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Emotional self-regulation and communication development in 5-year-old children: a playful methodological guide

Autorregulación emocional y desarrollo de la comunicación en niños de 5 años: guía metodológica lúdica

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RESUMEN

Introducción: la autorregulación emocional y el desarrollo de la comunicación constituyen procesos interdependientes en la primera infancia; sin embargo, en la Escuela de Educación Básica "Celeste Carlier Fuentes" (Quevedo, Ecuador) los niños de 5 años presentan dificultades frecuentes para manejar sus emociones y comunicarse con claridad. **Objetivo:** diseñar una guía metodológica de actividades lúdicas que mejorara la autorregulación emocional y el desarrollo de la comunicación en niños de 5 años. **Métodos:** se realizó un estudio con enfoque mixto y diseño descriptivo-exploratorio en 43 niños de 5 años de la institución, sus docentes y el Departamento de Consejería Estudiantil. Se aplicaron un análisis FODA institucional, una ficha de observación estructurada con 24 indicadores y una entrevista semiestructurada a docentes, ambos instrumentos validados por juicio de experto. Los datos cuantitativos se analizaron mediante estadística descriptiva y los cualitativos mediante categorización temática, con triangulación metodológica. El estudio contó con la aprobación del Comité de Ética institucional. **Resultados:** el diagnóstico evidenció debilidades en el manejo de emociones básicas, las estrategias de calma y las habilidades verbales y de escucha activa, así como fortalezas institucionales como el apoyo del DECE y la disposición docente. A partir de estos hallazgos se estructuró la guía "Juego, siento y me expreso", organizada en cuatro fases progresivas con 12 actividades lúdicas distribuidas en 11 semanas. **Conclusiones:** la guía articula de forma coherente los hallazgos diagnósticos con el sustento teórico y constituye una herramienta pedagógica factible para fortalecer simultáneamente la autorregulación emocional y la comunicación en la Educación Inicial.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Emotional self-regulation and communication development are interdependent processes in early childhood; however, at the "Celeste Carlier Fuentes" Basic Education School (Quevedo, Ecuador), 5-year-old children frequently struggle to manage their emotions and communicate clearly. **Objective:** To design a methodological guide featuring play-based activities to improve emotional self-regulation and communication development in 5-year-old children. **Methods:** A study with a mixed-methods approach and a descriptive-exploratory design was conducted involving 43 five-year-old children from the institution, their teachers, and the Student Counseling Department. Tools applied included an institutional SWOT analysis, a structured observation checklist with 24 indicators, and semi-structured teacher interviews; both instruments were validated by expert judgment. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic categorization and methodological triangulation. The study was approved by the institutional Ethics Committee. **Results:** The diagnostic assessment revealed weaknesses in basic emotion management, calming strategies, and verbal and active listening skills, alongside institutional strengths such as support from the Student Counseling Department and teacher willingness. Based on these findings, the "I Play, I Feel, and I Express Myself" guide was developed, organized into four progressive phases comprising 12 play-based activities distributed over 11 weeks. **Conclusions:** The guide coherently links diagnostic findings with theoretical underpinnings and serves as a feasible pedagogical tool for simultaneously strengthening emotional self-regulation and communication in early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

Talking about early education is talking about the foundations of human development. In the first years of life, what a child feels and what they manage to express are closely intertwined, to the point that emotion and communication can be understood as two sides of the same process that determines how the child relates, learns, and grows inside and outside the classroom. The ability to regulate one's own emotions and communicate effectively is fundamental to child well-being and has a direct relationship with later academic success. ⁽¹⁾ Neuroscience and developmental psychology have confirmed that the first years constitute a period of accelerated maturation in which the child's brain builds the emotional, linguistic, and social foundations that will support all future learning. ⁽²⁾

Emotional self-regulation can be understood as the child's ability to identify what they feel, understand it, and adjust their response appropriately to the context. ⁽³⁾ Internationally, evidence shows that children who manage to identify and manage their emotions from early ages present greater verbal fluency, better vocabulary development, and a more open disposition toward interaction with their peers. ⁽⁴⁾ Child communication, for its part, is a multimodal activity in which gesture, gaze, posture, and intonation carry weight equivalent to that of the word, a conception especially pertinent in 5-year-old children whose verbal language is still consolidating. ⁽⁵⁾

In Latin America, research conducted in Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador confirms the relationship between both dimensions from cultural contexts close to the Ecuadorian reality: children with difficulties controlling their impulses tend to withdraw socially, use poorer language, and present disruptive behaviors that interfere with oral language learning. ⁽⁶⁾ Oral expression, moreover, plays a central role in the resolution of emotional conflicts between peers. ⁽⁷⁾

