



## Parent–child predictors of social competence with peers in children with and without autism

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### ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the relations among parent–child joint engagement, dyadic interactive behaviors, and children's subsequent social competence with peers. Participants were 40 children (20 children with autism, and 20 developmentally-matched typical children) between the ages of 2.75 and 6.5 years. Observational coding was conducted to assess children's joint engagement initiations, global interactive behaviors with parents, and parents' responsiveness, behavior regulation, and attention regulation. Children's social competence with peers was measured approximately one year later. Group differences were observed in child-initiated joint engagement, children's interactive behaviors in the parent–child context, and individual aspects of social competence. Child-initiated joint engagement with parents was positively related to social competence with peers overall, and with less exclusion by peers and hyperactive-distractible behaviors with peers, in particular. In addition, parent attention regulation emerged as the most salient predictor of children's behaviors within the parent–child context. Findings are discussed with respect to implications for future research and intervention.

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Recent statistics indicate that 1 in 110 children in the United States have autism or a related disorder (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010) characterized by deficits in social interaction, communication, and restrictive/repetitive behaviors. Social deficits are reflected through a lack of joint attention, social initiations and social–emotional reciprocity (American Psychological Association, 2000), which can interfere with children's early parent–child interactions and later impact peer relations (Jerome, Fujiki, Brinton, & James, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that school-aged children with autism, even those considered high-functioning, tend to have poor peer relationships and few meaningful friendships (Guralnick, Connor, Neville, & Hammond, 2008; Stanton-Chapman, Denning, & Roorbach-Jamison, 2008), which can heavily contribute to poor academic achievement and a negative overall school experience (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006; Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006). With the Reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), which stipulates that children with disabilities are entitled to a maximally normalized learning environment in order to facilitate social contact with their typically-developing peers, the number of children with autism in general education classrooms has increased. Unfortunately, inclusion alone has not resulted in children's academic or social success (Hallenbeck & Kauffman, 1995; Harrower & Dunlap, 2001; Hunt & Goetz, 1997), as children with autism tend to perform below average academically compared to typically developing peers (Eaves & Ho, 1997), and are less accepted by the peer group (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). Given the importance of peer-related social competence for children's

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developmental outcomes in general, there is a clear need to better understand the construct of social competence and various factors that impact social competence in children with autism. Thus, the present study aims to describe discrete dimensions of social competence and examine factors that relate to these dimensions in children with high-functioning autism (HFA). Because skills learned within parent–child interactions can facilitate the transition from child–caregiver to child–peer relationships, and can predict a number of favorable social and academic outcomes for young children (Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Morrison, Rimm-Kauffman, & Pianta, 2003), we also focus on whether children's and parents' dyadic behaviors are related to aspects of children's subsequent social competence with peers.

### 1. Children's social competence with peers

Several decades of research on typically-developing children has concluded that social competence and peer relations are among the strongest predictors of children's adjustment across various developmental domains (Ladd, 2005; Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Andrews, 2009; Parker & Asher, 1987). Successful peer relationships can facilitate skill acquisition, educational goal-attainment, and access to meaningful supports (Kraemer, McIntyre, & Blacker, 2003; Ryndak & Fisher, 2001). In addition to being important to children's social experiences, peer relations, and the social skills necessary to maintain them, have been shown to have a significant association with academic success (Agostin & Bain, 1997).

The literature on typically developing children has identified dimensions of social competence that are conceptualized as either risk or promotive factors in the study of children's social adjustment: aggression, hyperactivity-distractibility, asocial behavior, anxiety-fearfulness, and pro-social behavior. Based on extensive work with typically-developing children, the Child Behavior Scale (CBS; Ladd et al., 2009; Ladd & Profilet, 1996) has captured these dimensions with high reliability across several diverse samples of school-aged children. Aggression is conceptualized as verbal and physical behavior intended to harm other children. Hyperactivity-distractibility captures restlessness, attention, and concentration abilities. Asocial behavior is identified as the extent to which children choose to distance themselves from other children, whereas exclusion by peers captures child isolation as imposed by peers. Anxious-fearful behavior is defined as child distress, worry or fearfulness in social situations. Finally, pro-social behaviors are positive predictors of children's later adjustment, and are conceptualized as children's empathetic, cooperative and self-sacrificing behavior toward peers. The work of Ladd and colleagues using this measure indicates that aggression and hyperactivity-distractibility are powerful predictors of academic underachievement, peer rejection and conduct problems (Dodge et al., 2006; Ladd, 2006), while asocial behaviors and anxiety-fearfulness are associated with later low self-esteem and depression (Ladd et al., 2009). Combined, these behaviors represent factors that either promote or inhibit social functioning, an area that is especially relevant to the study of high-functioning children with autism.

### 2. Development of social competence in the parent–child context

Previously researchers have established that parent–child interactions are vital to the development of the social skills necessary for active engagement among typically-developing children and those who are at risk (Baker, Fenning, Crnic, Baker, & Blacher, 2007; Fenning, Baker, Baker, & Crnic, 2007). A complete understanding of children's social behavior, therefore, requires a consideration of experiences with parents or other primary caregivers. As such, an important aim of the current study will be to investigate how parents' behaviors in the parent–child context relate to children's social skills within the dyad, and how these skills relate to later social competence with peers.

Children with autism display a number of behavioral difficulties within the parent–child context including issues concerning attention, persistence, displays of interest, cooperation, and positive affect (Kim & Mahoney, 2004), all of which are important to their overall social success (Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003). Additionally, children with autism face significant obstacles related to joint engagement behaviors which are responsible for initiating or maintaining shared interest with a social partner. The implications of joint engagement are embedded in its social function and in the critical role it plays in language and social development (Adamson, Bakeman, & Deckner, 2004; Jones, Carr, & Feeley, 2006; Rutherford, Young, Hepburn, & Rogers, 2007; Sillar & Sigman, 2008). In particular, children with autism have early and pronounced deficits with *initiating* joint attention (Mundy, Sigman, Ungerer, & Sherman, 1986; Sigman, Mundy, Sherman, & Ungerer, 1986), which includes the use of eye contact and gestures such as pointing or showing to engage a partner (Sheinkopf, Mundy, Claussen, & Willoughby 2004). Given the theoretical notion that behaviors within the parent–child context may facilitate children's later social functioning, and the emphasis on interactive and engagement behavioral difficulties in research on children with autism, our second goal was to explore whether child-initiated joint engagement and interactive child behaviors within the parent–child dyad predict individual dimensions of children's social competence with peers approximately one year later.

Initiating joint engagement skills have been found to be particularly susceptible to environmental factors such as parental sensitivity, scaffolding, and following the child's lead (Adamson & Bakeman, 1985; Vaughan et al., 2003). Findings indicate that parents can adjust their strategies to promote the social development of their children with developmental delays. Specifically, supportive parent–child interactions in which mothers use appropriate scaffolding techniques relate to children's cooperation and self-control, whereas less sensitive and engaging parent behaviors relate to children being rated as less sociable (Baker et al., 2007; Fenning et al., 2007). These findings are consistent with those from interventions that report that parents' styles of interaction, such as their responsiveness and attention, significantly related to children's

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