The relation of parenting, child temperament, and attachment security in early childhood to social competence at school entry

Kristin M. Rispoli [a,*], Kara E. McGoey [b], Natalie A. Koziol [c], James B. Schreiber [d]

[a] Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families, and Schools, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 162J Whittier Research Center, Lincoln, NE 68583, USA
[b] Duquesne University, 209A Canevin Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, USA
[c] Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families, and Schools, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 303 Mabel Lee Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588, USA
[d] Duquesne University, 321 Fisher Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

A wealth of research demonstrates the importance of early parent–child interactions on children's social functioning. However, less is known about the interrelations between child and parent characteristics and parent–child interactions in early childhood. Moreover, few studies have broadly examined the longitudinal relations between these constructs and social competence. This study is an examination of the relations between parent responsiveness, negativity, and emotional supportiveness, attachment security, and child temperament, and their impact on children's social competence from infancy to kindergarten entry. The sample was derived from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort and included 6850 parent–child dyads. Observational and rating scale data were used. The proposed model was nearly fully supported by path analysis, and it provides insight into the complex relations between early parenting behaviors, child characteristics, and parent–child interactions in the development of social competence.
© 2013 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

A considerable literature has highlighted the importance of children's early interactions and environments in supporting social development. Evidence suggests that efforts to promote social competence should begin as early as infancy, as the skills necessary to navigate interpersonal relationships are influenced by complex interrelations between biology, environment, and caregiving (Andreassen & West, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Siegler, DeLoache, & Eisenberg, 2006). When these mechanisms do not serve to enhance social competence, development is disrupted, and ongoing functional difficulties place children on a negative developmental trajectory (Shirk & Russell, 1996).

Associations between various aspects of the parent–child relationship, individual parent and child behavior, and children's social competence are demonstrated in research studying parent–child interactions during the early stages of development (e.g., Booth-LaForce & Oxford, 2008; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004; Spinrad et al., 2007). However, results of these studies largely demonstrate concurrent relations between these factors at a single developmental time point. To increase understanding of how child and parent behaviors and the parent–child relationship serve to promote or impede social competence over time, the present study examined longitudinal associations between parenting, child temperamental negativity, and attachment security in early childhood, and their relation with children's social competence following the transition to kindergarten.

* Corresponding author at: Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families, and Schools, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 162J Whittier Research Center, Lincoln, NE 68583, USA. Tel.: +1 402 472 6210; fax: +1 402 472 0248.
E-mail addresses: krispoli2@unl.edu (K.M. Rispoli), mcgoeyk@duq.edu (K.E. McGoey), nak371@neb.rr.com (N.A. Koziol), schreiberj@duq.edu (J.B. Schreiber).
ACTION EDITOR: Kathy Moritz Rudasill.

1.1. Social competence

Social competence serves as one of the most salient indicators of a child's socioemotional functioning, and as such, its development in early childhood is paramount. Although several definitions of social competence exist in the literature, an individual's success in interacting with others is often cited as a primary indicator of this construct (Denham, 2006; Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2006). We ascribe to the viewpoints of Rose-Krasnor (1997) and Denham et al. (2003) who broadly operationalize social competence as "effectiveness in interaction" (Rose-Krasnor, 1997, pp. 112). In the present study, our primary outcome of concern was young children's social competence, including the emotional, cognitive, and social abilities (Rose-Krasnor, 1997) that facilitate successful peer interactions as children reach school age and, together, buffer later behavioral, social, and academic difficulties (Cole, Teti, & Zahn-Waxler, 2003; Denham, Blair, Schmidt, & DeMulder, 2002; Elias & Haynes, 2008; Henricsson & Rydell, 2006; Valiente et al., 2011).

The formation of social competence across the early childhood period is critical, as children who display social difficulties in preschool often experience ongoing social, emotional, and behavioral issues in the transition to formal schooling and beyond. For instance, children who demonstrate issues such as impulsivity and defiance in preschool are more disruptive in their play with peers prior to the kindergarten transition (Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005) and are perceived as less popular when they reach school age (Spinrad et al., 2006). Moreover, lower rates of social competence in preschool are predictive of long-term internalizing and externalizing issues (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2010) and academic difficulties (Fantuzzo, Bulotsky, McDermott, Mosca, & Lutz, 2003).

1.1.1. Social competence and academic achievement

The importance of social competence as an outcome of early childhood is underscored in research that supports its role as a vital aspect of school readiness (Raver & Zigler, 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). In preschool, children who interact positively with peers during play are rated higher on early learning behaviors, including motivation, attention, and persistence, and are more positive about learning than children who evidence difficulties with peer play (Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000). Efforts to promote social competence in early elementary school are associated with increases in academic engagement (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2010). In fact, children's initial social competence and attainment of social–emotional skills over the school year are predictive of year-end academic functioning, beyond that predicted by initial academic competence levels (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Alternatively, behavioral difficulties, lack of social skills, and poor academic achievement are associated concurrently and over time in children from first through sixth grade (Henricsson & Rydell, 2006). Meta-analytic work by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) provided evidence of the positive impact of social and emotional programming on academic achievement across all grade levels and geographical locales. Based on findings reported in a select subsample of the studies reviewed, the researchers showed that students participating in social and emotional programming demonstrated an 11-point gain in academic achievement compared to controls, in addition to gains in social and emotional functioning.

1.2. Predictors of social competence

The development of social competence is largely impacted by early parenting behaviors and children's reaction to these behaviors, which reflect both innate characteristics and ecological influences (Belsky, Fish, & Isabella, 1991; Berlin & Cassidy, 2003; Calkins, 2004; Spinrad et al., 2007). Theories related to early parenting, child temperament, and attachment provide a conceptual framework for how various factors within the parent–child dyad influence the development of social competence over time. Despite evidence drawing associations between these constructs, to the best of our knowledge no research has examined their interconnections in the development of social competence. This study aimed to do so using a nationally representative longitudinal dataset.

1.2.1. Early parent responsiveness, child negativity, and attachment

Parent responsiveness, including parental sensitivity to children's cues, response to distress, and support for socioemotional and cognitive development (Sumner & Spietz, 1994; van den Boom, 1994), is associated in infancy with mutually regulatory interactions between parent and child, establishment of trust, and the development of secure attachment (Ainsworth, 1979; Cassidy, 1994; Field, 1994; Kochanska & Aksan, 2004). Considerable research has shown that these parenting behaviors capture the quality of parental response during early parent–child interactions (e.g., Cabrera, Shannon, West, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Kochanska & Aksan, 2004; van den Boom, 1994). Child temperament refers to innate tendencies and behavioral style, and comprises both emotional reactivity and self-regulatory abilities (Rothbart, 1986, 2007) that work together to influence social interactions (Pérez-Edgar & Fox, 2007). Child negativity, expressed either through physical actions or negative emotional expressions (Belsky et al., 1991; Goldsmith, 1996; Spinrad et al., 2007), is considered a primary indication of temperament in the early years (Chess & Thomas, 1989; Rothbart, 2007), and is predictive of later internalizing and externalizing issues, mood disorders, conduct problems, and attention difficulties (Saudino, 2005). The phenotypic presentation of temperamentally negative emotional displays may be particularly influenced by parent responsiveness (Rothbart, 1986; Saudino, 2005; van den Boom, 1994), as responsive caregiving is associated with lower rates of negative, dysregulated child emotion (Kochanska, Aksan, Prisco, & Adams, 2008). Moreover, high levels of parent responsiveness are associated with mutual, complementary parent–child interactions leading to the establishment of secure attachment and decreases in negative infant emotionality (Belsky et al., 1991; Field, 1994; Kochanska &