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Exploring Teachers' Strategies for Strengthening Children's Emotion Regulation Through Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Emotion regulation is a fundamental component of early childhood social-emotional development because it is closely related to children's ability to recognize, express, and manage emotional responses adaptively. In early childhood education, play-based learning may provide a natural context for supporting the development of emotion regulation. This study aimed to explore teachers' reported strategies for supporting children's emotion regulation through play-based learning in ECE institutions in Jonggol District, Bogor Regency. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, involving 12 teachers from four ECE institutions who were selected through purposive sampling based on their teaching experience and involvement in play-based learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis involving coding, categorization, and theme development. The findings showed that teachers reported using role play, emotion recognition games, storytelling, collaborative games, verbal scaffolding, positive reinforcement, and calming routines. Teachers perceived these strategies as helpful in supporting children to recognize and name emotions, express feelings verbally, manage impulses, respond to social conflicts, and regain calm after experiencing negative emotions. However, teachers also reported that children's responses were not uniform and that some children required repeated and individualized support. These findings suggest that play-based learning may provide a relevant pedagogical context for supporting children's emotion regulation when accompanied by responsive and consistent teacher interaction. Because the findings were based solely on teachers' interview accounts, they should be interpreted as perceptions of practice and perceived changes rather than as direct evidence of effectiveness.

Keywords: *emotion regulation; play-based learning; teacher strategies; early childhood education; social-emotional development.*

Introduction

Emotion regulation is one of the fundamental competencies in early childhood social-emotional development because it is related to children's ability to recognize feelings, regulate emotional responses, adjust behavior, and build adaptive social interactions. At the early childhood education (ECE) level, this competency becomes increasingly important as children encounter more complex social situations through interactions with teachers and peers.

Djamnezhad et al. (2021) showed that social-emotional learning in preschool settings has important potential to support children's development and readiness for subsequent education, although the existing evidence reflects considerable variation in approaches and outcomes. A recent study by Veraksa et al. (2025), which examined 33 studies from 9,639 identified publications, also showed that various forms of play, particularly pretend play, have the potential to support emotion regulation and emotional development in children.

In the Indonesian context, the need to strengthen children's social-emotional development also receives important attention. Pujiastuti et al. (2022) examined the social-emotional competence of 546 children aged 3–6 years in DKI Jakarta, DI Yogyakarta, and West Java and found differences in self-regulation, emotional expression, and social interaction. The findings show that the social-emotional development of Indonesian children is contextual and can differ based on environmental conditions and social experiences received by children. In this context, ECE institutions in Jonggol District, Bogor Regency, provide a relevant context for understanding how teachers support children's emotion regulation through daily learning activities (Kaizar & Alordiah, 2023).

Teachers have a strategic position in the development of emotion regulation because early childhood still needs adult support in understanding and managing their emotional experiences. Mänty et al. (2022) place co-regulation as a process when educators consciously help children recognize, understand, and regulate emotions through everyday interactions. In line with this perspective, Zinsser et al. (2023) explained that emotion-focused teaching can be realized through three interrelated practices, namely modeling, responding, and instructing children's emotions. In play-based learning, teacher involvement not only serves to direct activities, but also creates space for children to experience and manage various emotional situations. Research by Utami et al. (2023) in the Indonesian context shows that the involvement of teachers as players in Playworld can unite elements of imagination, cognition, and emotions and create conditions that support the development of children's self-regulation.

However, previous research still leaves gaps that need to be studied. Fatahi et al. (2023) found that stronger emotion-focused teaching practices were associated with better emotion regulation and reduced expression of negative emotions in preschoolers. Meanwhile, Jackson et al. (2024) show that emotion-focused teaching practices appear more in specially designed social-emotional activities than in regular learning activities. Tamakloe et al. (2024) also showed the benefits of games and puppets in social-emotional learning, but the study focused heavily on specific programs and coaching support for teachers. Thus, there are still limited qualitative studies that specifically explore strategies that ECE teachers naturally use to strengthen emotional regulation through play-based learning in daily practice, especially in local Indonesian contexts such as Jonggol District, Bogor Regency. This contextual and pedagogical gap is the basis of this research (Aisyah & Hakim, 2025).

