

Teachers' Strategies in Using Block Play to Manage Children who Refuse to be Left by Their Parents at Aisyiyah 39 Kratonan Kindergarten

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Abstract

This study aims to explore teachers' strategies in using block play as a means to address young children who experience difficulty separating from their parents at TK Aisyiyah 39 Kratonan, Surakarta. The phenomenon of separation anxiety often becomes an obstacle in the learning process, independence, and socialization of early childhood. To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, the study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The study involved 7 children, aged 5–6 years who showed moderate to high separation anxiety, selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that the research subjects matched the focus of the intervention. The findings reveal that the implementation of block play effectively diverts children's attention from emotional dependence on their parents toward enjoyable and meaningful learning activities. Through block play activities, children began to show improvements in independence, courage to be left by their parents, adaptability in the school environment, and social interaction with peers. Supporting factors for the success of this strategy include the availability of adequate block play materials, the warm and communicative role of teachers, and active parental involvement in the child's adaptation process. However, several challenges were identified, such as limited play equipment, short learning time, and uneven teacher skills in managing play-based activities. The implications of this study emphasize that block play functions not only as a play medium but also as an effective psychological, social, and pedagogical intervention tool to support early childhood development.

Keywords: *Block play, early childhood, independence, separation anxiety, Teacher strategies*

Introduction

Early childhood education is a crucial period for shaping a child's character, behavior, and positive habits. According to Djollong et al. (2023), early childhood education should encompass cognitive, social, emotional, and moral dimensions to ensure that children achieve holistic learning readiness. At this stage, children do not only learn academically but also develop self-confidence, independence, critical thinking skills, as well as social and emotional abilities that serve as the foundation for their future life (Hasanah, 2024). In this process, children are not only acquiring academic knowledge but are also developing self-confidence, independence, and the ability to interact with their surrounding environment. Character education in early childhood cannot be separated from the roles of three main components: family, school, and community. Character education at this age serves as the foundation for shaping children into virtuous, independent, and responsible individuals (Dini, 2021). These three components are interconnected and require close collaboration to holistically develop a child's personality. In particular, collaboration between parents and teachers is the key foundation in supporting children's growth and development (Amalia, 2023). Play activities in early childhood not only function as entertainment but also serve as a form of social learning that builds character and instills values of cooperation (Ali & Mastroah, 2022).

However, in practice, not all children can easily detach themselves from their parents when entering a school environment. In several early childhood education institutions, some children still show signs of separation anxiety, such as crying, refusing to enter the classroom, or constantly asking to be accompanied by their parents during learning activities. One such case was found at TK Aisyiyah 39 Kratonan, Surakarta City, where several children experienced difficulty being left by their parents during class. This indicates that the children were not yet emotionally ready to be independent, which can hinder their socialization and participation in classroom activities (Maulida, 2023).

Although many studies have indicated that block play can enhance children's cognitive and social abilities, a research gap still exists because most studies have not specifically examined the effectiveness of block play as an intervention to reduce separation anxiety in early childhood. In addition, previous research has tended to focus on improving creativity, motor skills, and social interaction, whereas the emotional aspect, particularly the process of children's adaptation when separating from their parents has not been explored in depth. This study aims to fill this gap by specifically investigating

how block play can be used as a teacher strategy to overcome separation anxiety in early childhood and support children's independence in the classroom.

Such issues often pose specific challenges for teachers. Children who are reluctant to separate from their parents tend to refuse participation in learning activities, lack self-confidence, or even show behavioral regression. In several cases, teachers have tried to create a pleasant and comfortable classroom atmosphere and engage children in educational games—one of which is block play. Block play is believed to be an enjoyable medium that stimulates children's development. It not only supports motor and cognitive growth but also serves as a means of fostering independence and self-confidence (Linder et al., 2021). Implementing block play methods can also help improve children's concentration, creativity, and self-control as they adapt to the new school environment (Lestari, 2022).

Block play provides a learning experience based on exploration, creativity, and collaboration. Through block play, children can recognize geometric shapes and enhance their logical and spatial thinking skills (Masruroh, 2022). By engaging in block play, children are encouraged to build something based on their imagination, either individually or in groups. This activity indirectly trains focus, perseverance, problem-solving skills, and helps establish healthy social interactions with peers (Mardhiah et al., 2024). For children experiencing separation anxiety, block play can divert their attention from emotional dependence on their parents to enjoyable activities, gradually fostering a sense of security and independence within the classroom environment (Zhou et al., 2024).

According to Bian & Huang (2024), the application of gamification in early childhood education can increase children's intrinsic motivation through structured and enjoyable play activities. Similarly, Indah (2025) emphasized that game-based learning strategies can foster learning interest and emotional engagement in children from an early age.