In Ecuador, the Early Education Curriculum incorporates among its objectives the development of socio-emotional and communicative competencies, and recognizes that emotional regulation is indispensable for meaningful learning and harmonious coexistence within the classroom. ⁽⁸⁾ However, important gaps persist between what is prescribed in the curriculum and what is effectively practiced, especially in institutions with limited pedagogical resources or where family support for emotional development is scarce. ⁽⁹⁾ The absence of emotional self-regulation skills brings with it difficulties in socialization and learning that, if not addressed, leave a mark on long-term school performance. ⁽¹⁰⁾

At the "Celeste Carlier Fuentes" School of Basic Education, located in Quevedo, Ecuador, 5-year-old children frequently show difficulties managing what they feel, which directly affects their way of communicating: crying in the face of frustration, shyness that prevents participation, impulsivity that interrupts their classmate, poor vocabulary, and difficulty sustaining a conversation. Among the identified causes are homes where emotions are not named or managed, pedagogical practices that prioritize the cognitive over the socio-emotional, and a scarcity of materials designed to work both dimensions through play. ⁽¹¹⁾ Play constitutes the natural language of children of this age and the medium through which they explore emotions, rehearse roles, and learn to regulate their behavior. ⁽¹¹⁾

Recent systematic reviews on language development in the preschool stage support the pertinence of intervening early on both dimensions jointly. ⁽¹²⁾ Along these lines, educational interventions based on play have been shown to contribute to self-control, the development of emotional vocabulary, and the strengthening of communicative skills in Early Education children. ⁽¹³⁾

From this evidence arose the need to design a methodological guide that would integrate, from a playful perspective, emotional self-regulation and the development of communication in 5-year-old children. The objective of this study was to design a methodological guide of playful activities that would improve emotional self-regulation and the development of communication in 5-year-old children at the "Celeste Carlier Fuentes" School of Basic Education.

METHODS

A study with a mixed research approach was conducted, combining quantitative and qualitative methods with the purpose of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of emotional self-regulation and communication in early childhood, processes that cannot be reduced solely to figures nor understood only through descriptions. ⁽¹⁴⁾ A descriptive-exploratory design was adopted: the descriptive component allowed observing and documenting the characteristics and behavior patterns of the children in their natural classroom environment, without intervening in the group's conditions; the exploratory component was pertinent because the specific interrelation between both variables through playful activities constitutes a little-explored field in the Ecuadorian educational context. ⁽¹⁵⁾

The study was developed at the "Celeste Carlier Fuentes" School of Basic Education, a public institution located in Quevedo, Los Ríos province, Ecuador, during the 2025-2026 school year. The universe consisted of 43 5-year-old children enrolled in the Early Education

level, their classroom teachers, and the institutional Student Counseling Department (DECE). The entire age group was worked with through a non-probabilistic census-type sampling, given the small and manageable size of the population. All 5-year-old children enrolled and present during the data collection period were included; cases with irregular attendance that prevented completing systematic observation were excluded.

The study variables were emotional self-regulation (management of basic emotions, calming strategies, emotional self-knowledge, and conflict resolution) and the communication process (verbal skills, non-verbal skills, active listening, and social interaction). Data collection was structured through the complementarity of two instruments validated by expert judgment. First, a structured observation form with a quantitative approach was applied, which evaluated 24 indicators distributed across the eight categories of both variables using a scale from 1 (not adequate) to 4 (very adequate), at three moments of the process (beginning, middle, and closing). Second, a semi-structured interview was applied to the teachers, with a qualitative approach, aimed at gathering their perceptions about the emotional and communicative dynamics of the classroom. Both instruments were submitted to validation by expert judgment, with a result of "very adequate" in the criteria of pertinence, coherence, sufficiency, relevance, clarity, and viability. Complementarily, an institutional SWOT analysis was conducted to identify strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats related to emotional self-regulation and communication in the school context.

The quantitative data obtained from the observation form were processed through descriptive statistics, with calculation of frequencies and percentages. The qualitative data derived from the interview were processed through thematic categorization. The convergence of both analytical strands, through methodological triangulation, allowed structuring the practical proposal for playful intervention—organized into phases, activities, objectives, variables, and achievement indicators—understood as a structured pedagogical resource that guides the teacher in the planning and implementation of intentionally designed play activities.⁽¹⁶⁾ The internal coherence of the proposal with the theoretical framework that supports it was verified qualitatively through the conceptual analysis of each pedagogical decision adopted.

