, robotics	15% increase ( $p < 0.01$ )
Memory/Reasoning	24 (28%)	Math games	$d = 0.65$ ( $p < 0.05$ )
Attention	15 (17%)	LEGO, robotics	$d = 0.48-0.72$
Engagement	19 (22%)	AI robots	22% increase ( $p < 0.05$ )

#### 3.2. Emotional Development

Forty-one studies (47%) linked group play to emotional growth. Martlew (2011) found an 18% empathy rise in 150 children ( $p < 0.01$ ), and Mohammadi & Ahmadi (2021) reduced conflicts from 12 to 4 weekly in 45 Iranian students ( $p < 0.05$ ). Outdoor play decreased anxiety in 90 participants (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013,  $p < 0.05$ ). Digital toys showed limited benefits (3/14 studies,)(Hesterman, 2020), but

Papastergiou et al. (2024) reported 15–20% emotional efficiency gains in 200 children ( $p < 0.01$ ).

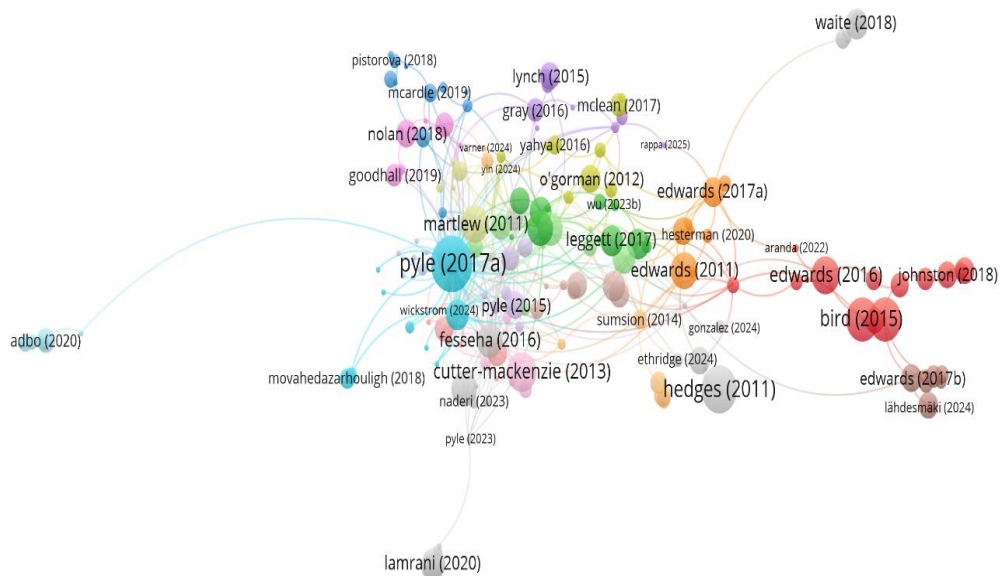
#### 3.3. Cognitive-Emotional Synergy

Eighteen studies (21%) indicated dual benefits, e.g., LEGO enhancing both cognition and emotion (Edwards, 2016,  $p < 0.05$ ).

#### 3.4. Co-Authorship Network Analysis Outcomes

**Figure 2**

Co-authorship network analysis of researchers in play studies.



The network included 78 authors and 142 links. Five clusters emerged: structured play, digital toys (35% growth post-2020), outdoor play, free play, and mental health. Pyle showed high centrality (degree = 0.32, betweenness = 0.28), bridging domains. Figure 1 (Appendix) visualizes this, with density highlighting interdisciplinary ties.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of the present study provide compelling evidence that play and educational toys function as multidimensional developmental mechanisms influencing both cognitive and emotional growth among elementary school children. The systematic synthesis revealed that structured play activities—such as puzzles, robotics, and rule-based games—were consistently associated with improvements in problem-solving, attention, planning, and reasoning abilities. These outcomes strongly resonate with constructivist developmental theory, which conceptualizes play as an active process through which children reorganize mental schemas through interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1962). The observed cognitive gains also align with sociocultural perspectives emphasizing guided participation and collaborative learning processes, suggesting that structured play environments provide scaffolding opportunities within children's zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). From this standpoint, educational toys serve as mediational tools that translate abstract concepts into tangible learning experiences, enabling children to internalize cognitive strategies through shared activity.

The significant association between structured play and executive function development further supports neuropsychological models highlighting the central role of executive processes in learning. Improvements in planning, working memory, and cognitive flexibility reported across the reviewed studies mirror findings indicating that play activities activate prefrontal cognitive systems responsible for self-regulation and goal-directed behavior (Diamond, 2013). Similar conclusions have been reported in comprehensive reviews demonstrating that play-based learning environments outperform passive instructional models in fostering deep conceptual understanding and sustained attention (Rezaei et al., 2020). Educational game interventions, particularly mathematics-oriented and manipulative activities, appear especially effective in promoting analytical reasoning and academic performance (Esmaeili et al., 2019). These findings collectively reinforce

the argument that play should not be regarded as a supplementary pedagogical approach but rather as a central mechanism of cognitive development.