Based on these gaps, this study aims to explore teachers' strategies in strengthening children's emotional regulation through play-based learning in ECE institutions in Jonggol District, Bogor Regency. In particular, the research is directed to identify the form of play activities used by teachers, emotional assistance strategies applied during activities, and how teachers interpret changes in children's ability to recognize, express, and manage emotions. To gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences and perspectives, the study used a descriptive qualitative approach involving 12 teachers from four purposively selected ECE institutions. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis through the process of coding, categorization, and theme formation.

Theoretically, this study is expected to expand the understanding of the relationship between play-based learning, emotion-focused teaching, and the process of emotion

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regulation in early childhood education by placing the teacher's experience as the main source of pedagogical knowledge. This research also provides novelty through the exploration of the play strategies that develop in the practice of early childhood education in the local context of Jonggol, rather than through the evaluation of predetermined intervention programs. Practically, the findings of the research are expected to be the basis for ECE teachers in designing games that are more responsive to children's emotional needs, as well as a consideration for ECE institution managers and Early Childhood Teacher Education programs in the development of teacher training that emphasizes emotional scaffolding skills, play-based learning, and contextual assistance in the regulation of children's emotions.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to explore in depth the strategies used by teachers in strengthening children's emotional regulation through play-based learning in early childhood education. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research is oriented towards teachers' experiences, meanings, and pedagogical practices as they describe them based on everyday learning experiences, not to test causal relationships or measure the effectiveness of interventions statistically (Groothuijsen et al., 2023). This design is in accordance with the purpose of the research which seeks to obtain a contextual description of the form of play, emotional assistance strategies, and teachers' perceptions of children's emotional responses. Quality qualitative research requires alignment between the objectives, design, data collection, and analytical approaches used (Takona, 2024).

Conceptually, the exploration is directed at three main perspectives, namely emotion co-regulation, emotion-focused teaching, and the role of teachers in play pedagogy. Mänty et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of educator support in helping children activate and learn emotion regulation, while Curby et al. (2022) group emotion-focused teaching practices into modeling, responding, and instructing. The perspective of play pedagogy also considers the active role of teachers in entering the world of children's play as shown by Utami et al. (2023).

The target population of the study consisted of ECE teachers who actively taught in Jonggol District, Bogor Regency. The study was conducted in four ECE institutions that were purposively selected because they provided relevant settings for exploring teachers' experiences in implementing play-based learning and were willing to participate in the study. Within each institution, three teachers were purposively recruited based on predetermined inclusion criteria: (1) active status as an ECE teacher; (2) at least two years of teaching experience; (3) direct involvement in planning and implementing play-based learning; and (4) willingness to participate in interviews and provide informed consent. Teachers who performed only administrative duties or were not directly involved in learning activities were excluded.

A total of 12 teachers, with three participants from each institution, were involved in the study. This distribution was not intended to provide institution-level representativeness or to support comparisons between institutions. Instead, it allowed the study to include multiple perspectives within each setting while also capturing variation across four institutional contexts. The adequacy of the sample was judged in relation to the focused qualitative purpose of the study, the relative homogeneity of the participant group, the depth of the interviews, and the recurrence of themes across participants.

Data adequacy was assessed iteratively throughout data collection and analysis. After each interview, the researcher reviewed emerging codes and categories and compared them with those identified in previous interviews. By the final interviews, most information repeated

previously identified patterns and no new substantive categories related to the research objectives emerged. On this basis, the dataset was considered sufficiently rich for the focused aims of the study. This judgment is consistent with Hennink & Kaiser (2022) who reported that saturation in relatively homogeneous qualitative samples with focused research questions is often reached within approximately 9–17 interviews.

The main instrument of the study is the researcher, with semi-structured interview guidelines as a data collection tool. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow questions to remain directed at the research objectives while giving the researcher flexibility to probe participants' experiences and explanations (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

The interview guidelines were developed by researchers and did not directly adapt a scale or previous questionnaire (Buschle et al., 2022). The preparation of the questions was based on the concept of co-regulation from Mänty et al. (2022), emotion-focused teaching from Curby et al. (2022), and play pedagogy from Utami et al. (2023). The interview questions covered six domains: (1) the teacher's understanding of emotion regulation; (2) the form of play activities used; (3) the teacher's strategy when the child expresses emotions; (4) the use of modeling, verbal scaffolding, and positive reinforcement; (5) teachers' perceptions of changes in children's ability to recognize, express, and manage emotions; and (6) obstacles in the implementation of play-based learning.

