

Social Behaviour and Interpersonal Problem-solving Skills of Australian Children

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ABSTRACT One hundred 4 to 6 year old Australian children (55 male and 45 female) were assessed for interpersonal social problem-solving skills. Class teachers rated social behaviour of children within the educational context. These results indicated that children who were assessed by their teachers as successful in peer group entry, popular among classmates, socially outgoing, and being using more positive and less negative strategies for conflict resolution were more likely to suggest greater number of relevant and alternative strategies in hypothetical dilemmas. Also these children were more likely to suggest prosocial and less likely to suggest agonistic strategies for getting access to an object in another child's possession and to initiate friendship in a direct and prosocial manner.

INTRODUCTION

The peer group is one of the significant socialisation agents during childhood years. The peer group provides emotional security, norms for social behaviour, social skills instructions, guidance and company, and teach children to get along with others (Parker and Asher, 1987). The peer group influences children's behaviour in a number of ways: first, to be part of the peer group children need to earn membership; second, in the peer group children get opportunity to interact with age-mates; and third, in the peer group children get chance to compare themselves with age-mates and may improve their behaviour and self-esteem. Social skills play an important role to determine whether a child is accepted or rejected in the peer group. Accepted children tend to be socially competent, whereas, rejected children tend to have difficulties in maintaining positive peer relations. (Hoffman et al., 1994).

Children from an early age face a range of social dilemmas in their interactions with peers. These include obtaining access to an object in another child's possession, initiating interaction with an unfamiliar child, and if they have done something wrong, avoiding an adult's anger. Children use different strategies to solve these

interpersonal problems. For instance, in order to obtain access to a swing children may use a number of strategies including waiting, using physical force, or requesting a turn. For initiating friendship with an unfamiliar child, again children may use a number of alternatives, for example, opening the conversation by asking the child's name, by using prosocial and complimentary statements, and directly or indirectly asking for friendship. The development of social problem-solving skills is a function, not only of cognitive development, but of many other factors as well, including children's socialisation experiences (Rubin and Rose-Krasnor, 1992).

Children who lack the skills to sustain good peer relationships are "at risk" for later developmental problems (Parker and Asher, 1987). It has been found that children who are aggressive, disruptive, inconsiderate of other children, not knowing how to join a peer group and dishonest are rejected by their peers (Coie et al., 1987).

Sociometric techniques are used to assess the children's social status in the peer group. These techniques require children to state their preferences for other children with respect to some specific characteristics. Another source of information concerning children's peer relationships and social skills is the teacher. Like peers, teachers have consistent long-term experiences with children, thus they are privy to infrequently occurring but significant social events that may determine the quality of their students' peer relationships. Teacher assessment also have atleast three distinct advantages over peer assessments. First, teacher assessments are likely to be less reactive and more objective than those of children. Teachers are not members of peer group networks, they may provide valuable, objective information. Second, it may be that teachers are better able than young children to identify children who evidence problems associated with withdrawal, anxiety and children's attempt to join others in play. Children

may not be as able as teachers to identify those who are shy and reserved. Third, the collection of teacher ratings need not require classroom time; consequently, the collection of data may be more efficient and less costly. In the present study children's social behaviour in the educational context was assessed by class teachers.

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between teacher assessed children's social behaviour and interpersonal social problem-solving skills of preschool Australian children.

METHOD

Subjects: One hundred 4 to 6 year old children (45 girls and 55 boys) from Brisbane, Australia participated in the present study. These children were selected from child care centres, kindergartens and preschools. Teachers were also requested to fill up the questionnaire regarding children's behaviour in the educational context. The mean age of target children was 59 months (SD = 5.41 months).

Procedure: The children's social behaviour in child care context was assessed by the class teachers. The children were administered a social-problem-solving test.

Social Behaviour: A checklist containing 14 items rated on a 4-point Likert-type scales was used to assess the children's social behaviour within the child care setting. Teachers were requested to observe the children for a period of one week before filling in the checklist. The five items described the extent to which the child was successful in peer group entry, popularity in the peer group, outgoing social behaviour, involvement in conflicts with peers, and conflict initiation.

The checklist also included nine items that described the positive strategies (For example, Considers interests of others.) and negative strategies (For example, Becomes aggressive.) used by children for conflict resolution. Three positive items were standardized and summed ($\alpha = .78$) to get a composite 'positive strategies' score. The six negative strategies were standardized and summed ($\alpha = .82$) to get a composite 'negative strategies' score. Items in the present study were selected from the literature.

Interpersonal Social Problem-solving Skills: The Social Problem Solving Test-Revised

developed by Rubin (1988) was used to assess children's interpersonal social problem-solving skills in hypothetical situations with their peers. Each child was presented individually with four problem situations in which a story character either wished to gain access to an object in another child's possession (two stories) or to become friendly with an unfamiliar child (two stories). The child being tested was then asked what the story character could do or say in each situation to achieve the desired goal. Two such responses were requested for each situation. Picture cards were used to depict the stories. The age and sex of the children in the stories were the same as that of the child being tested.

