

# Identifying the Social Development Needs of Preschool Children: A Teacher-Informed Needs Analysis

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## Abstract

Social development during early childhood is critical for building the foundations of emotional regulation, peer interaction, and school readiness. This study examined preschool children's social development needs through a teacher-informed needs analysis conducted with 50 preschool teachers. Data were collected using the *Preschool Children's Needs for Social Development Questionnaire*, a 25-item instrument measuring five domains of social competence: Social Emotion and Behavior, Conflict Resolution, Language Expression, Cooperation and Sharing, and Play Together. Descriptive statistical results revealed moderate levels across all five domains ( $M \approx 3.00$  on a 5-point scale), indicating that while children are willing to participate in social interactions, their prosocial skills are inconsistent. The lowest mean score was found in Cooperation and Sharing ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = .99$ ), followed by difficulties in empathy-related behavior and verbal conflict resolution. These findings suggest that preschoolers require structured, guided opportunities to practice prosocial behavior rather than relying solely on free play. Implications highlight the need for intentional social-emotional learning and guided play experiences, and the study recommends implementing structured play-based interventions such as the GATHER Play Module to enhance children's cooperative and empathetic behaviors in natural classroom settings.

**Keywords:** Preschool Social Development, Prosocial Behavior, Needs Analysis, Guided Play, Teacher Perception

## Introduction

Social development in early childhood refers to the ability of young children to interact positively with peers, manage emotions, communicate needs appropriately, and engage successfully in group activities (Jaggy et al., 2023). These competencies include empathy, emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, cooperation, and conflict management, skills that form the foundation of healthy interpersonal relationships. Research consistently shows that children with well-developed social skills are more likely to demonstrate school readiness, improved emotional well-being, and better adjustment to formal schooling (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Smith, 2021). Devine et al. (2025) found that early social competence not only influences academic engagement but also predicts long-term outcomes related to mental health and social functioning.

Despite the importance of these competencies, social skills do not automatically develop through age or passive exposure to social environments. Young children require systematic and intentional opportunities to practice social behaviors, receive feedback, and learn through adult modeling (Choi & Kim, 2003; Schunk, 1987; Spence, 2003). Unstructured play alone is insufficient for teaching the nuanced skills of sharing, turn-taking, and managing interpersonal dilemmas. According to Bierman and Sanders (2021), developmentally appropriate guidance, including explicit instruction, social modeling, and structured interaction, is required to scaffold learning, particularly for children who struggle with emotional regulation or peer interaction.

In many preschool contexts, however, teachers commonly assume that children will develop social abilities naturally through free play and daily routines (Jaruchainiwat et al., 2024; Mohan et al., 2022). Without facilitation, children may continue to experience difficulties initiating play, resolving conflicts, expressing emotions constructively, and empathizing with others (Kaizar & Alordiah, 2023). When challenges are repeatedly unaddressed, these patterns can lead to peer rejection, behavioral concerns, and limited opportunities for positive social learning (van Rhijn et al., 2021). Identifying these challenges through teacher input is crucial, because teachers observe children's behaviors across diverse social situations and can provide reliable assessments of children's developmental needs.

Given this context, there is a need to explore and document children's social development needs using teacher-informed data rather than assumptions. Understanding what children struggle with in real classroom settings enables educators to design interventions that are meaningful and developmentally responsive. However, despite increasing attention to social-emotional learning (SEL), there remains a lack of empirical, classroom-based evidence that identifies the specific areas in which preschool children struggle. Much of the existing literature highlights the importance of social skills but offers limited insight into the precise developmental gaps observed by teachers in real settings. This gap creates uncertainty when designing targeted interventions, as educators may not have concrete data to guide the development of structured play-based activities or SEL programs. Therefore, this study addresses a practical and empirical need by providing teacher-informed findings that clarify which social competencies require the most support. By doing so, the study contributes valuable baseline data for curriculum designers, early childhood practitioners, and researchers seeking to develop evidence-based strategies to strengthen preschoolers' social development. Therefore, this study asks: What are the social development needs of preschool children as perceived by their teachers?

