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Social Competence : An Exploration of Children's Experiences Within the Home Environment

Mandie B. Shean
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**Social Competence: An Exploration of Children's Experiences within the Home
Environment**

Mandie B. Shean

**A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of
Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Community Studies, Education
and Social Sciences, Edith Cowan University.**

October 2004

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**The Acquisition of Social Competence: A Review of Factors Influencing Children's
Level of Social Competence**

Mandie B. Shean

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Abstract

The acquisition of social competence is an important developmental task for children. This review examines how child effects and environmental effects contribute to children's achievement of social competence. Environmental factors are addressed through Bronfenbrenner's (1999) ecological systems model of the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem. The microsystem includes the home environment with parent-parent, parent-child and sibling relationships. The mesosystem includes the school environment with peer and teacher relationships. Finally, the exosystem incorporates indirect environments such as parent work, economic status and the media. Issues of reciprocal effects are addressed and the suggestion is made that social competence is the result of a pattern of experiences rather than one or two major causes. It is recommended that future research focus on children's experiences that have lasting effects.

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Submitted: August 16th, 2004

The Acquisition of Social Competence: A Review of Factors Influencing Children's Level of Social Competence

Introduction

Imagine the scene. There are several families within a busy shopping centre. In one family, the child is crying and demanding attention from the mother. In another, the child is laughing and regaling stories from the day. Each child is exhibiting a different level of social competence within that environment. A casual observer may attribute the behaviour of the crying child to poor parenting or child temperament and the behaviour of the second child to good parenting or child temperament. How did each child develop their level of social competence?

One definition of social competence is “the full range of skills, abilities, and cognitive processes that are involved in effective social interaction” (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2000, p.1555). Responses of an individual with high social competence include assertion, co-operation, empathy, self-control and responsibility (Elliot & Gresham, 1993). To demonstrate social competence children require the cognitive skills to: encode and interpret cues, clarify goals, access or construct responses, select responses and ability to enact the behaviour (Crick & Dodge, 1994). The acquisition of social competence is a significant developmental task for children as high social competence has been linked to academic achievement (Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neill, 2001), psychological wellbeing (Katz & Woodin, 2002) and adjustment in adulthood (Sanson & Smart, 2001).

In 2002, the Early Developmental Index (EDI: Hart, Brinkman, & Blackmore, 2003) was implemented in most public and private schools within the north metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia. Through teacher survey of pre-primary children, data was generated on five developmental domains; general

knowledge, physical health and well-being, communication skills, language and cognitive development, and emotional maturity. Data was collected from individual schools and profiles were developed for each postal code. In some postal codes, over 25% of 5 year-olds were identified as vulnerable (scoring in the bottom 10%) in social competence. It is evident that not all children are acquiring the necessary skills to achieve satisfactory levels of social competence and the cause of variation in children's social competence is an issue that requires further investigation.

Variability in children's social competence is often attributed to parenting practices (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Katz & Woodin, 2002). Parents are identified as the exclusive provider of children's social competence and are held accountable for their children's failure in the social world. This view is reflected in current legislation being introduced into Western Australia state parliament later this year. The legislation dictates that parents will be held responsible for children's anti-social behaviour and forced to attend parenting classes if their children are involved in misconduct ("Gallop Eyes Parenting Contract" 2004). This punishment insinuates that if parents had parented 'properly', the child would not be exhibiting deviant behaviour. In view of this thinking, the amount of influence the environment has over children's social competence needs to be considered. Is social competence an innate ability within children that is fixed at birth, or it is an acquired skill learned through experiences within the environment?

Research outcomes suggest the answer lies within the interaction between genetic and environmental factors. Studies of twins that shared the same environment reveal differences in social competence, indicating that genetics do not account for all of children's social competence (Scourfield, Bethan, Neilson, & McGuffin, 2004). Furthermore, research with siblings reveals different levels of competence between

brothers and sisters, refuting the premise that a shared environment results in similar levels of competence (Eaton, Chipperfield, & Singbeil, 1989). These studies suggest that children's social competence is most likely to be a product of the unique characteristics of the child and the environment in which they live.