The children's responses were scored in terms of their quantitative and qualitative features. The total number of different categories found in all four stories were computed. The children's responses were also scored for the number of relevant categories produced per story and were computed to get total relevancy score. An index of response flexibility was also computed. Flexibility involved a comparison of the categories found in response 2 with those found in response 1 for any given story.

All 100 protocols for the children were scored by two raters (aside from the researcher who scored all the protocols, a lecturer from Early Childhood Education, Queensland University of Technology, Australia rated all the children's protocols). Inter-rater reliability, computed as the percentage of agreements was 100% for quantitative and 98% for qualitative scores of Object Acquisition and Friendship Initiation tasks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed between teacher assessed children's social behaviour and interpersonal social problem-solving scores and strategies. Highly similar patterns were evident when boys and girls were considered separately. Therefore results in tables show correlations for boys and girls combined. Magnitude of correlations ranged from low to moderate.

Correlations Between Teacher Assessed Social Behaviour and Interpersonal Social Problem-Solving Scores and Strategies. As presented in table 1, successful peer group entry, popularity among classmates, outgoing social behaviour,

Table 1: Correlations between teacher assessed behaviour and interpersonal social problem-solving scores

<i>Teacher Assessed Behaviours with Peers</i>	<i>Interpersonal Social Problem-Solving Scores</i>		
	<i>Total number of strategies</i>	<i>Total relevancy score</i>	<i>Total flexibility score</i>
Successful peer group entry	.30**	.35**	.29*
Popularity among class-mates	.51**	.42**	.40**
Outgoing social behaviour	.47**	.35**	.39**
Positive conflict resolution strategies	.32**	.25**	.27**
Negative conflict resolution strategies	-.22***	-.28**	-.26**

Note : n = 100; Significant at *p<.05, **p < .01.

and positive conflict resolution strategies were significantly and positively correlated with total number of strategies suggested, total relevancy and total flexibility scores. Whereas negative conflict resolution strategies were significantly negatively correlated with these scores.

These results indicate that children who were being assessed by their teachers as successful in peer group entry, popular among classmates, socially outgoing, using more positive and less negative strategies for conflict resolution were more likely to suggest greater number of relevant and alternative strategies for obtaining an object in another child's possession and to initiate friendship with an unfamiliar child.

For object acquisition tasks, as depicted in table 2, significant and positive correlations existed between prosocial strategies and successful peer group entry, popularity among classmates, outgoing social behaviour, and positive conflict resolution strategies. Whereas significant and negative correlations existed for agonistic strategies. Teacher assessed negative conflict resolution strategies were negatively correlated with prosocial strategies and positively with agonistic strategies of object

acquisition.

Table further reveals that direct and prosocial strategies of friendship initiation were significantly and positively correlated with teacher assessed successful peer group entry, popularity among classmates, and outgoing social behaviour. Prosocial strategies were correlated positively with teacher assessed positive conflict resolution strategies and negatively with negative conflict resolution strategies.

From these findings it can be interpreted that children who were assessed by teachers as successful in peer group entry, popular among classmates, socially outgoing; and being using more positive and less negative conflict resolution strategies were more likely to suggest prosocial and less likely to suggest agonistic strategies to get access to an object in another child's possession. Also these children were more likely to use direct and prosocial strategies to initiate friendship with an unfamiliar child.

Results of the present study get support from previous literature. In relation to interpersonal problem solving, Walters and Peters (1980) found that children who were rated as aggressive by

Table 2: Correlations between teacher assessed behaviour and interpersonal social problem-solving strategies

<i>Teacher Assessed Behaviours</i>	<i>Interpersonal Social Problem-Solving Strategies</i>			
	<i>Prosocial (OA)</i>	<i>Agonistic (OA)</i>	<i>Direct (FI)</i>	<i>Prosocial (FI)</i>
Successful peer group entry	.36**	-.42**	.30**	.36**
Popularity among class-mates	.45**	-.38**	.32**	.35**
Outgoing social behaviour	.37**	-.25**	.28**	.29**
Positive conflict resolution strategies	.43**	-.34**	ns	.26**
Negative conflict resolution strategies	-.33**	.35**	ns	-.28**

Note: n = 100; Significant at *p<.05, **p < .01; OA= Object Acquisition, FI = Friendship Initiation, ns = Non Significant.

their teachers, the quality of their solutions deviated from the norm in different ways across the different types of dilemmas. Across all problems, children suggested aggressive solutions as a first response. Berndt (1983) also reported that children who are cooperative and friendly in their interactions become popular and are liked by their peers. Whereas children who are aggressive and disruptive in their peer interactions are disliked by their peers. In a study with kindergarten children (Asher and Renshaw, 1981) found that popular children's strategies were rated by adult judges as more friendly and more effective than unpopular children's strategies.

It can be concluded from this study that teacher assessed social behaviour of children is associated with their interpersonal social problem-solving skills and vice versa. Further this study supports the view that teachers can provide good source of information concerning children's peer relationships and social skills.

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