Before use, the interview guidelines were reviewed through expert judgment by two academics in the field of early childhood education and one researcher who has experience in qualitative methodologies. Interview trials were conducted on two ECE teachers outside the research participants to assess the clarity of the questions and the flow of the interview. Because the research is qualitative and the instrument is not a measurement scale, the test of construct validity, Cronbach's alpha, and statistical reliability is not applied. The validity of research is more directed at credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency of the research process, in line with the principle of evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Kakar et al., 2023).

Data collection is carried out in stages. First, the researcher obtained a research permit from each ECE institution and identified potential participants based on inclusion criteria. Participants are then provided with information about the purpose of the research, the confidentiality of the data, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to terminate involvement at any time before providing informed consent.

Second, the interviews were conducted individually using a semi-structured format with a duration of about 35–50 minutes for each participant. The interview takes place at an agreed place and does not interfere with learning activities. With the consent of the participants, the conversation is recorded using a digital recording device, then transcribed verbatim. The identities of participants and institutions are anonymized with codes such as G1–G12 and PAUD-A–PAUD-D.

Third, the researcher re-read the transcript and clarified the ambiguous information. A summary of the main interpretation is also confirmed to the relevant participants as a form of member checking to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation. Member checking can increase credibility when it is done in a structured manner and directed at the meaning of the interpretation results, rather than simply asking participants to reread the transcript (McKim, 2023). All methodological decisions, code changes, and theme formation are recorded in trail audits to support the dependability and transparency of the research.

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The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis with a predominantly inductive approach at the semantic level. This approach enables researchers to identify patterns of meaning that are relevant to the research questions while recognizing the researcher as an active participant in the interpretation of the data (Byrne, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2023).

The analysis was conducted through six iterative stages. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and noting initial impressions. Second, relevant segments of the data were assigned initial codes, such as “role play,” “emotional naming,” “calming the child,” “positive reinforcement,” and “playing with friends.” Third, codes with related meanings were grouped into broader analytical categories. Fourth, these categories were developed into candidate themes that represented recurring patterns in teachers’ strategies and experiences. Fifth, the candidate themes were reviewed against the coded excerpts and the full dataset to assess their coherence, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research objectives. Sixth, the final themes were clearly defined, named, and presented narratively using participant quotations as empirical evidence. This analytical procedure is consistent with thematic analysis practices that emphasize the iterative relationship among coding, theme development, interpretation, and the research question (Byrne, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2023).

To enhance analytical transparency, the development of themes was traced from participants’ statements to initial codes, broader categories, and final themes. For example, a teacher’s statement describing how a child was helped to identify anger after a toy was taken and then guided to express that feeling verbally was initially coded as “naming emotion,” “identifying the cause of emotion,” and “guiding verbal expression.” These related codes were grouped under the category of “verbal emotional scaffolding,” which subsequently contributed to the broader theme of “Verbal Scaffolding and Positive Reinforcement as Emotional Assistance Strategies.” Similar comparisons were made across participants to identify recurring patterns while retaining meaningful variations in their experiences.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher played an active interpretive role throughout the process. Analytical memos and reflective notes were used to document emerging interpretations, reconsider coding decisions, and examine how the researcher’s engagement with the data influenced the development and refinement of themes. Themes were therefore treated as interpretive constructions developed through sustained engagement with participants’ accounts rather than as categories that emerged automatically from the data.

NVivo 14 was used to support the organization of interview transcripts, coded segments, analytical memos, and evolving thematic structures. The software facilitated data management, retrieval, and comparison across participants, but it did not generate or determine the codes, categories, or themes. All interpretive decisions remained the responsibility of the researcher. Credibility was strengthened through member checking and analytical discussions with fellow researchers, while dependability and confirmability were supported through audit trails and reflective documentation during the analysis process. The final analysis generated themes describing teachers’ strategies in play-based learning and their perceptions of how these strategies contributed to children’s ability to recognize, express, and manage emotions.

