

# The Role of a Gadget-Free Community Program in Improving Elementary School Children's Social Skills

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## ABSTRACT

The increased use of digital devices among elementary school children often results in decreased direct interaction, collaborative skills, and emotional regulation abilities. Kampung Lali Gadget (KLG or a Gadget-Free Community), a community-based community in Sidoarjo, presents a form of non-formal education through traditional game activities integrated with the values of collaboration, empathy, and social communication. This study aims to understand in depth the role of the KLG community in shaping and strengthening the social skills of elementary school-aged children. The method used is qualitative research with a case study approach. Data were collected through participant observation during traditional game sessions, in-depth interviews with children, parents, facilitators, and community leaders, and documentation of activities. Data analysis was conducted using thematic techniques through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, as well as triangulation of sources and methods to maintain validity. The results of the study indicate that children's involvement in KLG activities facilitates meaningful social learning processes: children become more skilled at communicating, showing empathy, collaborating, following rules, and managing emotions in group interactions. The role of community facilitators using a reflective and collaborative approach proved crucial in creating a safe, inclusive, and enjoyable learning environment. Furthermore, parental participation and local community support contributed to the program's sustainability. This study concludes that KLG functions as a

culturally based communal learning space that is effective in improving the social skills of elementary school children.

### Keywords

Community  
Elementary School  
Children  
Kampung Lali Gadget  
Social Skills  
Traditional Games

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## Introduction

Social behavior and children's emotional development have changed significantly due to the rapid development of digital technology. Recent studies have found that excessive screen exposure correlates with a decline in the quality of social-emotional interactions, attention disorders, and reduced opportunities for meaningful conversations with peers and adults, which are crucial for early social skills [1]. Play as the primary medium and vehicle for social learning plays an important role in supporting collaboration, communication, role negotiation, rule compliance, empathy, and emotional regulation. The American Academy of Pediatrics policy states that uncontrolled use of digital devices has the potential to reduce children's opportunities to learn through real interactions with peers and adults [2]. This condition poses a significant challenge in the context of education, especially in Indonesia, where a substantial increase in gadget ownership among children has occurred from an early age. The concept of "power of play" aims to develop 21st-century competencies, while studies in Indonesia show that traditional games such as gobak sodor, petak umpet, and egrang facilitate cooperation, sportsmanship, leadership, and conflict resolution in children. Thus, traditional games are not merely a means of cultural preservation, but also a pedagogical strategy for building social skills that are relevant to the needs of children in the digital age [3].

In Indonesia, community-based non-formal education ecosystems offer flexible innovation spaces through a living laboratory approach that integrates local contexts, community participation, and reflective practices in addressing social and educational issues. Kampung Lali Gadget (KLG) in Pagerngumbuk Village, Wonoayu, Sidoarjo, has emerged as a community based on traditional thematic games such as water, sand, leaves, stones, clay, and field games, so that children consciously "forget" their gadgets while building healthy social relationships. A number of local government reports, mainstream media coverage, and local scientific works confirm KLG's mandate as a space for learning and playing that restores children's social interactions, introduces local wisdom, and preserves cultural values. Through learning in the form of traditional games, children are not only stimulated to learn about the

values of togetherness, sportsmanship, leadership, and negotiation skills, but also internalize cultural meanings relevant to pedagogical strategies [4]. Direct interaction, which is characteristic of traditional games, is also useful in instilling the values of cooperation, togetherness, and self-control that are relevant to character education.

In general, empirical studies on traditional games and children's social skills in Indonesia tend to show positive impacts, but they are still dominated by literature studies, small quasi-experimental designs, or school contexts; while in-depth qualitative explorations that examine the mechanisms of change in the community arena (the role of facilitators, group norms, peer scaffolding, and parental involvement) are still limited. This gap is an important novelty, considering that the strengthening of social skills takes place in a rich ecology of real interactions, full of symbols and local social rules, which are more sensitively captured through a qualitative approach [5].

This study focuses on the role of KLG communities in improving the social skills of elementary school children through a qualitative lens (case study). Specifically, the study aims to:

- map traditional game-based pedagogical practices in KLG that contribute to communication, cooperation, empathy, role negotiation, and emotional regulation;
- to reveal the dynamics of the role of community facilitators, parental support, and norms of child participation in shaping a safe and inclusive social climate; and
- to explain the context, mechanisms, and outcomes that bridge play activities to the improvement of children's social skills.