This review aims to identify how environmental factors and child factors contribute to a child's level of social competence. It also aims to distinguish how experiences of children low in social competence vary from those high in social competence. The focus is limited to regular functioning children prior to adolescence; as the developmental issues of adolescents and children with disorders are beyond the scope of this review. The first factor addressed in this review is the effect of the child's characteristics on social competence. The second factor addressed is the effects of the environment, such as the home and school, on a child's social competence. Finally, factors that affect children's social competence through indirect influence will be discussed.

The Child

Children are born with certain abilities. Some children are good at running while others may be better at mathematics. Children bring particular abilities to social interactions that may enable or hinder their social competence. Thus, child effects in social competence need to be understood prior to looking at the effects of their experiences within the environment. Temperament is one factor that differentiates children at a young age. Temperament is an innate child characteristic that indicates how a child acts, rather than what the child does (Sanson & Smart, 2001). For example, some children are cautious when meeting new people and other children are excited. Variance in child temperament can account for variation in social competence outcomes.

Sanson and Smart (2001) studied the effect of child temperament on social competence in a longitudinal project with over 1800 Australian children. They assessed how easy the parent found the child (parent-child fit) and child temperament through measures of reactivity, emotion regulation and attention regulation. Findings indicated that children with an easy temperament and good parent-child fit, followed by children with a difficult temperament and good parent-child fit had the best outcomes. Children with a difficult temperament and a poor parent-child fit had the lowest outcomes in social competence (Sanson & Smart, 2001). These results indicated that the environment and the child influence social competence. Furthermore, it appears that a good parent-child fit can compensate for a difficult child temperament.

Other innate abilities such as intelligence or verbal skills may also influence a child's social competence. Mostow, Izard, Fine, and Trentacosta (2002) studied the effect of verbal ability on children's social competence, hypothesising that children high in verbal ability would also be high in social competence. Children's verbal ability, emotional skills, sociometric status and teacher rating on the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS: Gresham & Elliot, 1990) were collected twice over the school year for 201-second grade children. They found verbal ability only predicted social competence if children understood emotions (Mostow et al., 2002). These findings indicate that children's innate abilities do not automatically confer social competence. While verbal ability is beneficial in developing social skills, children also need to have the knowledge, particularly of emotions, to be successful in social situations. Consequently, if this knowledge is not innate it must be gained through various experiences in the environment.

The Environment

Children experience multiple environments. They grow up in a family, attend a school, some go to church, and some are involved in sport or music associations. Bronfenbrenner (1999) identifies the different environments as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The microsystem is people within the child's immediate environment; the mesosystem is connections between microsystems; the exosystem is social settings that indirectly influence the child, and the macrosystem is the surrounding culture. These environments do not operate in isolation but interact and influence one another (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). That is, experiences at school can influence experiences at home and experiences at home can influence experiences at school. Therefore, the assumption cannot be made that one environment is exclusively responsible for a child's social competence.

Environments need to be viewed concurrently to find the effect of one on the other.

Furthermore, it is not the environment that shapes the child's social competence but the collection of experiences the child has within the environments. A classroom is just a building; the significant factor is whether a child experiences rejection, acceptance or conflict within that environment. Within each environment, children gather new experiences of social interactions and those experiences all contribute to the development of a child's self-schema of social interactions (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Self-schemas are "cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience that organise and guide the processing of self-related information contained in the individual's social experiences" (Markus, 1977, p.64). The self-schemas then become frameworks for future social interactions directing children's judgments, interpretation and responses in social situations (Markus, 1977). For example, Rudolph, Hammen, and Burge (1995) found that children with

negative schemas had a more negative impression of their family and expected more aversive consequences in the mother-child interactions than children with positive schemas. Thus, the acquisition of self-schemas of social interaction evolve through experiences within various environments.

Microsystem

Parent-parent relationship

The first relationship within the microsystem that can affect a child's social competence is the parent-parent relationship. Even though children are not directly involved in the parent-parent relationship, they still have an experience of the relationship and this relationship provides them with a model of social interactions (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). Unfortunately, not all marriages provide excellent models or experiences for children. With 51.2% of divorces in 2001 involving children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001), it could be assumed that some environments are less than conducive for children to learn appropriate social skills. Research indicates children from divorced families perform lower academically and socially, and have lower scores in well-being and adjustment compared to children from intact marriages (Amato, 2001).