The study was conducted respecting the international recommendations on research with human beings contained in the Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association, with the adaptations proper to the educational field. The research protocol was approved by the institutional Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from the educational authorities and the legal representatives

of the participating children, as well as the corresponding assent of the teachers involved; no identifiable personal data were collected nor were photographs of the minors used.

RESULTS

The institutional SWOT analysis evidenced that the "Celeste Carlier Fuentes" School of Basic Education has favorable conditions for intervention: teachers with a predisposition to innovate in playful strategies, a good school climate with active support from the DECE, and ample physical spaces for dynamic activities. Among the identified weaknesses were insufficient specialized teacher training in emotional education, the absence of differentiated strategies for children with specific difficulties, and low availability of socio-emotional assessment instruments. As threats, family environments that do not always promote emotional regulation and curricular time limitations for socio-emotional work were noted (Table 1).

Table 1. Institutional SWOT analysis for emotional self-regulation and communication development

Dimension	Main findings
Strengths	Teachers with a predisposition to innovate in playful strategies; good school climate and DECE support; ample spaces for dynamic activities.
Opportunities	Institutional interest in incorporating emotional education into the curriculum; availability of playful materials; potential family support for reinforcement at home.
Weaknesses	Scarce specialized teacher training in emotional education; absence of differentiated strategies; low availability of socio-emotional assessment instruments.
Threats	Family environments that do not promote emotional regulation; overload of tasks and lack of curricular time; socioeconomic problems that affect the child's comprehensive well-being.

Source: prepared by the author.

Regarding the instruments applied to the children, the structured observation form showed a predominance of low scores in the indicators of management of basic emotions, calming strategies, and active listening skills, which revealed the need to strengthen these areas of child development. The semi-structured interview applied to the teachers coincided with these findings: consistent perceptions were identified regarding a marked lack of emotional vocabulary, difficulties sustaining conversations, and withdrawal or impulsivity behaviors in

conflict situations in the classroom. The triangulation of both instruments confirmed the coexistence of expressive difficulties and impulse management in the studied group, which justified the design of an integrative playful intervention.

From this diagnosis, the methodological guide "I Play, I Feel, and I Express Myself" was structured, organized into four progressive phases that advance from the individual to the collective and from basic emotional identification toward complex communicative interaction, distributed across 12 playful activities over 11 weeks, with three weekly sessions of 40 minutes (33 sessions in total).

Phase 1, "I Recognize What I Feel" (weeks 1-2), was oriented toward identifying and naming basic emotions through the activities "The Dice of Emotions," "The Thermometer of Emotions," and "The Mirror of Faces," strengthening emotional self-knowledge and non-verbal skills. Phase 2, "I Calm Down and Control Myself" (weeks 3-5), introduced calming strategies through "The Turtle," "Air Balloons," and "The Traffic Light of My Emotions," each accompanied by a moment of verbal expression. Phase 3, "I Express Myself and I Listen to You" (weeks 6-8), focused on verbal skills, active listening, and social interaction through "The Traveling Microphone," "Cooperative Stories," and "The Telephone Game." Phase 4, "Together We Solve It" (weeks 9-11), integrated the competencies worked on in situations of collaboration and conflict resolution through "The Agreement Map," "The Collective Web," and "The Corner of Calm and Dialogue" (Table 2).

Table 2. Matrix of coherence between phases, objectives, activities, and variables of the methodological guide "I Play, I Feel, and I Express Myself"

Phase	Specific objective	Main activities	Variable worked	Achievement indicator
1. I Recognize What I Feel	Identify and name basic emotions	Dice of emotions, thermometer, mirror	Self-regulation: management of emotions and self-knowledge	Names at least 3 basic emotions and associates them with real situations
2. I Calm Down and	Apply calming strategies in tense situations	The turtle, air balloons, emotional traffic light	Self-regulation: calming strategies and self-control	Uses at least one calming strategy

Control Myself				autonomously
3. I Express Myself and I Listen to You	Develop verbal, non-verbal skills, and active listening	Traveling microphone , cooperative stories, telephone, role-playing	Communication: verbal, non-verbal skills, active listening	Participates in conversations respecting turns and using complete sentences
4. Together We Solve It	Apply conflict resolution strategies and collaborative communication	Agreement map, the web, corner of calm and dialogue	Self-regulation: conflict resolution / Communication: social interaction	Proposes peaceful solutions and dialogues with peers in conflicts

Source: prepared by the author.