Results

Research Results

An analysis of semi-structured interviews with 12 ece teachers in Jonggol District, Bogor Regency produced a number of patterns that illustrate teachers' strategies in strengthening children's emotional regulation through *play-based learning*. The thematic analysis produced five main themes, namely: (1) play as a space to recognize and express emotions; (2) collaborative games as a means of managing impulses and social interactions; (3) emotional assistance through *verbal scaffolding* and positive reinforcement; (4) calming routines as a strategy to manage intense emotions; and (5) teachers' perceptions of the development of children's emotional regulation. In addition, several contextual obstacles were found that affected the implementation of the strategy.

Participant Characteristics

A total of 12 teachers from four ECE institutions participated in the research, with each institution represented by three teachers. All participants have at least two years of teaching experience and are directly involved in play-based learning activities. The length of teaching experience ranges from 3–15 years. Most of the participants have a S1 educational background in Early Childhood Education Teacher Education or relevant fields of education.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Code	Institutions	Age	Education	Teaching Experience
G1	PAUD-A	32 years old	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	7 years
G2	PAUD-A	28 years old	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	4 years
G3	PAUD-A	41 years old	S1 Education	12 years
G4	PAUD-B	35 years old	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	9 years
G5	PAUD-B	29 years old	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	5 years
G6	PAUD-B	45 years old	S1 Education	15 years
G7	PAUD-C	27 years old	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	3 years
G8	PAUD-C	34 years old	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	8 years
G9	PAUD-C	39 years old	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	11 years old
G10	PAUD-D	30 years	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	6 years

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G11	PAUD-D	37 years old	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	10 years
G12	PAUD-D	33 years old	S1 Education	7 years

These characteristics show that the participants have quite diverse experiences, but all of them have interacted directly with the child and have experience applying play activities in daily learning.

Games as a Space to Recognize and Express Emotions

The first theme reflects teachers' perceptions that play activities provide opportunities for children to recognize, name, and express emotions more naturally. The three strategies that appear the most in this theme are role play, emotional recognition games, and storytelling activities.

As many as 10 out of 12 teachers said that role-playing is one of the activities that is relatively often used. Game themes usually relate to experiences that are close to a child's life, such as playing with the family, doctor-patient, shopping, schooling, or sharing toys. The teacher uses this situation to direct the child to recognize the emotional state of the character being played.

"If I play doctors, for example, there is a child who pretends to be afraid of being injected, I usually ask, 'How does it feel if I'm afraid?' So children don't just play, but start to be able to express their feelings." (G2, PAUD-A, interview May 6, 2026)

Emotion recognition games were also reported by 9 out of 12 participants. Teachers use facial expressions, simple emotion cards, guess mimics, or games to imitate expressions of joy, sadness, anger, and fear. This activity is mainly used when children are still having difficulty giving names to the emotions they are experiencing.

"Usually I show an expression, then they guess. After that I asked them when they had ever felt that way. Children actually have a lot of stories because of the form of the game." (G8, PAUD-C, interview May 10, 2026)

In addition, 8 teachers mentioned the use of story-based stories or games to open up conversations about emotions. Teachers generally stop the story in a certain part and ask the child to identify the character's feelings or estimate the best course of action. These findings show that teachers do not separate emotional learning as a separate activity. Recognition and expression of emotions are more naturally incorporated into the gaming experience.

Collaborative Games as a Means of Managing Social Impulses and Interactions

The second theme relates to the use of collaborative games to provide opportunities for children to learn to wait, share, take turns, accept group decisions, and face differences in desires with friends. As many as 9 out of 12 teachers stated that the situation of playing together is actually the moment when the child's emotional response is most easily seen. Small conflicts such as fighting over toys, not getting turns, losing games, or not having their ideas accepted by friends are seen as opportunities to help children manage emotional responses.

"If everything is always made easy, children do not learn to regulate their emotions. Sometimes when I fight for blocks, I don't finish right away. I help them talk, who wears it first and then whose turn." (G4, PAUD-B, interview May 7, 2026)

Other teachers emphasized the use of games that require turns as an exercise in controlling the desire to act immediately.

