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Journal of Communication Disorders 38 (2005) 143–162

Journal of  
**Communication  
Disorders**

## Social cognition and language in children with specific language impairment (SLI)

Klara Marton\*, Brocha Abramoff, Shari Rosenzweig

*Department of Speech Communication Arts and Sciences, Brooklyn College, City University of New York,  
2900 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11210, USA*

Received 18 February 2004; received in revised form 7 June 2004; accepted 25 June 2004

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### Abstract

This investigation examined the relationship between social pragmatics, social self-esteem, and language in children with specific language impairment (SLI) and in their age-matched peers (7–10 years). The children with SLI indicated significantly poorer social cognitive knowledge than their typically developing peers. They showed low social, but not academic self-esteem. They often used inappropriate negotiation and conflict resolution strategies. Their errors reflect some qualitative differences from those of the typically developing children (e.g., children with SLI use more nonverbal strategies, demonstrate passive/withdrawn behavior, etc.). Our data show that these children's social pragmatic deficit is not causally related to their language impairment; the two problems are co-occurring. Further, the parents and teachers of the children with SLI indicated different views regarding these children's social relations. Although the parents expressed major concerns about their children's social competence, the teachers did not notice this problem.

Learning outcomes: The reader will be able to summarize, critically analyze, and interpret the findings from existing research on social cognition and its relationship with language abilities in children with specific language impairment. Further, the reader will gain an understanding of the importance of applying intervention procedures that facilitate the use of language in different social situations, and the necessity of increasing parent–teacher communication in schools.

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*Keywords:* Specific language impairment; Executive function; Social cognition; Conflict resolution; Negotiation; Self-esteem

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 718 951 5186; fax: +1 718 951 4167.  
E-mail address: [kmarton@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:kmarton@brooklyn.cuny.edu) (K. Marton).

## 1. Introduction

Social cognition is fundamental to our understanding who we are as individuals, allowing us to participate effectively in social settings. Appropriate social skills are a prerequisite in establishing positive interpersonal relationships. Language competency is necessary for the application of social communication skills and for the initiation and maintenance of such relationships. The inability to form these relationships may contribute to lowered self-esteem and various behavioral problems (Fujiki, Brinton, Morgan, & Hart, 1999).

Social cognition is an umbrella term. A number of skills and abilities are important features of social cognition: emotion perception; social problem solving; and self-cognition (Cohen, Menna, Im, & Horodezky, 1998). This complexity might be one reason that so many different views appear in the literature on the relations between social cognition and language development. All agree that there is a strong relationship between social cognitive competence and language competence, however, there are alternative views regarding the causality of this relationship.

Locke (1997) argues that children's socio-cognitive abilities provide a foundation for language development, thus language acquisition is determined by social cognition. According to other authors (e.g., Bishop, 1997; Leslie, 1987), both language and social cognition are underpinned by certain cognitive abilities such as encoding and discriminating information, working memory, and processing capacity. Furthermore, methodological differences also add to the variations seen in empirical data. The tasks that have been used to investigate social cognition differ in their linguistic complexity and in their information processing and memory demands.

Despite these difficulties, both developmental and neuropathological data support a strong relationship between language development and social cognition: children with better linguistic skills evidence higher level of socio-cognitive competence (Jenkins & Astington, 1996); socio-cognitive abilities can be predicted from early language development (Astington & Jenkins, 1995); language deficits in autism are linked with socio-cognitive development (Baron-Cohen, Tager-Flusberg, & Cohen, 1993); the language deficits alone do not account for the range of social difficulties that children with specific language impairment (SLI) encounter (Singer & Bashir, 1999).

### 1.1. *Social competence in children with SLI*

The objective of the current study was to investigate the social cognitive skills of children with SLI through direct assessment and by examining their parents' and teachers' perception of their social skills. We were interested in studying different aspects of social cognition such as social problem solving, negotiation, initiation of interaction, and social self-esteem in various social settings from children's everyday life. Our intention was to compare children's self-reports with the reports of their parents and teachers to see whether they are in agreement.

Children with SLI are at a disadvantage in forming successful peer relationships, and therefore, at risk for social problems and poorer self-esteem (Craig, 1993; Jerome, Fujiki, Brinton, & James, 2002). They exhibit difficulties in initiating social interactions (Craig

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