This study positions KLG as a culture-based open learning space with the potential to be replicated in other communities in Indonesia.

The research results are expected to contribute to strengthening the non-formal education ecosystem in line with SDG 4, particularly Target 4.1 (achieving basic learning outcomes), 4.5 (equity and inclusion), 4.7 (education for sustainable development and global citizenship), and 4.a (safe and inclusive learning facilities). By documenting good practices and their mechanisms, this study provides an empirical basis for regional and national stakeholders to design community interventions that are culturally rooted, affordable, and impactful on children's social development [6].

Although a number of quantitative studies on the influence of traditional games on children's social skills have emerged, qualitative approaches that describe in depth the mechanisms of community roles, facilitation dynamics, and parental involvement in shaping children's social climate are still relatively limited [7]. In fact, a deep understanding of this process is important for formulating a sustainable community-based non-formal education

model. Therefore, this study focuses on exploring in depth the role of the KLG community in improving the social skills of elementary school children through a qualitative approach. This study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the research enriches studies on community-based non-formal education, traditional games, and the development of children's social skills. Practically, the results of the research can be a reference for educators, community managers, and policymakers in designing social intervention programs based on local culture.

## Material and Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study strategy [8]. The case study approach was chosen because the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena in a real context, namely the role of the KLG community in improving the social skills of elementary school children. The research location was KLG, Pagerngumbuk Village, Wonoayu District, Sidoarjo Regency, East Java. The research subjects consisted of: elementary school-aged children (7–12 years old) who participated in traditional games at KLG; facilitators/community leaders who guided the games; parents of children involved in supporting the activities; and KLG community managers. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their level of involvement in the activities. The number of informants was determined by data saturation, i.e., until the data showed no new findings [9]. Fig. 1 is the research procedure in this study.

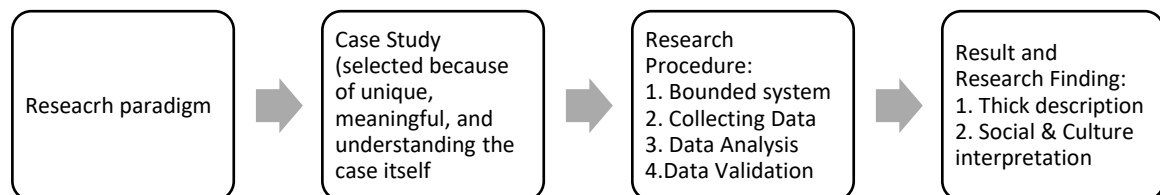


**Fig. 1.** Research Procedure of Study Case [8]

Data was collected using three main techniques, namely Participatory observation: researchers directly observed and engaged in children's social skills while playing traditional games (communication, empathy, cooperation, rule compliance); In-depth interviews: conducted with children, parents, facilitators, and community managers using semi-structured guidelines; and Documentation: in the form of activity archives, photos, videos, and community notes

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis [10] with the following stages: familiarization with the data, coding, grouping of themes, review of themes, and drawing of conclusions. Findings are presented descriptively with direct quotations from informants.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **A. Overview of Kampung Lali Gadget (KLG)**

KLG is a community-based non-formal education community that was established in 2018 in Pagerngumbuk Village, Wonoayu, Sidoarjo. This initiative arose from the founder's concern about the increasing use of gadgets among children, which has led to a decline in social activities. The KLG aims to revive the natural play environment for children by engaging their five senses directly through traditional games. Its main programs include thematic traditional game sessions, such as bamboo stilts, spinning tops, catching catfish, simple archery, dakon, and various other traditional games combined with reflection activities and peer bonding activities. Community facilitators act not only as technical guides but also as social mediators who encourage children to communicate, cooperate, and healthily resolve conflicts.

This community utilizes underutilized land around the village for play, such as rice fields for mud play, backyards for exploring leaves, soil, bamboo, and so on. In this way, land that was previously underutilized is transformed into an attractive and contextual play space with local wisdom values, allowing children to explore their sensory and social skills. This is relevant to a study Vigil-Dopico et al. [11] that describes learning with peers, facilitators as more knowledgeable others, and the village environment as a zone of social development.