## **Literature Review**

Social development in early childhood refers to the acquisition of skills that enable children to interact effectively with peers, regulate emotions, and participate in group-based learning experiences (Thümmeler et al., 2022). These foundational abilities include empathy, turn-taking, sharing, listening to others, and resolving conflicts in prosocial ways (Xovoxon, 2024). Children who develop strong social-emotional competencies during preschool are more likely to exhibit positive mental health, higher self-confidence, and smoother adjustment to primary school (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Jayaputra & Raharja 2024). Conversely, delays in these competencies may lead to social withdrawal, peer rejection, and behavioral challenges in

later schooling years (Stewart, 2024). Thus, early childhood education plays a critical preventive role in shaping lifelong socio-emotional development trajectories.

Research consistently emphasizes that social competencies do not automatically emerge with age; instead, they require explicit teaching and structured practice opportunities (McDaniel et al., 2022; Gagnon & Nagle, 2004). Although free play provides important opportunities for social exposure, unstructured play alone is insufficient for children to learn cooperation, emotional regulation, or conflict resolution (Asmara & Rulyansah, 2024; Hock, 2023). D'Souza and Hevlund (2022) stated that young children often lack the strategies to negotiate peer disagreements or to communicate their needs appropriately, requiring adult mediation and modeling. Therefore, educators must intentionally embed social-emotional learning into daily routines and interactions, ensuring that children practice and internalize key social skills in guided contexts (Blewitt et al., 2021).

Play-based learning has been recognized as an effective pedagogy to support the development of social skills in naturalistic environments (Jastine Jake et al., 2025; Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025; Qayyum et al., 2024). Through play, children learn to negotiate roles, take turns, express emotions, and collaborate toward shared goals. Play that is structured, such as cooperative games, guided dramatic play, and small-group activities, has been shown to promote higher social engagement and reduce peer conflict (Asmara & Rulyansah, 2024). However, to maximize learning outcomes, teachers must facilitate these play experiences by intentionally prompting language use, modeling empathy, and supporting problem-solving (John, 2025; Wang, 2025). In other words, play becomes most effective when it is purposeful and scaffolded.

Teacher perception plays a crucial role in assessing children's social development. Teachers interact with children throughout the day and are therefore capable of observing behaviors across diverse socio-emotional contexts, including transitions, playtime, and group activities (O'Brien & Egan, 2025). Literature shows that teacher reports are reliable indicators of children's social behavior, particularly in identifying patterns such as social withdrawal, peer difficulties, or inconsistent emotional responses (Coelho et al., 2023). Teachers' insights are therefore valuable for accurately identifying development gaps and planning targeted interventions. Because preschoolers lack the cognitive maturity to self-evaluate their own social skills, teacher-informed assessments serve as an appropriate and developmentally valid method of needs analysis.

Needs analysis is an essential first step in developing instructional programs or interventions. In curriculum research, needs analysis ensures that instructional materials are grounded in actual learner needs rather than assumptions (Dewi & Qamariah, 2023; Nashir et al., 2022). By identifying the specific areas where preschoolers struggle such as cooperation, conflict resolution, or empathy, educators can design structured, evidence-based interventions that address these deficits directly. In social-emotional learning contexts, needs analysis also strengthens the validity of program development because interventions become responsive, contextually relevant, and more likely to produce measurable growth (Kurtz et al., 2023). Therefore, conducting a teacher-informed needs analysis is crucial to ensure that any planned intervention, such as a social development module, is purposeful and aligned with real classroom challenges.

Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of social-emotional learning, guided play, and teacher facilitation, the existing literature offers limited empirical evidence on the specific social development needs observed in everyday preschool classrooms. Much of the current research focuses on the effectiveness of SEL programs or theoretical discussions, but fewer studies provide data-driven insights into which competencies—such as sharing, empathy, or verbal conflict resolution—are most challenging for children in real practice. Moreover, very few investigations draw directly from teachers' systematic observations using structured instruments, despite teachers being the primary observers of children's day-to-day social behaviours. This gap makes it difficult for educators and curriculum designers to determine where to focus intervention efforts. Therefore, the present study contributes to the literature by providing a teacher-informed needs analysis that identifies concrete developmental gaps across five domains of social competence. By grounding the findings in classroom-based observations, this study offers empirically supported directions for designing targeted, developmentally appropriate interventions that address the most pressing social needs of preschool children.