However, divorce is only a label for parents that no longer live together. Features of some divorced couples, such as economic strain and conflict, may also be evident in families that have not divorced. Conflict is often presumed to be exclusive to divorced couples but this is an inaccurate assumption. Conflict is evident in all relationships to differing degrees; it is the level of conflict rather than its existence that gives rise to negative effects in children. For example, Jaycox and Repetti (1993) found that a 'general climate of conflict', regardless of the level of anger, was related

to child maladjustment and Lindsey and Mize (2001) found that parental agreement related to higher social competence outcomes.

Katz and Woodin (2002) studied conflict in marriage by assessing how regulated the listening and speaking skills were during a discussion of a topic of conflict. Regulation was coded through the ratio of positive to negative behaviours (intensity, frequency and control) during speaking and listening. They identified three conflict styles: conflict engaging (regulated listening and speaking), conflict avoiding (regulated speaking and unregulated listening), and hostile detached (unregulated listening and speaking). Measures of parent reports of child adjustment, marital quality and parental psychopathology were collected for 130 families with young children.

Hostile detachment was the most detrimental form of parental conflict for children and was most strongly associated with family maladjustment. Conflict engaging or conflict avoiding couples had marriages of equal stability (Katz & Woodin, 2002), indicating it was the withdrawal in conjunction with the hostility that was harmful for child outcomes. This study suggests that well-managed interparental conflict can be beneficial for the development of children's competence. Appropriate conflict management can provide a schema for children of how to work out their own conflicts successfully. Alternatively, couples that are hostile and then withdraw during conflict provide an ineffective model for children to refer to when they experience conflict.

Therefore, if parents provide a model for children's social skills, do children from one-parent families lack the experiences that children from two-parent families have? Kesner and McHenry (2001) assessed pre-school children in a sample of two-parent families and never married mothers. Children were rated on conflict resolution

and teacher ratings of social competence on the SSRS (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Regardless of socio-economic status, there were no significant differences between one and two parent families within children's social skills and conflict management (Kesner & McHenry, 2001). These findings suggest that while the parental relationship may provide a model for children's social competence, this model is not essential for children to achieve good outcomes. An important point to note in this study is that the single mothers were never married. Taken with the findings of Katz and Woodin (2002), it is possible that the one-parent families had never experienced the conflict that divorcing families experience, suggesting that the conflict may be the key factor in accounting for lower outcomes in social competence, rather than the number of parents present in the home.

Therefore, the one-parent/two-parent dichotomy needs to be investigated further and samples of divorced and never married parents should be compared to ascertain differences in child outcomes between groups. Exposure to experiences of conflict, aggression and withdrawal appears to form a more prevalent indicator of low social competence than the status of the parent-parent relationship. Future research needs to assess the experience of the child within the family home to ascertain what is happening within each environment.

Parent-child relationship

The second relationship in the microsystem is the parent-child relationship. This relationship is a significant relationship in children's lives, providing them with experiences in social interactions from birth that are added to children's self-schema of social interactions. Additionally, parents can form a positive or negative model for children of effective or ineffective communication (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).

Parenting style is one aspect of the parent-child relationship that children

experience. Baumrind (1993) classifies parenting styles as authoritarian, authoritative or permissive. Authoritarian is demanding and obedience orientated, permissive is lenient without many requirements for children and authoritative is supportive with clear boundaries and expectations. Hart, Ladd, and Burleson (1990) studied 144 families and their young children to investigate the effect of parenting style on children's social competence. Children's social competence was assessed through outcome expectation interviews and sociometric data, and mothers' discipline styles were coded as power-assertive or inductive consequential through interviews.

Results indicated that mothers who were more power-assertive had children that were less preferred by their peers. These children also expected to get their own way when using unfriendly assertive strategies (Hart et al., 1990). These findings suggest that maternal discipline can act as a model for children to use in other social interactions. Children with controlling mothers may expect success when using forceful strategies because their experience is that forceful strategies are successful. Alternatively, it is also possible that mothers who use forceful strategies do so because their children are more difficult to manage. Subsequently, unless discipline is studied in an experimental model, the directions of the effects will remain unclear.

The family is the first context in which children have the opportunity to learn social skills (Boyum & Parke, 1995). Parke and colleagues have investigated the effect of parent communication, family expressiveness and children's social competence. They suggest that the method and style of communication parents use may affect the social competence of children (McDowell, Parke, & Wang, 2003).