Each of the 12 activities had a technical sheet specifying the operational objective, the time and materials required, the methodological development in three moments (beginning, process, and closing), a communicative reflection guided by the teacher, and an associated evaluation criterion. Implementation was structured under an active and participatory learning approach, with sessions organized into opening (emotional activation, 5 to 10 minutes), development (central playful activity, 20 to 25 minutes), and closing (verbal reflection on the experience, 5 to 10 minutes); the latter was especially relevant because it constitutes the moment when the child verbalizes what they felt and what they learned, connecting the playful experience with communicative development.

Implementation involved the Early Education teachers as direct executors, the Student Counseling Department as technical support for the cases of greatest difficulty, an institutional coordinator responsible for managing times and resources, and the families, convened through home activity guides and monthly emotional accompaniment workshops. The evaluation of the proposal was designed continuously and formatively, applying the structured observation form again at three moments of the program and complementing the findings with feedback meetings between teachers and the DECE at the close of each phase.

DISCUSSION

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The findings of this study confirm that emotional self-regulation and communication development are interdependent competencies in early childhood, as indicated by the consulted literature. ^(7,9) The coexistence of difficulties in the management of basic emotions and in verbal and active listening skills, evidenced both in the observation form and in the teacher interview, is consistent with Latin American research that reports a close relationship between impulsivity, social withdrawal, and poverty of oral language in children of similar ages. ⁽⁶⁾

The decision to structure the intervention in four progressive phases—from basic emotional recognition to conflict resolution in group interaction—is coherent with socio-emotional development models that indicate that emotional regulation is built from the inside out: first internal recognition, then regulatory action, and finally interaction with the environment. ⁽¹⁷⁾ This sequencing differentiates the proposal from interventions that address communication and emotional regulation as separate domains, and supports previous findings according to which activities that integrate play foster emotional and social learning with significant results in children's communicative skills. ⁽¹⁸⁾

The use of play as the methodological axis is grounded in the socio-constructivist perspective, according to which communicative development occurs through social mediation and not in solitude. ⁽¹⁹⁾ The results of this study reinforce this approach: activities such as "the traveling microphone" or "cooperative stories" not only exercise vocabulary but also demand regulation of impulsivity to respect turns and listen, concretely illustrating how emotion and communication are co-constructed in the classroom, as described by other studies on cooperative games and social skills. ⁽¹³⁾ From the cognitive-behavioral approach, moreover, self-control arises from the interaction between cognitive processes and behaviors shaped by guided practice, which supports the decision to accompany each calming strategy with teacher modeling and systematic practice. ⁽²⁰⁾

Among the limitations of the study is that the diagnosis was based mainly on observation instruments and teacher perception, without a comparison group or a standardized baseline measurement with psychometric tests validated for the Ecuadorian context, which restricts the possibility of establishing causal relationships between the variables. Likewise, the size of the studied group (43 children from a single institution) limits the generalization of the findings to other educational contexts with different socioeconomic or cultural characteristics. The absence, in this phase of the study, of data on the application and impact of the guide—which corresponds to a later stage of implementation and follow-up—also constitutes a limitation that must be considered when interpreting the scope of the proposal.

Despite these limitations, the proposal responds directly to the Ecuadorian curricular mandate to strengthen socio-emotional competencies from Early Education, ⁽⁸⁾ and offers teachers a structured, low-cost, and easily replicable tool, coherent with international recommendations on the importance of play in early child development ⁽²¹⁾ and with the rights of the child to play and comprehensive development. ⁽²²⁾ Future research should be oriented toward evaluating the impact of the effective implementation of the guide through quasi-experimental designs with pre- and post-intervention measurements, as well as exploring its adaptability in populations with specific educational needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The diagnosis carried out at the "Celeste Carlier Fuentes" School of Basic Education evidenced relevant difficulties in the management of basic emotions, calming strategies, and verbal and active listening communicative skills of 5-year-old children, in an institutional context with exploitable strengths such as the support of the Student Counseling Department and the teaching disposition toward pedagogical innovation. From these findings, the methodological guide "I Play, I Feel, and I Express Myself" was designed, structured in four progressive phases and 12 playful activities that intentionally integrate emotional and communicative work, in coherence with the theoretical support on the interdependence of both competencies in early childhood. The guide constitutes a pertinent, viable, and contextualized response to the identified problem, and offers Early Education teachers a structured tool to address emotional self-regulation and communication in an integrated way through play. A later phase of implementation and impact evaluation is recommended to assess its effects on child development.

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