"Early childhood children want to be fast. When the game takes turns, initially someone immediately takes it. After a long time after being reminded, they began to know they had to wait." (G10, PAUD-D, interview May 12, 2026)

Based on participants' accounts, collaborative games were perceived as providing social situations in which children's emotional responses became more visible and teachers could offer direct support. However, these changes represent teachers' perceptions rather than outcomes derived from direct observation or measurement of children's behavior.

Verbal Scaffolding and Positive Reinforcement as Emotional Assistance Strategies

Analysis of interviews shows that play activities alone are not considered enough by teachers. Most participants emphasized the need for verbal accompaniment when the child begins to show certain emotions.

As many as 11 out of 12 teachers described a strategy that can be categorized as verbal scaffolding. The teacher helps the child name the emotion, explain the cause, and then direct the child to a more acceptable response choice.

Frequently mentioned sentence forms include "you're angry because the toy was taken", "try telling your friends that you're not done", or "if you're disappointed, we can talk first, you don't need to push your friends".

"I usually don't say 'don't be angry'. I tried to say, 'You're mad that the block was taken, huh?' After the child says yes, then I will help you how to convey it." (G6, PAUD-B, interview May 8, 2026)

Positive reinforcement was also found in 10 out of 12 interviews. Teachers give appreciation when children are able to wait, express displeasure with words, return to play after being disappointed, or resolve simple conflicts without aggression.

"If he usually cries because he can't take his turn, then one day he can say, 'Mom, I haven't got it yet', I appreciate it. I said, 'Great, you can already tell how you feel.'" (G11, PAUD-D, interview May 13, 2026)

Teachers tend to use simple verbal reinforcement rather than material rewards. Appreciation is given to the child's process of managing emotions, not solely to the success of completing the play task.

Calming Routines to Manage Intense Emotions

The fourth theme shows the use of *calming routines* when the intensity of the child's emotions is considered too high to be immediately directed back to play activities. A total of 8 out of 12 teachers mentioned practices such as taking a slow breath, sitting with the teacher, counting, drinking water, temporarily moving to a quieter area, or giving time before children return to play.

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"If the child has cried loudly, it is usually not effective to have a long conversation. I asked you to sit next to me, take a deep breath, and then we would talk about what happened." (G1, PAUD-A, interview May 6, 2026)

The teacher emphasized that calming routines are not used as punishment or seclusion. Children are still accompanied until they are considered ready enough to communicate or rejoin activities.

"I don't tell children to be alone. Usually still accompanied. When it's calmer, I ask, 'Are you ready to play again or do you still want to sit down first?'"(G9, PAUD-C, interview May 11, 2026)

Variations in practice were found between institutions. PAUD-A and PAUD-D more often use simple breathing exercises, while some teachers in PAUD-B and PAUD-C use quiet sitting and individual conversations more. Although the form is different, the goal conveyed is relatively the same, which is to help children reduce the intensity of emotions before returning to interact.

Teachers' Perceptions of Changes in Children's Emotional Regulation Ability

The fifth theme concerns the changes perceived by teachers after emotion regulation strategies were consistently incorporated into play activities. The four main perceived changes were children's ability to recognize emotions, express feelings verbally, manage impulses, and respond to social situations more adaptively. All changes reported in this section reflect teachers' perceptions based on their classroom experiences and should not be interpreted as directly observed or measured changes in children's behavior.

Table 2. Patterns of Change Perceived by Teachers

Perceived Aspects	Number of Teachers Mentioned
Children are better able to recognize/name emotions	10 of 12
Children are better able to express their feelings verbally	9 of 12
The child shows the ability to delay or control impulses	8 of 12
Children are more adaptive in conflicts with friends	9 of 12
It is easier for children to calm down after experiencing negative emotions	8 of 12

The ability to recognize emotions is the most reported change. Some teachers mention that children who previously expressed discomfort mainly through crying or physical behavior began to use more specific words.

"Now some children can say 'I'm upset' or 'I'm sad because I wasn't invited'. In the past, it used to be used to cry or snatch it right away." (G3, PAUD-A, interview May 7, 2026)

Another change has to do with the ability to manage impulses when conflicts occur during play.