In one study, Boyum and Parke (1995) coded a naturalistic family setting to assess the effect of parents' positive expression on children's social competence. Measures of affective expression (e.g., humour, anger, and excitement) were

gathered during a family mealtime and parents completed a 'Dinner Questionnaire' after the meal to indicate how representative the video was of regular family meals. A family expressiveness questionnaire and teacher gathered sociometric data of children's social competence was also collected. Results indicated a positive association between high child sociometric ratings, prosocial behaviour and positive parent expressiveness (Boyum & Parke, 1995). These findings suggest that the more frequently parents express positive affect, the greater a child's social competence. However, it is possible that children high in social competence evoked parents' positive expression, rather than parents' positive expression producing high social competence. This is reflected in a more recent study by Isley, O'Neill, Clatfelter, and Parke (1999) with children's positive affect moderating the relationship between parents' affect and children's social competence.

McDowell, Parke, and Wang (2003) also investigated the effect of parent advice on children's social competence. Measures of loneliness, depression and sociometric status were gathered for 46 third grade children, and parent advice was coded by the number of solutions parents offered to children, the quality of the advice and the interaction style. McDowell et al. (2003) found the best predictor of a child's social competence at time one and time two one year later was parent interaction style. That is, parents that exhibited more warmth during advice giving, regardless of the content of the advice, had children that were more competent socially. Furthermore, parents that gave more advice had less socially competent children.

However, the direction of this relationship cannot be assumed. Parents may have given children more advice or been more controlling if their children were low in social competence, rather than excessive and controlling advice giving being the

cause of low social competence. Additionally, future research should assess a range of ages to measure parents' advice giving at different development stages. The eight year-olds in this study may have been at an age where a lot of advice was not warranted unless children were having difficulty in social interactions. Younger children may require greater instruction, and therefore different parenting styles may be more beneficial at different ages.

Parke and colleagues also assessed the influence of parent-child play on children's social competence (MacDonald & Parke, 1984). They coded mothers and fathers playing with their 3-5 year old children on four scales: physical play, directiveness, parental engagement and number of verbal interchanges. Teachers ranked children's social popularity and observations of children were coded on seven scales (e.g., temperament, negative affect displayed and agreement). Popularity of sons was predicted by mothers' verbal engagement and directiveness during play, and fathers' physical play and engagement. Popularity of girls was only predicted by fathers' physical play (MacDonald & Parke, 1984). This study also assumes that it is the parent influencing the child's social outcomes when it is possible that negative or positive child characteristics are evoking the behaviour.

Eisenberg and Fabes have also completed significant studies in the relationship between parenting and children's social competence (e.g., Fabes et al., 1994; Fabes, Eisenberg, & Miller, 1990). They suggest that the way parents respond to their children provides them with an experience of the rules of social interaction. In one study, Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, and Martin (2001) investigated the frequency and intensity of children's emotion expression and its relationship to parental responses. Over a period of five months, brief daily observations of negative emotionality in children aged between four and five years old were gathered.

Teachers assessed children's social competence and parents completed a measure of how they responded to their child's negative emotions. Responses were coded as punitive (parents were controlling, reducing need to deal with child's negative emotions), minimising (parents reduced importance of child's concern or situation) or distressed (parents became negatively aroused through children's expression of negative affect). 'Harsh' parenting included punitive or minimising responses.

Fabes et al. (2001) found that parents' use of harsh responses was positively associated with the intensity and reactivity of children's negative emotions, and children's intense expression of negative emotions was related to lower social competence. These findings have two possible explanations. They suggest that children's negative emotions need to be addressed by parents, rather than minimised or controlled, so that children have the opportunity to learn how to cope with and express negative feelings. Children that are not permitted to experience their negative emotions may be missing opportunities to add to their self-schema on processing negative emotions and this lack of knowledge appears to be translating into poorer relationships with peers. The second explanation is that children with poorer social skills evoke harsher parenting from parents. That is, parents need to make stronger responses to cope with these children.

An interesting finding by Fabes et al. (2001) was that when harsh parenting was combined with distress, children expressed negative emotions less frequently but with greater intensity. This finding indicates that children may try to minimise negative affect in the face of a distressed parent but release the expression eventually. These children are not acquiring the necessary experiences with their parents to understand how to appropriately feel and express negative emotions. This leads to poorer outcomes in social competence.