### Methodology

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine preschool children's social development needs through teacher-informed assessments. A descriptive approach is suitable when the goal is to gain an accurate portrayal of existing conditions or behaviors without manipulating variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the goal was not to measure change or establish cause-effect relationships, but to document teachers' perceptions of preschoolers' current social competencies during natural classroom and play interactions. Descriptive quantitative design is commonly used in needs analysis studies because it enables researchers to quantify developmental gaps based on respondent judgment and observed behavioral frequency (Sleezer et al., 2014).

Fifty kindergarten teachers were recruited through purposive sampling and participated voluntarily. Teachers were selected instead of children because preschoolers lack the cognitive maturity to evaluate or record their own social behaviors reliably (Lozano-Pena et al., 2021). Teachers, on the other hand, interact with children across daily routines, transitions, conflict episodes, and peer play, providing them with a holistic view of each child's socio-emotional functioning. Their professional observations offer valid and reliable accounts of behavior patterns in natural settings (Ahir & Deshmukh, 2025). Participation criteria required that teachers had at least one year of teaching experience and regularly monitored children's interactions.

Data were collected using the Preschool Children's Needs for Social Development Questionnaire, which was developed based on the theoretical frameworks of Gagnon and Nagle (2004) and Huber et al. (2019), who identified five domains essential for social competence in early childhood. The instrument consisted of 25 observable behavior items organized into five domains: (1) Social Emotion and Behavior, (2) Conflict Resolution, (3) Language Expression, (4) Cooperation and Sharing, and (5) Play Together. Each domain contained five items representing common social behaviors in preschool settings, such as giving comfort to others, resolving conflicts verbally, taking turns, and sharing materials. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree),

allowing teachers to rate how frequently children demonstrated each behavior. Higher scores indicated stronger demonstration of social skills.

Table 1 presents an overview of the questionnaire structure based on the five domains. Presenting the questionnaire framework ensures clarity and allows alignment with the underlying developmental competencies measured.

Table 1

*Structure of the Preschool Children's Needs for Social Development Questionnaire*

Domain	Description of Focus	No. of Items
Social Emotion & Behavior	Empathy, emotional regulation, positive affect	5
Conflict Resolution	Managing disagreements and problem-solving	5
Language Expression	Verbal communication and listening skills	5
Cooperation & Sharing	Turn-taking, sharing materials, collaborative tasks	5
Play Together	Participation in peer play and group activities	5

Before data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in early childhood education to ensure content validity and age-appropriateness of the behavioral indicators, consistent with recommended validation practices in instrument development (Zhou, 2019). Minor refinements were made to several items to enhance clarity and ensure that each descriptor captured observable behaviors rather than internal traits. The final questionnaire required approximately ten minutes for teachers to complete and was administered during a scheduled professional development session to maximize participation.

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which generated descriptive statistics including means, medians, standard deviations, and range values for each of the five domains. Descriptive statistics are commonly used for needs analysis as they help identify the relative strengths and developmental gaps within a target population (Beltram et al., 2016). Mean scores allowed the researchers to rank domains from strongest to weakest, while standard deviations provided information about the variability of behaviors across children in each domain. These statistical outputs provided a structured foundation for determining which aspects of social development require targeted pedagogical interventions.

### Results and Findings

Descriptive statistics were used to identify preschool children's social development needs based on teachers' observations. The analysis included five domains of social development: Social Emotion and Behavior, Conflict Resolution, Language Expression, Cooperation and Sharing, and Play Together. Mean scores, standard deviations, and interpretations for each domain are presented in Table 2. Overall, teachers reported moderate development across all five domains, with mean scores clustered around the midpoint of the scale ( $M \approx 3.00$ ). However, domains varied in strength, indicating uneven development among children.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics of Social Development Domains (n = 50)*

Social Development Domain	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Play Together	3.14	1.14	Children are willing to engage in group play
Social Emotion and Behavior	3.12	1.11	Emotional regulation and empathy inconsistent
Language Expression	3.09	1.07	Struggles with listening and turn-taking
Conflict Resolution	3.09	1.06	Inconsistent ability to negotiate conflicts verbally
Cooperation and Sharing	2.99	0.99	Weakest domain; difficulty sharing and collaborating

The highest mean score was recorded in the Play Together domain ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), suggesting that most children are willing to participate in group activities and exhibit interest in peer interaction. However, the high standard deviation indicates variability across children's levels of independent engagement. While some children participate fully in peer games, others require adult prompting or appear uncertain about how to begin or sustain play activities.