"It doesn't necessarily work every time, but it starts to be seen that they remember the sentences we usually use. Some said to their friends, 'I'm still wearing them, I'll replace them later.' For me, it has been a development." (G7, PAUD-C, interview May 10, 2026)

The teacher also said that development did not occur uniformly. Some children are considered to be faster to adopt verbal strategies, while other children need more intensive repetition and mentoring.

"Not all children can do it right away. Some know how to talk after a few times, but some still cry when they are very angry. So it still needs to be helped repeatedly." (G12, PAUD-D, interview May 13, 2026)

The findings also indicate that these strategies were not perceived as equally helpful for all children. Some teachers reported that children continued to cry, respond impulsively, or experience difficulty verbalizing their emotions during highly emotional situations, suggesting that repeated and individualized support remained necessary. The findings are important because they show that teachers view emotion regulation as a skill that develops gradually, rather than as a change that emerges after one or two play activities.

Obstacles in the Implementation of Emotion Regulation Strategies

Although not the main focus of the study, interviews identified a number of obstacles in the implementation of the strategy. As many as 7 out of 12 teachers mentioned differences in children's character and needs as the main challenge. An effective strategy for one child may not necessarily provide the same response for another.

A total of 6 teachers also cited limited time and teacher-child ratio as obstacles when several children need emotional assistance at the same time. Meanwhile, 5 teachers cited differences in response patterns between school and family environments as factors that sometimes make the implementation of strategies less consistent.

"At school, we are used to conveying with words, but sometimes the habits at home are different. So there are children who have actually started to be able to go to school, but after a few days they go back to their original patterns." (G5, PAUD-B, interview May 8, 2026)

Despite these obstacles, all participants stated that play activities provided a relatively flexible space to incorporate emotion regulation strategies without having to turn activities into formal learning.

Table 3. Themes, Strategies, and Patterns of Research Findings

Theme	Key Strategies/ Practices	Patterns Found
Recognizing and expressing emotions	Role play, emotional play, storytelling	Children are perceived to be more likely to identify and express emotions
Managing impulses in social situations	Collaborative, turn-based, sharing games	Teachers perceived that children gradually became more able to wait, negotiate, and respond to simple conflicts during collaborative play.

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Emotional mentoring of teachers	*Verbal scaffolding*, *modeling*, positive reinforcement	Teachers help children name emotions and choose more appropriate responses
Managing intense emotions	Breathing, quiet sitting, individual mentoring	Children are perceived to be more likely to return to a calm state before playing again
Changes in emotion regulation	Repetition of strategies in daily activities	Teachers report progress on emotion recognition, verbal expression, impulse control, and social responses

Overall, the results of the interviews show that the emotion regulation strategy applied by PAUD teachers in Jonggol District does not stand as a special program, but is integrated into the daily play experience. Role play, emotion recognition, storytelling, collaborative play, *verbal scaffolding*, positive reinforcement, and calming routines were the most consistent strategies that appeared in the data. Teachers perceive that the repeated use of strategies helps children better recognize the source of their emotions, express their feelings in a more acceptable way, control impulses, and respond to social situations more adaptively. However, because the study only used teacher interviews, all of these changes were positioned as participants' perceptions based on their pedagogical experiences, rather than as evidence of effectiveness obtained through direct observation or measurement of children.

Discussion

The findings indicate that teachers in ECE institutions in Jonggol District integrate emotion regulation support into everyday play rather than treating it as a separate instructional activity. Role play, emotion recognition games, storytelling, collaborative play, verbal scaffolding, positive reinforcement, and calming routines were described as part of daily pedagogical interactions. This suggests that play functions not only as a recreational activity but also as a pedagogical context in which emotional experiences naturally arise and can be addressed through teacher–child interaction. Teachers perceived that these situations provided opportunities for children to recognize and name emotions, communicate feelings, negotiate with peers, manage impulses, deal with social conflicts, and regain calm after emotionally challenging experiences. However, these perceived changes were not uniform across children, and some participants reported that repeated and individualized support remained necessary. Thus, emotion regulation in the context of this study appears to be a gradual process shaped by the interaction between play experiences, teacher support, and repeated emotional guidance in daily activities.