In a similar study, Eisenberg, Fabes, and Murphy (1996) studied how parents cope with children's emotions and the effect on children's social competence. A broad range of social competence measures were collected through parent, teacher and laboratory assessment for 148 third to fifth graders. Parental coping with children's negative emotions was observed and coded as distressed, minimising, encouraging, emotion-focused or problem-focused. The results indicate that when parents used minimising or punitive responses, children used more avoidant coping, were less popular, less socially skilled and used less constructive methods of coping. Alternately, mothers' use of problem-focused coping was associated with children's popularity and positive social functioning (Eisenberg et al., 1996). Therefore providing children with constructive methods of coping with emotions appears to enhance their social competence.

Understanding how emotions are expressed and regulated is an important element of social competence. Display rules govern how we regulate and express our emotions and provide a schema of how to respond in socially acceptable ways (Jones, Abby, & Cumberland, 1998). For example, if somebody looked atypical, the socially correct response would be to mask your true feelings. If children do not understand the display rules or the goals associated with them, it may lead to difficulties in social interactions. Jones et al. (1988) investigated the relationship of children's emotion display rules with the family system. Children were interviewed to ascertain display rule knowledge, expression regulation and goals of display rules (e.g., prosocial, norm-maintenance, or self-protection) and mothers completed a questionnaire to determine expression in the home environment.

Children from family environments that were predominantly negative formulated more self-protective goals. Children who focused less on social rules and

other people's needs generated more aggressive and emotionally intense responses (Jones et al., 1988). Thus, negative family environments may influence children to set more self-protective goals in other environments. Furthermore, if children have inappropriate social goals, it is more likely they will have more frequent negative experiences during interactions. Subsequently, the goals of social interaction appear to be as important as the skills children bring to the interaction.

Many of the parent-child studies are correlational and the direction of the relationship cannot be determined. Studies also utilise school ratings of social competence, assuming that children's social competence is the same from one context to another. Cartledge, Adedapo, and Johnson (1998) found significant differences between teacher and parent ratings of children's social competence on the SSRS (Gresham & Elliot, 1990), with parents and teachers consistently rating children differently in social competence. This finding highlights two issues. Firstly, social competence may be situation specific, and children's style of interaction may be dependent on the context. Secondly, behaviours that are seen as problematic in one cultural context (e.g., school) may be beneficial in another (e.g., a dangerous neighbourhood). Thus, parents may encourage behaviours that schools identify as problematic. Therefore, measures of social competence need to be gathered from multiple contexts to ascertain children's competence across those environments.

Sibling relationship

The third relationship in the microsystem that children experience is the sibling relationship. Sibling interactions are opportunities for children to learn the basic social skills to be socially competent with other children and adults (Lockwood, Kitzmann, & Cohen, 2001). Lockwood et al. (2001) proposed that sibling interactions produce a carry-over effect or a compensatory mechanism. The

carry-over effect assumes that the interactions occurring in the sibling relationship will continue into the child's other relationships. Whereas the compensatory model assumes that if children are having negative interactions with their siblings they will work harder to ensure other relationships are positive.

Lockwood et al. (2001) assessed both theories with 53 third to sixth grade students. They collected measures of self-reported sibling conflict and warmth, school sociometric status and sibling relationship questionnaires. Overall, their findings supported the carry-over model with sibling warmth predicting positive peer relations and social competence, and sibling conflict predicting victimisation, rejection by peers, lower social status and withdrawal.

These findings are not particularly enlightening as the data is correlational and there is no indication of the direction of the relationship. However, one finding from Lockwood et al. (2001) worth noting is the difference between children in high and low conflict sibling relationships. While both sets of children were less successful socially, children in high conflict relationships were more aggressive and children in low conflict relationships were more withdrawn and victimised. This suggests that different forms of sibling conflict carry over into other relationships in different ways.