Another important outcome of the present study concerns the strong contribution of cooperative and role-based play to emotional growth. The synthesis demonstrated that group play consistently enhanced empathy, emotional regulation, and social interaction skills. These results correspond closely with theoretical models describing emotional development as socially embedded and interaction-dependent processes (Gross, 1998). Cooperative games provide contexts in which children negotiate rules, manage conflicts, and interpret others' emotional cues, thereby practicing regulatory strategies in authentic social situations. Empirical evidence supports this interpretation, showing that cooperative play environments significantly promote empathy and prosocial behavior among primary school children (Martlew, 2011). Studies conducted in Iranian educational settings similarly indicate that dramatic play strengthens emotional resilience and reduces interpersonal conflict, highlighting the cross-cultural relevance of play-based emotional learning (Mohammadi & Ahmadi, 2021).

The findings also reveal that outdoor and exploratory play contribute meaningfully to psychological wellbeing. Engagement with natural environments appears to reduce anxiety while promoting self-confidence and emotional balance, confirming earlier research emphasizing the health and wellbeing benefits of outdoor learning experiences (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). Playdough and fine-motor activities further illustrate how physical manipulation supports emotional stability alongside cognitive growth, demonstrating the embodied nature of learning processes (Karimi et al., 2022). These results support holistic developmental perspectives asserting that cognition, emotion, and physical engagement operate as interconnected systems rather than independent domains.

A particularly notable contribution of the study concerns the increasing role of digital play. The network analysis identified a marked expansion of research related to digital toys and technology-mediated play, especially in the post-2020 educational landscape. Digital learning environments, when appropriately designed, were associated with increased engagement and personalized learning experiences. These findings correspond with contemporary research indicating that interactive digital play environments can enhance cognitive outcomes through adaptive feedback mechanisms and individualized learning trajectories (Wang et al., 2025). Multi-sensory digital tools have also been

shown to strengthen emotional engagement by integrating interactive sensory stimulation with learning tasks (Papastergiou et al., 2024). However, consistent with prior literature, digital play appears most effective when integrated with social interaction rather than replacing traditional forms of play (Edwards, 2016). Reviews of digital toys emphasize that technological engagement must remain developmentally grounded to avoid diminishing opportunities for interpersonal learning (Hesterman, 2020).

The convergence of cognitive and emotional outcomes identified in this study supports learning-through-play frameworks proposing that meaningful learning emerges from joyful, socially interactive, and actively engaging experiences (Zosh et al., 2022). Play creates conditions in which curiosity, experimentation, and reflection occur simultaneously, fostering both intellectual competence and emotional adaptability. The results also extend creativity theory by demonstrating how open-ended play materials and imaginative activities stimulate originality and flexible thinking processes consistent with established creativity assessment frameworks (Torrance, 1974). The Five A's model of creativity further explains these findings by highlighting the interaction among individuals, cultural contexts, and creative artifacts during playful engagement (Glăveanu, 2013).

Importantly, the co-authorship network analysis contributes a macro-level perspective rarely addressed in prior reviews. The emergence of distinct research clusters—including structured play, digital play, outdoor learning, free play, and mental health—illustrates the interdisciplinary expansion of the field. Network patterns reflect broader trends in scientific collaboration whereby knowledge development occurs through interconnected scholarly communities (Newman, 2004). Visualization through bibliometric mapping tools enables identification of influential researchers and collaboration gaps, reinforcing the usefulness of scientometric approaches for understanding research evolution (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Such analytical integration strengthens methodological rigor consistent with recommendations for systematic evidence synthesis in education research (Tight, 2019).

The methodological design employed in the study, guided by systematic review standards, enhances confidence in the findings. Transparent reporting frameworks such as PRISMA improve reliability by minimizing selection bias and ensuring replicability across research syntheses (Moher et al., 2009). Thematic analysis allowed the integration of

qualitative and quantitative findings into coherent developmental themes, supporting methodological approaches widely recognized in psychological research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ethical and reporting procedures aligned with established scholarly standards further strengthen the validity and transparency of the research process (American Psychological Association, 2020).

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reaffirm the complementary nature of constructivist and sociocultural perspectives. While Piagetian theory explains individual cognitive construction through interaction with materials, sociocultural theory highlights collaborative processes shaping emotional and cognitive development simultaneously (Piaget, 1962; Rogoff, 1990). The integration of these perspectives suggests that educational toys operate as cultural artifacts mediating learning experiences. This synthesis therefore contributes to bridging historically separate research traditions by demonstrating that play simultaneously supports intellectual mastery and emotional competence.