The target community is children from early childhood to elementary school age, so it can be estimated that the target of this program is children aged 5 to 12 years. Children at this age experience rapid social development, so traditional games have great potential in improving these skills. Learning activities using the traditional games approach at KLG bridge children's social learning needs through outdoor activities that are constructive for their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor knowledge.

Thematic analysis yielded four main strategies that explain the role of the The KLG community in improving the social skills of elementary school children.

#### **1. Finding 1: Traditional Games as a Collaborative Medium**

Observations show that traditional games in KLG create a natural collaborative space where children learn to work together, share roles, and negotiate. Each game requires group coordination and responsibility, thereby encouraging communication and solidarity.

In interviews conducted, one participant stated,

*"If we want to win the long bakiak, we have to work together. If anyone is selfish, we will definitely lose"* (AR, 10 years old, participant).

The above statement means that the traditional game of gobak sodor teaches children to work together and collaborate actively to win the game. In addition, communication with one another can facilitate the cooperation needed to achieve the goal.



**Fig. 2.** Children played Long Bakiak

The image above confirms the existence of mutual observation, adjusting steps, taking turns, coordination, maintaining the rhythm of steps, and group strategy. Direct communication and interaction together increase the potential for team success.

Traditional sensory-based play activities with themes such as “dolanan godhong,” “dolanan lempung,” “dolanan kreweng,” “dolanan watu,” and so on, which involve natural materials such as water, sand, leaves, stones, clay, and mud, create a context for direct tactile learning. These face-to-face play opportunities bring out natural behaviors such as sharing, taking turns, asking for help, helping each other, and problem-solving. This event is a concrete manifestation of Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes that cognitive and social development, as well as higher mental functions, develop from social interactions with others and through cultural tools (tools, signs) in a social context. The Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes that children's interactions with peers will support their social skills.

Supported by Bandura's Social Learning Theory, traditional games in The KLG facilitate children to behave based on observation of models, imitation, and modeling. Cognitive factors involving willingness, attention, and retention also determine whether the behavior they see will be adopted or not. This is evidenced by the results of an interview with a participant named Nanda,

*“I can play dakon because I imitated the guide who taught me. At first, I didn't know how to play. Then I played with Tuko, and now I know how to play dakon.”*

The traditional games facilitated at KLG are very diverse and are able to spark children's interest in playing them. The most popular game is catching catfish. The guide directs the children to play in a pond filled with water, and then the guide will throw small catfish for the children to catch and take home. The interaction in competing for the catfish

is not only about competition, but also about working together, having fun together, and celebrating success.

These results are in line with research by Bodrova and Leong [12] which states that collaborative play helps children develop social executive functions such as joint decision-making, problem-solving, and self-control. KLG successfully utilized the context of traditional games to build team spirit and strengthen a sense of togetherness among children. Games are not merely entertainment, but also a means of socialization that can improve communication, solidarity, and group responsibility. Previous studies support this: for example, a study found that traditional games improve children's social skills ( $\beta = 0.155, p = .008$ ).

## 2. Finding 2: Guides as Social and Emotional Mediators

The role of guides is to facilitate KLG communities, which is not limited to supervising games, but also functioning as social-emotional mediators for children, connecting children in managing the social-emotional dynamics that arise during play [13]. With the guide's help, children learn to manage their emotions, empathize, and understand the feelings of their peers. In observation, the guide uses reflective strategies such as pausing and talking to temporarily stop the game to discuss conflicts or children's behavior.

*"When a child is angry and doesn't want to play, I ask: 'You were angry because you lost, right? It's okay, let's play again. Try again to win'" (AYG, guide 2)*

By helping children regulate their emotions when they lose at play, guides give children the opportunity to understand and validate their own feelings and help them reflect on and overcome these emotions. This approach reinforces the findings Ginsburg et al. [14] and Murray and Palaiologou [15] that interactions with empathetic companions strengthen children's emotional regulation. Thus, facilitators at KLG function as social-emotional coaches who instill the values of tolerance, responsibility, and sportsmanship [16][17].



