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Reformulating infant and toddler social competence with peers

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Abstract

Efforts to identify children at risk for social and academic difficulties at an early age have begun to apply conceptualizations of social competence with peers from childhood to infancy and toddlerhood. These attempts have had limited success, in part because social behaviors studied in later childhood such as negative or aggressive acts may not capture relevant dimensions of social competence with peers during the infant and toddler years. The present study conducted an exploratory factor analysis to begin developing a conceptualization of social competence with peers that is appropriate for use with infants and toddlers, and that captures individual differences capable of predicting later social functioning. Results indicate three dimensions of infant and toddler social competence with peers: peer sociability, active peer refusal, and passive peer avoidance. Negative and aggressive behaviors loaded on each of the three factors rather than emerging as a unique dimension of social competence. Each factor demonstrated both convergent and predictive validity, indicating that early identification of social skills remains a reasonable goal for practitioners and researchers alike. Finally, antecedents within children, families, and out-of-home child care environments helped to explain individual variability in each of these three factors of social competence with peers.
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The development of social competence with peers begins as early as the first year of life (Brownell & Brown, 1992; Eckerman, Whatley, & McGehee, 1979; Hay, 1985; Howes, 1988 (1, serial no. 217); Rauh, 1987; Vandell & Wilson, 1987). However, early peer interactions are generally quite rudimentary. They tend to be exploratory in nature, and are often limited to interactions around objects and intense watching or looking at the social partner (Brownell & Brown, 1992; Eckerman et al., 1979; Rauh, 1987; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). In contrast, by the early school years children's patterns of interacting with their peers become fairly stable, and serve as important predictors of later social functioning, academic success, and mental health (Biovin, Vitaro, & Poulin, 2005; Campbell, Lamb, & Hwang, 2000; Coie, Terry, Lenox, Lochman, & Hyman, 1995; Ladd, 1999; Rubin et al., 1998). The contrast in peer interactions between infancy and the early school years has resulted in qualitatively distinct research agendas and conceptualizations of social competence between these age groups.

Despite these conceptual differences, a new line of research is working to bridge the work on social competence during the school years with that from the infant and toddler years. These efforts aim to better understand the development of social difficulties and their origins at an early age, thus building a framework for preventive interventions (Campbell et al., 2000; Campbell, 2002; Howes, 1988; National Institute for Child Health and Human Development Early Child

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Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN], 2001). However, due, in part, to the differences in conceptualizations of social competence between infancy and early childhood, these efforts have experienced limited success (Campbell et al., 2000; Howes, 1988; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN], 2001).

The present study aims to develop a conceptualization of social competence with peers that will facilitate longitudinal studies of peer competence from infancy through preschool. This formulation intends to be appropriate for use with infants and toddlers, and to capture individual differences in social competence that are capable of predicting later social functioning and that are sensitive to antecedent contributions from individual, family, and contextual factors.

1. Previous conceptualizations of social competence with peers

Frameworks for investigating social competence in early childhood differ from those for studying later childhood. While researchers of infant and toddler interactions with peers most often examine normative, age-related behaviors, investigations of older children's social competence tend to focus on individual differences in patterns of behavior, using these differences to predict developmental outcomes. The separation of these two lines of inquiry has resulted in different types of focal behaviors between the two developmental periods. In particular, studies of infants and toddlers tend to focus on the development of the content and the complexity of peer interactions (Bronson, 1981; Brownell & Hazen, 1999; Eckerman et al., 1979; Hay, 1985; Howes, 1980, 1988; Ross & Lollis, 1987; Vandell & Wilson, 1987). In contrast, the study of peer interactions during childhood tends to emphasize individual differences in social competence, such as popularity with peers (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Coie et al., 1995; Rubin et al., 1998), and aggressive, or negative behavior (Biovin et al., 2005; Coie & Dodge, 1998; Rubin et al., 1998). This line of inquiry has established the importance of aggressive behavior for children's social status and their social, emotional, and academic functioning (Burks, Dodge, & Price, 1995; Coie et al., 1995; for a review see McDougall, Hymel, Vaillancourt, & Mercer, 2001).

In the attempt to identify these children early in their development, and to study their development over time, researchers have begun investigating negative and aggressive peer interactions in toddler and preschool children (Campbell et al., 2000; Howes, 1988; NICHD ECCRN, 2001; Vaughn, Vollenweider, Bost, Azria-Evans, & Snider, 2003; for a review see Odom & Ogawa, 1992). Findings depict instability of individual differences in negative and aggressive peer behaviors between the infant and preschool years (Campbell et al., 2000; Howes, 1988). In addition, early measures of negative, aggressive peer interactions fail to predict children's subsequent social competence with peers (Howes, 1988). It is not clear exactly when negative interactions do reach stability, though results from longitudinal investigations suggest that stability begins to occur around age two (NICHD ECCRN, 2001) or three (Campbell et al., 2000).

This instability in aggressive and negative behaviors may result from a shift in the meaning of these behaviors from the infant and toddler period to the preschool and school-aged years. While many infants and toddlers exhibit elevated levels of aggressive or difficult interactive behavior (Biovin et al., 2005; NICHD ECCRN, 2004; Shantz, 1987; Tremblay, 2000; Tremblay & Nagin, 2005), it may be inappropriate to define aggressive behavior as poor social competence during these early years. Rather, aggression during the earliest years represents a normative age-related pattern of development. Longitudinal studies suggest that children's patterns of aggressive behavior tend to increase during the toddler and preschool years and to decline thereafter (NICHD ECCRN, 2004; Tremblay, 2000; Tremblay & Nagin, 2005). From an evolutionary perspective, this period of heightened aggression can be viewed as adaptive, allowing children to exercise their impulses within safe environments. With the help of parents and other adult caregivers, young children learn how to express their aggression, physical play, and negative emotions in an appropriate manner (Cairns & Cairns, 2000; NICHD ECCRN, 2004; Suomi, 2000; Shantz, 1987; Tremblay & Nagin, 2005). Thus, as infants and toddlers learn to control these behaviors, they can begin to develop more adaptive social behaviors. Research suggests that infants and toddlers who are aggressive also tend to be more socially competent than non-aggressive children (Biovin et al., 2005; NICHD ECCRN, 2001; Vaughn et al., 2003).

1.1. Working toward a re-conceptualization of peer competence for infants and toddlers

Given the inconsistency between social behaviors in infancy and early childhood, there is a need for a measure that captures individual differences in social competence with peers that is appropriate for use in the infant and toddler years. As previously discussed, recent attempts to employ assessments of negative or aggressive behaviors during this