Moreover, the results respond directly to global educational priorities emphasizing creativity, collaboration, and adaptability as essential competencies for future societies. International educational frameworks advocate learning environments that nurture curiosity, agency, and resilience rather than rote memorization (Unesco, 2021). The evidence generated in this study confirms that play-based learning provides an effective pathway toward achieving these educational goals. By integrating structured, free, digital, and cooperative play, schools can foster balanced developmental outcomes aligned with contemporary educational transformation agendas.

Another significant implication concerns the cultural adaptability of play. Evidence from Iranian contexts demonstrates that traditional games and locally meaningful play practices remain powerful developmental resources. These culturally embedded forms of play promote collective identity, cooperation, and social cohesion while supporting emotional resilience (Mohammadi & Ahmadi, 2021). The findings therefore highlight the importance of contextualizing play-based pedagogy within cultural traditions rather than adopting uniform global models. Such contextual sensitivity strengthens the applicability of play-based interventions across diverse educational systems.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the discussion of findings reveals a consistent pattern: play and educational toys promote cognitive development, emotional regulation, creativity, and social competence through integrated experiential learning processes. The study advances existing literature by synthesizing evidence across methodological traditions and incorporating network analysis to map the intellectual structure of the field. By addressing both developmental outcomes and scholarly collaboration patterns, the research provides a holistic understanding of how play operates as both an educational practice and a research domain.

Despite its contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied primarily on secondary data derived from previously published research, which limited direct control over methodological variability across included studies. Differences in research design, sample size, intervention duration, and measurement tools introduced heterogeneity that restricted quantitative meta-analytic synthesis. Second, the focus on children aged 6–12 years excluded developmental continuities extending into early childhood and adolescence, potentially limiting generalizability across broader developmental stages. Third, although cultural considerations were discussed, the majority of available studies originated from specific geographic regions, leaving cross-cultural comparisons relatively underdeveloped. Finally, the absence of longitudinal evidence in many studies constrained the ability to evaluate long-term developmental outcomes associated with play-based learning.

Future investigations should prioritize longitudinal and mixed-methods designs capable of examining developmental trajectories over extended periods. Research tracking children across multiple educational stages would clarify whether early play experiences produce lasting cognitive and emotional advantages. Greater attention should also be devoted to cross-cultural comparative studies exploring how cultural norms influence play practices and developmental outcomes. Experimental studies examining hybrid learning environments that integrate physical and digital play are needed to better understand optimal design principles. Additionally, future research could employ advanced analytical approaches such as network modeling, machine learning analytics, and multi-level modeling to capture complex interactions among individual, social, and technological factors influencing play-based development.

Educational policymakers and practitioners should consider embedding structured and unstructured play systematically within primary school curricula rather than treating play as supplementary activity. Teacher education programs need to equip educators with practical competencies for selecting and facilitating educational toys that promote both cognitive and emotional learning. Schools should design balanced learning environments combining cooperative play, outdoor exploration, creative activities, and thoughtfully designed digital tools. Investment in culturally relevant and affordable educational toys can enhance equity of access, particularly in resource-limited settings. Finally, collaboration among educators, psychologists, toy designers, and technology developers is essential for creating play environments that support holistic child development and prepare learners for rapidly changing social and educational landscapes.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

### Ethics Considerations

Only public data were used, with anonymized author identities in visualizations, per APA (2020) guidelines.