These findings can be interpreted through the perspective of co-regulation. Mänty et al. (2022) emphasize that young children often require adult support to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions before they can manage such experiences more independently. In the present study, teachers appeared to enact this co-regulatory role by naming children's emotions, helping them identify possible causes, guiding them toward verbal expression, and remaining present during calming routines. From this perspective, the teacher does not simply control children's behavior but supports children in constructing emotional meaning and developing more adaptive responses through interaction. This interpretation also helps explain why teachers considered verbal scaffolding and repeated assistance important, particularly for

children who continued to cry, respond impulsively, or experience difficulty verbalizing emotions during highly emotional situations.

The findings are also consistent with the framework of emotion-focused teaching proposed by Zinsser et al. (2023), which emphasizes modeling, responding, and instructing as central practices in supporting children's emotional competence. The teachers' accounts in this study reflected these practices in several ways. Modeling was apparent when teachers demonstrated more appropriate ways to respond to emotional situations; responding occurred when teachers acknowledged and validated children's emotional experiences; and instructing was reflected in verbal scaffolding that helped children name emotions and communicate their feelings more acceptably. Teachers perceived verbal scaffolding as helpful in supporting children to identify emotions, understand their possible causes, and express feelings in more acceptable ways (Rangel-Rodríguez et al., 2021). Positive reinforcement was also reported as a way to acknowledge children's attempts to communicate displeasure verbally, wait for turns, return to play after disappointment, or resolve simple conflicts without aggression. When children's emotions were perceived as too intense, teachers described the use of calming routines before inviting them to discuss the situation that had occurred.

The findings are broadly consistent with previous research showing that play can provide meaningful opportunities for social-emotional learning. Djamnezhad et al. (2021), suggest that social-emotional learning in preschool settings can be integrated into children's daily educational experiences. Similarly, Veraksa et al. (2025), highlighted the potential of pretend play to support emotional development through children's engagement in symbolic situations, social interaction, and emotional experiences. In the Indonesian context Utami et al. (2023), found that teachers' involvement in children's play can connect imagination, cognition, and emotion and create conditions that support the development of self-regulation. The present findings extend these studies by showing how teachers describe emotion-related support as being embedded within ordinary play routines rather than being limited to specially designed programs or interventions.

The findings are also consistent with Fatahi et al. (2023), who reported that stronger emotion-focused teaching practices were associated with better emotion regulation and reduced expressions of negative emotions in preschoolers. However, the present study does not provide direct evidence of such behavioral outcomes because the data were derived solely from teachers' interview accounts. Therefore, the reported changes in children's ability to recognize emotions, express feelings verbally, manage impulses, respond to social conflicts, and regain calm should be interpreted as teachers' perceptions rather than as directly observed or measured improvements in children's behavior.

At the same time, the findings differ from those of Jackson et al. (2024), who reported that emotion-focused teaching practices appeared more frequently during intentionally planned social-emotional learning activities than during routine classroom activities. In the present study, teachers described emotional support as emerging naturally during everyday play, including moments of turn-taking, conflict, disappointment, sharing, and emotional escalation. This difference may partly reflect methodological and contextual factors.

Jackson et al. (2024) relied on direct observations of classroom practice, whereas the present study used interviews to explore teachers' retrospective experiences and interpretations of their own pedagogical practices. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as a direct contradiction, but rather as an indication that teachers in this local context perceive routine play as an important opportunity for emotion-focused support.

The local ECE context may also shape how these strategies are implemented. Teachers described relatively simple and flexible practices, such as breathing together, sitting quietly

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with a child, using everyday verbal prompts, providing positive reinforcement, and incorporating emotional conversations into familiar play activities. These practices may reflect the practical realities of ECE classrooms in Jonggol, where teachers need strategies that can be incorporated into ongoing activities without requiring separate programs or specialized materials. At the same time, participants reported several contextual constraints, including differences in children's characteristics and needs, limited time, teacher–child ratios, and inconsistencies between emotional guidance at school and at home. These conditions suggest that the implementation of emotion regulation support is influenced not only by teachers' pedagogical knowledge but also by institutional circumstances and the continuity of emotional support across children's environments.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the understanding that the relationship between play-based learning and emotion regulation is not determined solely by the type of play activity used. Play provides situations in which emotional experiences become visible, while co-regulation and emotion-focused teaching provide the interpersonal support through which those experiences can be named, interpreted, and managed. In this sense, the value of play-based learning lies not only in role play, storytelling, collaborative games, or other activities themselves, but also in the quality, responsiveness, and consistency of teacher–child interaction. The findings therefore extend the application of co-regulation and emotion-focused teaching concepts by illustrating how both may be enacted within routine play-based learning in a local Indonesian ECE context.