Furthermore, using project-based learning models combined with play activities can promote children's independence from an early age (Nakaskara et al., 2023). Thus, block play can be interpreted not only as a play medium but also as an effective psychological and pedagogical intervention strategy for addressing separation anxiety in children at school.

This study aims to explore the factors that cause young children to experience difficulty separating from their parents in the classroom. By employing a descriptive qualitative method, this research investigates the experiences and perspectives of children, parents, and teachers. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for parents, teachers, and other educators in developing more effective strategies to help children overcome difficulties in separating from their parents and to support their socio-emotional development.

Research methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive qualitative design, as proposed by Lexy J. Moleong. The purpose of this approach is to understand a phenomenon in greater depth, comprehensively, and contextually by presenting data in the form of rich, meaningful narrative descriptions. This approach was chosen because the study is not intended to test hypotheses or examine cause-and-effect relationships quantitatively. Instead, it focuses on exploring, revealing, and interpreting the experiences, feelings, and meanings directly experienced by the research subjects, particularly young children who experience difficulty being left by their parents in the classroom.

The research was conducted at TK Aisyiyah 39 Kratonan, located at Kartotiyasan RT 04 RW 06, Kratonan Village, Serengan District, Surakarta City. The institution was chosen as it is one of the early childhood education centers that implements adaptive learning programs tailored to children's developmental needs. The research was carried out over a three-month period, from March to June 2025, following a series of stages that included initial observations to identify problems in the field, implementation of an intervention strategy using block play as a fun learning medium, and evaluation to determine the effectiveness of this strategy in helping children adapt and feel comfortable entering the classroom.

The research subjects consisted of 7 children, aged 5–6 years who showed moderate to high levels of separation anxiety based on the initial observations conducted by the classroom teacher. The subjects were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that their characteristics aligned with the focus of the intervention. The sample characteristics include 4 boys and 3 girls, 5 children who were not yet accustomed to being separated from their parents, and 3 children with a history of difficulty adapting to new environments.

The object of this research focuses on the strategy of using block play as an intervention tool to support young children's willingness to participate in learning activities. The research subjects include children at TK Aisyiyah 39 Kratonan who show reluctance to be left by their parents in class, classroom teachers who are directly involved as facilitators, and the school principal who provides supporting data related to institutional policies and child adaptation programs.

Data for this study were collected using observation, interview, and documentation techniques. The data sources were divided into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary data sources included classroom teachers who guided children's adaptation processes and provided information about the strategies implemented, the principal who explained institutional policies related to adaptation programs, and the children themselves as the focus of the research. Meanwhile, secondary data sources consisted of children's progress reports, learning documents used during the intervention process, and photographic documentation that supported the validity of the research data.

The block play intervention was carried out over a period of 4 weeks with a frequency of 3 sessions per week. Each session lasted 15 minutes and consisted of free block exploration and group construction activities. The types of block play

used included wooden unit blocks and geometric blocks. The selection of these block types was based on their suitability for enabling children to build simple structures while simultaneously fostering social interaction through collaborative play.

The data collection techniques involved participatory observation, in which the researcher directly participated in the learning activities to observe children's behaviors; in-depth interviews with teachers and the principal to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies, challenges, and obstacles in implementing block play; and documentation collection, which included developmental notes, daily reports, and activity photos to reinforce the findings.

The indicators of intervention success were determined based on the reduction in crying frequency when parents left the classroom, the child's willingness to enter the class without parental accompaniment, and the increase in social interaction with peers during play. Observation data were recorded using a behavioral observation sheet containing a child response scale (refusing – somewhat enthusiastic – highly enthusiastic), while interview data were documented in the form of written transcripts.

Data analysis used the interactive analysis model by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, by sorting, selecting, and summarizing relevant information according to the research focus; data display, in the form of narratives, tables, or visuals to facilitate analysis and conclusion drawing; and verification, conducted repeatedly through deep reflection to obtain a thorough and accurate understanding of the meaning behind the research findings.

To ensure data validity, the study employed technique triangulation (observation, interviews, and documentation) as well as source triangulation (classroom teachers, the principal, and parents). Validity was further strengthened through a member check with the classroom teacher to confirm that the interpretation of the data was consistent with the actual conditions in the field.

Research Results and Discussion

The results of the study revealed changes in children's behavior after the consistent implementation of the block play strategy. Initially, children refused to enter the classroom without their parents and often cried. They exhibited symptoms of separation anxiety such as crying loudly, tightly holding their parents' hands, and refusing to sit with their peers. However, after several weeks of participating in block play activities, the children began to show interest in building activities, were able to interact with friends, and were willing to be left alone by their parents for short periods. Group play activities using blocks successfully improved children's social skills, particularly in communication and cooperation (Nurhabibah et al., 2021). Although there were occasional relapses in children's reluctance to separate from their parents, the frequency and intensity of such resistance decreased significantly, and the children demonstrated progress in independence and comfort within the school environment.



