

Preschoolers' social competence: Relations to family characteristics, teacher behaviors and classroom climate [☆]

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Abstract

This study investigated family and classroom characteristics associated with parents' and teachers' ratings of 183 preschool children's social competence. Results of multilevel modeling indicated that teachers' negative ratings of the children were predicted by negative teacher behaviors and less optimal classroom climate. Children with higher stress were more likely to demonstrate low social competence when in class with other children with less optimal social competencies. Teachers' positive ratings of the preschooler's social competence were predicted by positive assessments of classroom climate and teacher behaviors. Positive classroom climate appeared to mediate the relationship between teacher behaviors and preschoolers' social competence. Path analyses indicated that higher socioeconomic status directly predicted parent ratings of social competence. Paths between child stress and parent ratings of social competence were significant as were paths between teachers' ratings of preschoolers' competence at school and parent ratings of social competence. These findings have implications for teacher training and parent education programs.

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1. Introduction

Whereas federal policies strongly emphasize the importance of academic skills to school success and achievement (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), there is growing interest in the contribution of children's social competence to school outcomes (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Hart, Olsen, Robinson, & Mandlco, 1997; Luster & McAdoo, 1996; Malecki & Elliot, 2002). Social competence is a broad construct, encompassing many related skills. In a detailed review of social competence research in recent years, Raver and Zigler (1997) note that social competence refers to the child's abilities to have positive relationships with peers, family members and teachers. More specifically, they note that social competence is articulated through key skills such as emotion regulatory skills, social cognition

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skills, and positive communicative behaviors. Emphasis on the role of such traits to school and life success is reflected not only in the scholarly literature (e.g., Blair, 2002; Hart et al., 1997; Luster & McAdoo, 1996; Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002; Mendez, McDermott, & Fantuzzo, 2002) but also in policy briefs and reports for practitioners (e.g., Gershoff, 2003; Huffman, Mehlinger, & Keriva, 2000; Knoll & Patti, 2003).

Accordingly, there has been increased research on how these important social skills are developed. Social competency of children presumably is a product of multiple influences. Both the family and school environments are major contexts within which social development is shaped and expressed (Schmitt, Sacco, Ramey, Ramey, & Chan, 1999). However, two primary gaps are evident in the research literature. First, existing research has primarily explored singular aspects of the family or school on children's social development. Further, much research has focused on either family or educational environments. Second, indicators of classroom environment quality often rely on structural indicators such as class size or teacher education. In the research reported here, we have tried to move beyond generic markers of quality, such as teacher education level (e.g., Burchinal, Cyer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002; Howes, 1997) and teacher-child ratio (Howes, 1997) and to move beyond current measures of climate, primarily as defined by emotional supportiveness (e.g., NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003), to include additional aspects of the climate that may parallel those of the family climate. There is a need for such information on additional emotional tones of the classroom climate with regard to such dimensions as control, maturity demands, and shared leadership.

Current models of social competence must examine multiple family and classroom characteristics, two key environmental contexts for children, in order to better understand its development. With this need in mind, the current study was guided by an ecological theoretical perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) in which development results from the interactions of individuals and their environmental contexts. Although the study of social competence no doubt, encompasses a wide range of potential influences, the current study begins with a subset of variables we believe to be important to the development of social competence.

The main research question posed in the study was: Do characteristics of environmental contexts (family characteristics, teacher behaviors and classroom climate) predict parent and teacher ratings of preschoolers' social competence? We hypothesized that family and child characteristics (higher income and education, intact family status, and low parental, family and child stress), controlling for child age and sex, would predict teacher and parent ratings of social competence. Also, we expected that teacher behaviors illustrating an authoritative approach (high warmth, communication and maturity demands, and high but shared control with children) and classroom climate characterized by elements such as warmth and organization would predict teacher and parent ratings of preschoolers' social competence.

Below we briefly review the literature concerning contexts of children's social development. First, we examine family and child characteristics (income and SES, family structure, child and parent stressors) and then classroom characteristics (teacher behaviors and classroom environments) with regard to children's social development.

1.1. Family income and SES

Family income has been widely studied with regard to children's development. In a comprehensive review of the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) on child outcomes, Bradley and Corwyn (2002) note that children's externalizing, aggressive social behaviors are often more prevalent in lower SES families. Berger, Paxson and Waldfogel (2005) also found that, on average, preschoolers from low income families exhibited more aggressive, withdrawn and anxious behaviors as compared to children from higher income families. On the other hand, Garner and Spears (2000) noted few differences in the way middle and lower income preschoolers regulated their anger with peers. The relationship between SES and very young children's social behavioral outcomes is not as clear as it is for other areas of development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), and poverty typically co-exists with other influences on development. Morris and Gennetian (2003) note that increases in income are related to positive social behavioral outcomes in children and families in greatest financial need, most notably because moving out of poverty brings additional resources and fewer financial stressors to the family context.

1.2. Stress and family structure

In a comprehensive study of characteristics associated with children's antisocial behaviors, Farrington (1992) reported family stress and lack of marital support related to children's poor social development. More recent research

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