The second-highest domain, Social Emotion and Behavior ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), shows moderate emotional awareness among children, yet item-level scores reveal difficulty applying these skills consistently. Specific behaviors such as giving comfort to others or demonstrating positive emotional control received lower ratings, suggesting that empathy and emotional regulation remain developing areas. As emotional skills serve as a foundation for social interaction and prosocial behavior (Belacchi et al., 2022), this finding signals an important developmental gap.

The domains of Language Expression ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) and Conflict Resolution ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) scored similarly, indicating limited verbal abilities when interacting with peers. While some children can express themselves during structured activities like storytelling, they often struggle with listening, turn-taking, and using language to resolve disputes. Teachers noted that children frequently rely on non-verbal strategies (e.g., grabbing toys, walking away) rather than communicating needs or negotiating conflicts verbally.

The lowest domain was Cooperation and Sharing ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = .99$ ), demonstrating that children have difficulty collaborating with others, sharing materials, or contributing to group tasks. Further item-level analysis revealed that behaviors such as taking turns and willingly sharing toys received the lowest individual scores, indicating a need for intentional teaching strategies that target cooperative skill development.

Table 3 illustrates selected item-level findings, highlighting the weakest and strongest behaviors demonstrated by preschool children. Low-scoring items emphasize weaknesses in empathy and sharing, whereas higher-scoring items indicate emerging strengths in structured expressive tasks like storytelling.



Table 3

*Examples of Item-Level Findings From the Needs Analysis Questionnaire*

Behavior Item	Mean
Willingness to share toys	2.92
Active participation in group games	2.84
Gives comfort when others are sad	2.94
Participates in storytelling	3.22
Uses verbal strategies to solve disputes	3.22

Overall, the findings show that although preschool children demonstrate interest in engaging with peers, they lack the social-emotional competencies needed to successfully initiate and sustain interactions without adult mediation. Teachers reported that children frequently require guidance to start games, negotiate turn-taking, or resolve misunderstandings. These results support the need for structured pedagogical interventions that intentionally teach cooperation, empathy, and social communication rather than relying solely on unstructured play.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that preschool children demonstrate basic social abilities but lack consistency in three critical domains: empathy-based behavior, sharing and cooperation, and verbal conflict resolution. While children showed willingness to engage in play (“Play Together” had the highest mean), their participation was often passive or dependent on teacher facilitation. This suggests that children may understand *what* social behavior is expected, yet lack the competencies or confidence to initiate and sustain such interactions independently. This aligns with Reddy (2025) who emphasized that social functioning is not innate but gradually shaped through structured interactions and positive reinforcement.

The weakest domain, Cooperation and Sharing, highlights a significant developmental concern. Sharing represents an early form of prosocial behavior, and insufficiencies in this area can lead to peer rejection and exclusion (Sabato & Kogut, 2021). In this study, children struggled with sharing materials, taking turns, and participating in collaborative tasks, which are skills considered fundamental to early peer relationships. Similarly, Dempsey et al. (2024) affirmed that early prosocial behaviors predict school readiness and emotional well-being. Thus, the low scores observed in this domain signal an urgent need for intentional interventions that cultivate cooperative dispositions through guided experiences.

Another notable finding was children’s inconsistent ability to express themselves during social interactions. Although expressive skills were moderately developed (e.g., participating in storytelling activities), receptive skills such as listening, taking turns in conversation, and using language to negotiate conflicts remained weak. Difficulty using language to manage interpersonal challenges suggests that children may react impulsively, such as grabbing toys or leaving interactions rather than initiating problem-solving dialogue. Leventhal (2007) similarly reported that children lacking verbal negotiation strategies are more likely to engage in conflict-avoidant or conflict-provoking behaviors. This reinforces the need for explicit, embedded teaching of communication skills during play.