Figure 1. Block play media for early childhood education

The children began to show enthusiasm for stacking and building blocks. Their responses could be seen from their cheerful expressions, excitement when choosing colorful blocks, and eagerness to construct simple structures such as houses, towers, or bridges. They also began to interact with their peers, for instance, by asking for help to stack tall blocks or offering blocks to other children. These activities indirectly trained their social and language skills since they used simple sentences to communicate. This change indicates that block play serves as an effective positive distraction medium to reduce separation anxiety.

The teacher observed that children showed different responses when their parents left them in the classroom. For example, some children immediately cried and held their parents' hands, while others chose to sit in the corner of the classroom and refused to interact. However, after block play was consistently introduced into classroom activities, the children began to show more positive behavioral changes. This indicates that block play is not only a play medium, but also an emotional intervention strategy to reduce separation anxiety and increase children's engagement during learning activities. Interviews with the principal confirmed the institution's commitment to supporting children's adaptation, even though the preschool is not categorized as a therapeutic or inclusive school. The classroom teacher stated that block play helps children shift their focus from their parents to enjoyable construction activities. This statement supports the school's efforts in creating an emotionally supportive learning environment while giving teachers the space to develop adaptive

strategies. The teacher also emphasized that block play enables children to feel more confident and have a sense of control over their own activities.

“When I started the activity by building a block tower, the children immediately came closer and wanted to join in. They stopped looking for their parents. Their focus shifted to the play activity,” (Teacher).

“We found that directing children to structured block play activities helps the adaptation process. Children are not forced to separate, but rather encouraged to engage in activities that make them feel comfortable. Our teachers are very creative in using block play,” the principal explained. He added, *“We encourage teachers to develop play-based strategies because our facilities are not yet complete, but teacher creativity is the school’s main strength in supporting children’s emotional needs,”* (Principal).

Parents reinforced the observations and interview findings. They explained that block play had a positive impact even at home. Children became more independent and capable of explaining what they had built in class. Block play stimulates children’s development. Through block play, children recognize geometric shapes and practice critical and spatial thinking skills (Masruroh, 2022). For children experiencing separation anxiety, block play shifts their emotional dependence away from their parents toward enjoyable activities, gradually building a sense of safety and independence in the classroom. Parents also observed that block play helped children regulate their emotions during separation, not only as a school activity but also as an emotional expression.

“He used to cry every time I left him, but now he is stronger. He said he wants to play with the blocks again tomorrow. I was very surprised by this change,” (Parent of a child who used to refuse to be left at school).

Another parent added, *“My child is calmer after playing with the blocks. Now he wants to enter the classroom even though I leave the school. He used to need constant accompaniment, but now he tells me, ‘Mom, you can go home, I want to build a house,’ ”* (Parent of a child who used to refuse to be left at school).

Another parent also reported, *“Now my child is more excited to go to school and learn because we don’t have block toys at home, so he’s very eager to go to school and immediately start building with the blocks,”* (Parent).

Documentation such as weekly and daily lesson plans as well as learning activity photos shows the integration of block play across all phases of learning, from the opening to the closing. In the theme “Playing with Friends,” children were seen sitting in groups constructing a house using blocks while discussing the building’s structure. A child who previously refused to enter the classroom appeared actively involved and smiling throughout the session. Observations also showed that the teacher divided the activity into short play sessions and allowed children to choose what they wanted to build. This approach proved effective in maintaining concentration and providing children with a sense of control. Follow-up interviews with the teacher emphasized that block play serves as an emotional bridge that helps children feel safe and comfortable in the classroom.



Figure 2. The use of block play to support children who struggle to separate from their parents

“We try to schedule block play sessions for 10–15 minutes and then alternate them with light activities so the children remain enthusiastic. When the child feels comfortable, they no longer focus on the fact that their parent is leaving,” (Teacher).

“For example, when learning about the theme ‘My House,’ I invited the children to build a house with blocks while connecting it with their experience of living at home with their parents. Children became more able to express their emotions and understand that they are safe in school,” the teacher added. *“Block play helps children build confidence through mastering the task of completing a block structure. They feel capable, and that reduces their anxiety,”* (Teacher).