**Fig. 3.** Facilitators help children play egrang

The facilitator not only facilitates the competition but also fosters a sense of social responsibility by supervising turns and ensuring that the game runs peacefully without fighting or conflict. The facilitator also facilitates self-reflection among participants so that a sense of tolerance, responsibility, and sportsmanship arises. Tolerance is built by training children to be gracious when they lose and to admit their mistakes. A sense of responsibility is cultivated by maintaining a positive atmosphere during play and respecting fellow players. Sportsmanship is fostered through a healthy competitive environment. The rules established by the facilitator aim to internalize social norms through direct experience during play.

### 3. Finding 3: Parental Involvement as Ecological Social Support

In addition to children, the role of parents in developing children's social skills has proven to be significant. They are present during activities and observe games designed by the community. Parents report changes in their children's behavior at home, becoming more communicative, patient, and actively interacting with family members.

*"Now my child often invites me to play here. He also likes to role-play as the guide at KLG, with us as participants. He also rarely plays games on his cell phone anymore. When friends come over, he immediately says, 'Let's play benthik like at KLG,'" (OT, 53).*

This interview confirms parental involvement and shows new social initiatives in the home environment. The importance of family ecological support is emphasized in the Ecological Systems theory [18], where positive interactions in microenvironments such as communities and families strengthen children's social learning. The presence of parents within the family strengthens the relationship between the play environment and the community, thereby creating continuous social experiences for children.

*"My child now prefers to play outside, fly kites, or catch fish in the ditch near our house. There have been many changes after playing at KLG several times". (BL, 38)*

*"As for me, I enjoy inviting my children or younger siblings to play together at home. Playing for a while to unwind after work really helps us recharge our energy" (NK, 39).*

Parents, as part of the social ecological system, play a dual role in increasing their children's opportunities to improve their social skills [19]. Through practicing social skills, inviting family members to play, respecting others, taking turns, and solving small problems at home. Parental support in creating a social atmosphere at home, such as being present during children's play activities, involving other family members such as younger siblings, uncles, or aunts, further strengthens children's social development [20]. During family playtime, children have the opportunity to internalize their social behaviors while playing at KLG [21]. This study reflects that families act as a metaphorical "mosquito" that facilitates the transfer of social-emotional learning from the community to the home.

### 4. Finding 4: Community as a Safe and Inclusive Space

KLG is a safe space for children from various social backgrounds to learn and play

without competitive pressure [22]. Children who were initially shy began to dare to lead games and express themselves without academic or competitive pressure. This environment provides a safe space for children to explore, take risks in decision-making while playing, and enjoy carefree social experiences with their peers. This practice applies the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, which has a positive impact in the form of a sense of security and confidence.

In addition to exploring social experiences, children are also allowed to lead teams, such as in playing long skipping rope or mushrooming. This opportunity is excellent for increasing courage, as expressed by one of the participants:

*"I used to be shy about talking in front of my friends, but here I was asked to try being in front (team leader)"* (B, 9 years old).

The atmosphere created by KLG is a judgment-free play environment, where every child is allowed to try, and there are no sanctions or negative consequences if they fail. A safe and supportive play environment encourages children to be more confident and courageous in new social roles [13].

Facilitators also encourage inclusivity by adjusting the rules of the game for children with different abilities. This reinforces the Community of Practice theory [23] which emphasizes social learning through meaningful participation in the community. KLG functions as a learning community that facilitates social apprenticeship, where children learn norms, cooperation, and empathy naturally in the context of the local socio-cultural environment.

Differences in physical abilities or the need for extra attention among children playing in KLG are accommodated by slowing down the pace of play, assigning different and lighter roles, and rotating leadership. This is in line with the principle of inclusive pedagogy, which places each child as an active learner in group activities [24].

## **B. KLG as a Community Supporting Children's Social Skills**

Research findings show that KLG is not only a means of recreation but also a culture-based social laboratory that allows children to acquire social-emotional learning naturally. Traditional games serve as a pedagogical context that brings together social values such as cooperation, sportsmanship, empathy, and leadership with children's active learning experiences through direct interaction with peers and guides.

These results are consistent with the findings of Tumbuh et al. [4] and Lathifah et al. [25] which concluded that traditional games can foster children's social intelligence through direct interaction. In a non-formal context, this shows that community-based learning, such as KLG, can complement formal education, which is often academic and technology-based.