Practically, the findings suggest the importance of strengthening ECE teachers' competence in recognizing children's emotions, providing verbal scaffolding, using positive reinforcement, and implementing calming routines responsively. Teacher education and professional development programs, including ECE teacher education, may incorporate these competencies more explicitly into early childhood pedagogy. At the same time, the reported variations in children's responses, teacher–child ratios, time constraints, and differences in emotional guidance between school and home indicate that emotion regulation support cannot depend solely on individual teachers. Institutional support and greater consistency between school and family may be needed to provide children with more continuous emotional guidance. This interpretation is consistent with Tamakloe et al. (2024), who showed that professional support and coaching can strengthen teachers' use of play to support social-emotional learning.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, data were collected only through teacher interviews, meaning that the findings relied on participants' experiences, memories, and interpretations and may therefore be affected by self-report bias. The study did not provide direct observational evidence of children's emotion regulation behavior. Second, the study involved only 12 teachers from four ECE institutions in Jonggol District, Bogor Regency; therefore, the findings are contextual and are not intended to be generalized to all ECE institutions in Indonesia. Third, the study did not include the perspectives of parents or children, even though participants indicated that differences in emotional guidance between school and home may influence the consistency of children's emotional development. Fourth, the descriptive design did not include longitudinal observation, so the study cannot determine whether the changes perceived by teachers are sustained over time. In addition, the reliance on interviews as the sole source of data did not allow triangulation between teachers' perceptions and children's actual behavior.

Further research should combine teacher interviews with classroom observations so that teachers' strategies and children's emotional responses can be examined directly within play-based learning contexts. Mixed-methods approaches may also be considered by

incorporating instruments that measure children's emotion regulation, allowing qualitative accounts of teacher experience to be complemented by quantitative evidence. Parents' perspectives should also be included to better understand the consistency of emotion regulation practices between home and school. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether teacher-perceived developments persist over longer periods, particularly because evidence regarding the sustainability of the effects of play on emotional development remains limited (Veraksa et al. 2025). Future research may also compare ECE institutions with different geographical, social, and institutional characteristics to investigate how context shapes the implementation of emotion regulation strategies. In addition, experimental or quasi-experimental studies could examine more specifically the effectiveness of role play, collaborative play, verbal scaffolding, or calming routines in relation to particular indicators of emotion regulation. Research on teacher competence may also be expanded by examining the roles of teaching experience, ECE educational background, social-emotional training, and teacher–child ratios in shaping the quality of emotional support provided during play activities.

Conclusion

This study shows that ECE teachers in Jonggol District, Bogor Regency, apply various play-based strategies to support children's emotion regulation, including role play, emotion recognition games, storytelling, collaborative games, verbal scaffolding, positive reinforcement, and calming routines. These strategies are integrated into daily learning activities and were perceived by teachers as helping children recognize and name emotions, express feelings verbally, manage impulses, respond to social conflicts, and regain calm after experiencing negative emotions. These findings suggest that play-based learning may provide a relevant pedagogical context for supporting children's emotion regulation, particularly when accompanied by responsive and consistent teacher interaction. However, teachers did not perceive these strategies as equally helpful for all children. Some participants reported that children continued to cry, respond impulsively, or experience difficulty verbalizing emotions during highly emotional situations, indicating that repeated and individualized support remained necessary.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the relationship between play-based learning, co-regulation, and emotion-focused teaching in the context of early childhood education. Practically, the results of the study show the importance of strengthening teachers' competence in providing emotional assistance through appropriate language, positive reinforcement, and calming strategies that are in accordance with children's needs. However, because the data were only obtained through interviews with 12 teachers from four ECE institutions, the results of the study were contextual and could not be used to conclude causal effectiveness. Further research needs to involve classroom observation, parent and child perspectives, and longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the contribution of play-based learning to early childhood emotion regulation.

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