The principal also emphasized the need to develop an evaluation system for monitoring children's emotional adaptation. Observations showed that the current assessment relies mostly on descriptive notes from the teacher. The development of more systematic measurement tools to identify children's independence and emotional readiness is therefore essential. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that block play plays an important role in increasing children's comfort, participation, and independence in the classroom. Teacher creativity in facilitating block play, school support, and parental involvement are key factors for the success of this strategy. Consistent and structured implementation of block play has been proven to help reduce children's separation anxiety in the school setting while highlighting the importance of structural support and measurable developmental evaluation.

This activity also developed children's language and social skills because they communicated while cooperating to build block structures. Thus, stimulation through interactive play nurtured critical thinking and communication abilities in children aged 5–6 years (Saputri & Katoningsih, 2023).

However, the use of blocks also presented certain limitations. First, block play requires intensive teacher supervision to ensure children stay focused and engaged. Often, children lose concentration, dismantle their structures, or argue over blocks with friends. This requires teachers to remain alert and guide interactions to stay positive. Second, the limited number of blocks becomes an obstacle when the number of children exceeds the available materials, which can lead to boredom or minor conflicts. Therefore, teachers must be sensitive in managing educational play tools so they remain effective for children with diverse needs, including those experiencing separation anxiety (Suwandari & Mastiani, 2021).

Despite these limitations, the findings affirm that block play can serve as a positive distraction tool that helps children reduce separation anxiety, foster independence, enhance socio-emotional skills, and provide enjoyable learning experiences.

The findings of this research show that using block play to address children's reluctance to be separated from their parents in class is highly effective as a positive distraction medium that minimizes separation anxiety. According to Sylvani (2024), consistent use of block play can increase independence in six-year-old children because they learn to make decisions during play. Similarly, Mayndra (2024) found that block play therapy has a calming effect on children experiencing anxiety. This aligns with Mustikasari (2022), who emphasized that play activities can serve as an emotional bridge between teachers and children. Teachers who create a fun and engaging play environment help establish a sense of security, gradually enabling children to feel comfortable being separated from their parents. Teacher training and skill in guiding block play significantly contribute to improving children's social competence. Group block play activities also strengthen social interactions and reduce children's fear of the school environment (Zanety & Sumarni, 2023). Additionally, group play fosters helping behavior and cooperation skills (Septiawati et al., 2020). Teachers who are able to create a positive play environment can help transform children's fear into joyful learning experiences (Masnipal, 2021).

These findings can be explained through Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (Smidt, 2022). Teachers act as scaffolding by providing initial support during block play until the children are able to play independently. The teacher's warm, patient, and consistent role is a key factor in the success of this strategy. The findings are also consistent with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, particularly the stage of "autonomy versus shame and doubt." Children who are supported through play-based activities tend to feel more confident and independent, whereas those who lack support may experience doubt or anxiety (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2023). Constructive play can also reduce stress and anxiety among preschoolers by enhancing their sense of control and self-competence (Piotrowski et al., 2023). A meaningful and interactive learning environment is crucial for fostering children's independence and reducing stress and anxiety in early childhood (Syahfrillina et al., 2025).

Therefore, the results of this study confirm that block play is not merely a form of play activity but an effective pedagogical and psychological tool to help children cope with separation anxiety, develop independence, and enhance their cognitive, social, and emotional abilities. However, its effectiveness largely depends on the availability of materials, teacher competence, and parental support during the child's adaptation process at school.

The concept of learning through play must be balanced so that children can internalize values without pressure. In this context, block play acts as a bridge between enjoyment and meaningful learning (Wahyuni & Azizah, 2020). Block play activities also promote positive social behaviors such as sharing and respecting peers' opinions. This further strengthens the understanding that block play is not only a learning aid but also a medium for character development from an early age (Nurcahaya, 2022). Overall, a teacher's warm, patient, and communicative approach is the key to successfully managing separation anxiety and fostering children's independence (Khotijah et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the block play strategy proved effective in helping young children overcome difficulties in separating from their parents in the school environment. Through block play activities, children were able to shift their focus from emotional dependence on their parents to enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences. The children demonstrated improvements in their willingness to enter the classroom without parental accompaniment, independence in participating in learning activities, and social interaction with their peers. Overall, block play can be used as an intervention strategy to reduce separation anxiety in early childhood through engagement in constructive activities, social collaboration, and emotional support from teachers throughout the play process. From a

theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the early childhood education literature by showing that block play serves not only as a medium for cognitive and social development but also as a psychological intervention tool for overcoming separation anxiety. Although the findings were positive, the study still has limitations. The effectiveness of block play depends on several factors, including the availability of adequate play materials, teachers' skills in managing play-based activities, and the varying emotional readiness of children. Therefore, the block play strategy should be applied flexibly and adapted to each child's condition as well as the support provided by the surrounding environment.

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