The inconsistency observed in empathy-related behaviors further highlights the immature development of emotional regulation in preschoolers. Teachers reported that children were not yet consistently able to comfort peers or respond with sensitivity during emotional situations. Emotional regulation is foundational for empathy; however, young children typically require adult scaffolding to identify and manage emotional responses (Chen & Adams, 2023; Song & Park, 2021). Previous research also found that children who do not receive guided emotional coaching tend to struggle with peer relationships and are more prone to frustration during conflict (Akpovo et al., 2023; Markham, 2024). The present findings therefore echo the argument that emotional competence cannot be left to chance but requires intentional modeling and reinforcement.

The study also challenges traditional beliefs among educators that social skills will naturally develop through unstructured free play. While free play allows exposure to social experiences, it does not guarantee that children will internalize prosocial patterns or conflict resolution strategies (Schneider et al., 2022). Without teacher facilitation, children may repeatedly engage in unsuccessful or unproductive social exchanges, reinforcing maladaptive behaviors. Çetken Aktaş (2025) and Yu (2022) demonstrated that guided play, where adults mediate interaction and scaffold conversation, produces significantly higher social engagement than free play alone. Therefore, the inconsistent social competencies identified in this study reflect not children's unwillingness to engage, but the lack of structured opportunities to *practice* and *refine* social behaviors.

Collectively, these results confirm that social development at the preschool level requires structured, intentional instruction, not passive exposure. Teachers must take on the role of facilitators, designing cooperative tasks, modeling empathy, and teaching verbal negotiation strategies in real-time interactions. The findings justify the need for a structured pedagogical intervention such as the GATHER Play Module, which is designed to target the specific gaps identified, including cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution, through intentional and developmentally appropriate play-based activities. By embedding explicit teaching into guided play, educators can transform natural peer interactions into meaningful opportunities for prosocial growth.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that preschool children demonstrate foundational social development but lack consistency in higher-level prosocial skills such as empathy-based behavior, cooperation and sharing, and verbal conflict resolution. While children expressed willingness to engage socially, as reflected in the relatively higher scores in the "Play Together" domain, the weaker performance in cooperation, empathy, and language-based problem solving indicates that children do not yet possess the autonomy or confidence needed to navigate social interactions independently. The uneven patterns observed across the five domains confirm that social development does not occur automatically through exposure to peers but must be intentionally cultivated.

An important contribution of this study is its provision of empirically grounded, teacher-informed evidence that pinpoints the specific social competencies where preschool children struggle most. By identifying clear developmental gaps across five domains, this study offers practical direction for curriculum designers, preschool educators, and



policymakers seeking to build targeted interventions. Unlike general discussions on SEL, this research contributes concrete, classroom-based data that can serve as a baseline for developing structured play-based programs such as the GATHER Play Module.

Theoretical and practical implications emerge from these findings. Theoretically, this study reinforces existing research arguing that social-emotional learning (SEL) in early childhood must be explicitly taught rather than assumed to emerge naturally (Ferreira et al., 2021; Philibert, 2021). Practically, the findings emphasize the crucial role of teachers as facilitators of social learning. Teachers cannot rely solely on spontaneous peer interactions or unstructured free play; instead, they must design purposeful activities that allow children to practice emotional regulation, practice sharing, and learn verbal strategies for resolving disagreements (Lin, 2025; Mänty et al., 2022). When teachers model language for negotiation and guide children through cooperative play, they support the gradual internalization of prosocial behaviors.

Based on the results, several recommendations are proposed. First, preschool environments should integrate structured play-based interventions that specifically target cooperation, empathy, and communication. Programs such as the GATHER Play Module, intentionally designed to support social interaction through guided play, can provide children with repeated, scaffolded opportunities to apply social skills in authentic contexts. Besides, teachers should receive professional development on intentional facilitation strategies, including emotional coaching, conflict mediation prompts, and cooperative learning structures. Apart from that, classroom routines should include reflection activities that allow children to verbalize feelings, reflect on behavior, and celebrate prosocial efforts, reinforcing self-awareness and social responsibility.

Future research should explore longitudinal effects of structured social skills interventions to determine whether targeted play-based instruction leads to sustained improvements in children's prosocial behaviors across multiple semesters or transition to primary school. Additionally, qualitative data from classroom observations or interviews could enrich understanding of the specific teacher practices that most effectively promote social growth. By combining intentional instruction with continuous needs assessment, early childhood educators can create learning environments that not only address children's social development gaps but also nurture confident, empathetic, and cooperative young learners.

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