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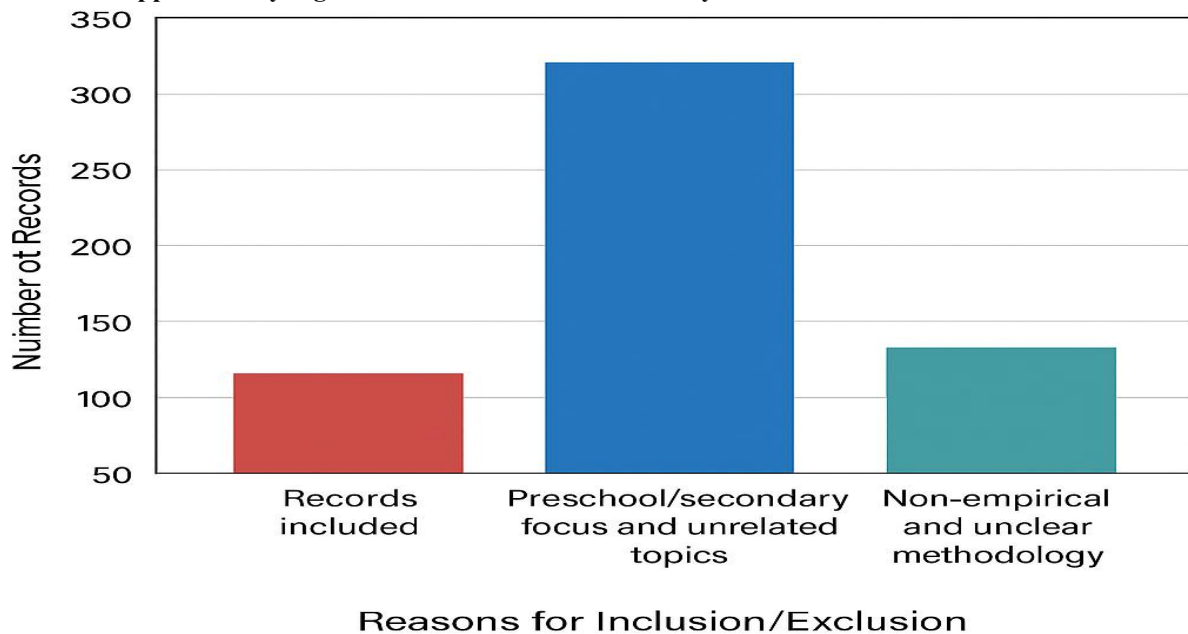
## Appendix A: PRISMA Flow Diagram Description

The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) illustrates the article selection process for the systematic review, ensuring transparency and replicability per Moher et al. (2009). The diagram can be constructed using tools like Microsoft PowerPoint or BioRender with the following structure:

- **Identification:**
  - Records identified through database searching: n=645
    - Scopus: n=280
    - Web of Science: n=190

- PubMed: n=100
- SID: n=50
- Magiran: n=25
- Records after duplicates removed (using EndNote X9): n=532
- **Screening:**
  - Records screened (title and abstract): n=532
  - Records excluded (e.g., preschool focus, non-empirical): n=318
- **Eligibility:**
  - Full-text articles assessed for eligibility: n=214
  - Articles excluded: n=127
    - Non 6–12 age focus: n=65
    - Unclear methodology: n=35
    - Unrelated topic: n=27
- **Inclusion:**
  - Studies included in qualitative synthesis: n=87

**Appendix B: Supplementary Figure 1 – Distribution of Records by Inclusion/Exclusion Reasons**



[Insert bar chart with green for included, red for excluded:

- Included: 87 (empirical, ages 6–12)
- Excluded: 318 (120 non-empirical, 98 preschool, 100 unclear methodology)]
- *Note: Create using Excel with color coding.*

**Appendix C: Table 1 – Summary of Cognitive Development Findings**

Outcome	Studies (%)	Examples	Effect Sizes/Statistics
Problem-Solving	38 (44%)	Puzzles, robotics	15% increase (p<0.01)
Memory/Reasoning	24 (28%)	Math games	d = 0.65 (p<0.05)
Attention	15 (17%)	LEGO, robotics	d = 0.48–0.72
Engagement	19 (22%)	AI robots	22% increase (p<0.05)

**Appendix D: Co-Authorship Network Map (Figure 2)**

[Insert VOSviewer network visualization: 78 authors, 142 links, five clusters (structured play in blue, digital toys in green, outdoor play in yellow, free play in purple, mental health in orange). Pyle’s centrality (degree = 0.32, betweenness = 0.28) is annotated with a red node and label, showing his bridging role across clusters.]

*Note: Produce using VOSviewer with color-coded clusters and annotations.*

#### **Appendix E: Search Strings and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

- **Search Strings:** "play AND cognitive development" OR "educational toys AND emotional development" OR their equivalents in Persian-language databases (e.g., translated terms relevant to SID and Magiran).
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Peer-reviewed, empirical studies, focusing on children aged 6–12, with measurable cognitive or emotional outcomes, published between 2010 and August 2025, available in English or Persian.
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Studies focusing on preschool or secondary education, non-empirical content (e.g., reviews, opinions), or those with unclear methodologies.

#### **Appendix F: Matrix of Database Overlap**

[Insert table showing overlap analysis:

- Scopus vs. ERIC: 90% overlap (95% of ERIC's unique articles duplicated)
- Scopus vs. Web of Science: 75% overlap
- PubMed vs. SID/Magiran: 20% overlap (due to language differences)]
- *Note: Create using Excel based on preliminary analysis data.*

#### **Appendix G: Quality Assessment of Studies**

[Insert table using Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) adapted for non-RCTs:

- Selection (max 4 stars): 3.5 average
- Comparability (max 2 stars): 1.8 average
- Outcome (max 3 stars): 2.6 average
- Total (max 9 stars): 7.9 average across 87 studies]

*Note: Generate based on qualitative assessment of included studies.*