Furthermore, KLG as a learning ecosystem is strengthened by the role of facilitators and

parents, demonstrating the synergistic function between elements of the learning ecosystem. Facilitators act as cultural brokers [26], translating the values of games into meaningful reflective experiences. Meanwhile, parents reinforce the sustainability of the social learning process at home.

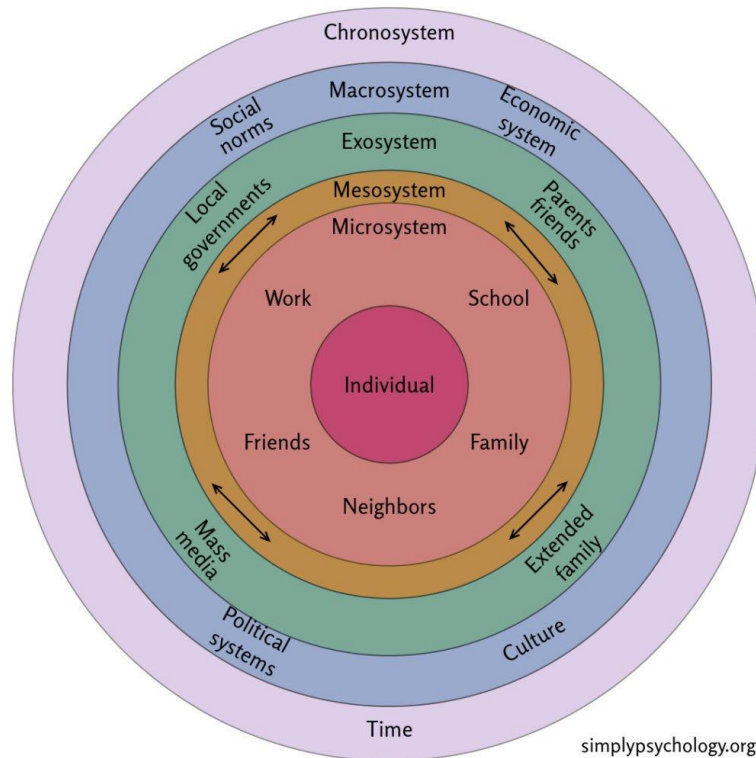


**Fig. 4.** Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Parents act as agents of social value transfer who, in the Bio-Ecological Systems Theory [27][28], are described as extending the social learning process within the child's internal environment. Thus, families support children's social abilities by fostering their cultural identity, developing 21st-century competencies such as communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, and expanding the meaning of education as a cross-spatial process (community and family).

This research implies that children's social education needs to be integrated with local culture-based activities and actively involve community actors. The KLG model is in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7, namely education that fosters human values, sustainability, and global citizenship, and appreciation for cultural diversity. Overall, KLG serves as a community-based intervention model that uses traditional games to build children's social skills; positions facilitators as social-emotional coaches; involves parents as supporters of sustainable social learning; and provides a safe and inclusive space for children to learn without competitive pressure. Thus, KLG proves that community-based non-formal education can be an effective approach in improving the

social skills of elementary school children in the digital age.

## Conclusion

This study indicates that The KLG is a community that plays a significant role in improving the social skills of elementary school children by providing a local culture-based learning space that allows children to be directly involved in traditional games, facilitating them to communicate, cooperate, have empathy, control their emotions, and obey the rules of the game. KLG provides a safe and inclusive environment for children, allowing children from various social backgrounds to express themselves without academic pressure or competitive technology. Facilitators, referred to as play companions, also play a crucial role in resolving conflicts, cultivating children's leadership roles, resolving conflicts, and reflecting on children's social behavior. The development of children's social skills is also strongly supported by the role of parents at home, as a social learning process that reinforces the internalization of values obtained from the community. Further research recommendations include conducting further studies or using mixed methods to assess the sustainability of behavioral impacts, comparing different community contexts, and exploring scalable intervention models that involve more elements of the learning ecology, such as schools and local cultural figures. Overall, the KLG case study shows that utilizing cultural resources within a participatory community framework has proven effective in strengthening children's social development.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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