Stormshak et al. (1996) found similar associations between sibling relationships and social competence with peers. They assessed behaviourally disruptive 6-8 year old boys through maternal and child interviews, sociometric status, teacher report of child behaviour and a social and emotional control scale. Half of the boys were in conflictual sibling relationships (more conflict than warmth) and the other half were either supportive (more warmth than conflict) or involved (equal warmth and conflict) relationships. Sibling conflict predicted social

difficulties with peers and behavioural problems. Sibling support predicted emotional control and social competence (Stormshak et al., 1996). These findings are significant because one would expect that behaviourally disruptive boys would experience negative social outcomes at home and at school. However, it appears that the experience of supportive sibling relationships may have a buffering effect on children's social competence.

Mesosystem

Children's experiences extend beyond the immediate relationships of the nuclear family into the mesosystem. The mesosystem includes the school and classroom environment and relationships with peers and teachers. Each of these environments and relationships can exert a different influence on children's social competence (Wentzel, 1998).

School Environment

Children spend a large portion of their day in the school environment. Barth, Dunlap, Dane, Lochman, and Wells (2004) studied the relationship between the classroom environment and children's behaviour in a longitudinal study over two years. A classroom profile was created through individual student data on aggression, peer relations and academic focus. Barth et al. (2004) found that children with poorer behavioural outcomes came from poorer classroom environments, indicating that the classroom environment is an important factor in children's social competence at school.

They also found that children's social competence changed from one year to the next and when children with negative behaviours were placed in a poorer classroom environment their behaviour deteriorated (Barth et al., 2004). This

suggests that children's social competence is specific to different contexts and that children are able to adapt their behaviour to meet the demands of each context.

In a Canadian study, Hoglund and Leadbeater (2004) studied the effect of the family, school and classroom characteristics on children's social competence. Teachers reported social competence, emotional problems, and behavioral problems for 432 first grade children at the beginning and end of grade one. Measures of classroom prosocial behaviour, school disadvantage, household moves and mothers' education were also collected. Hoglund and Leadbeater found that prosocial classrooms predicted increases in children's social competence and school disadvantage predicted increases in behaviour problems and a decrease in social competence. Therefore, the school and classroom environment appear to have a significant effect on the development of children's social competence.

Teachers

Teachers are an influential group within the mesosystem as they establish the environment that children experience. What teachers communicate to children in the class can affect the children's perceptions of their peers and affect children's social competence (White, Sherman, & Jones, 1996). Wentzel (2002) found that students had better academic and social goals when they perceived teachers to be more caring and research by Chang (2003) indicates about 10-30% of variance in children's classroom behaviour can be explained by teacher behaviour. The effect teachers have on children's social competence can be direct through explicit teaching, or indirect effect through the behaviour they model.

Farmer-Dougan, Viechtbauer, and French (1999) assessed the influence of explicit effects through a social skills intervention. Children's social competence was measured through the teacher version of the SSRS (Gresham & Elliot, 1990) in two

Head Start schools within the United States. Both teachers received training for the social skills program and a similar amount of time with the consultant; however only one teacher received modelling of the program and ongoing consultation. Children in the classroom where the teacher received modelling of the program and ongoing training made significant gains in social skills compared to the teacher that only received the training (Farmer-Dougan et al., 1999). This finding is reflected in the study by Thomson-Rountree and Musun-Baskett (1981) where teachers that were more skilled in implementing social development programs achieved more significant gains than unskilled teachers.

These results indicate that teachers can have a significant effect on children's social competence if they are intentional and receive appropriate training. It is naïve to presume that all teachers have the skills to impart to children or that all behaviours they model are appropriate. What is clear is that teachers have a significant influence on the social competence of children.

Peers

Another influential relationship in the mesosystem is a child's peers. The bulk of research on peer group has focused on the negative effects of peer influence (e.g., deviance, aggression); however, it is possible that if children can be influenced in a negative direction they can also be influenced in a positive direction. Hektner, August, and Realmuto (2003) investigated the transmission of negative and positive behaviours with second graders during a summer camp. Aggressive and nonaggressive children were paired and completed most camp tasks together. The pairs were observed and coded for aggression while they played a game against other pairs of children.

Hektner et al. (2003) found the behaviour change depended on the existing

friendship between the pair. When the children were friends, the aggressive child became less aggressive and the nonaggressive child remained stable. If the children were not friends, the nonaggressive child became more aggressive and the aggressive child became less aggressive. This indicates that the quality of the friendship may mediate the level of influence children have upon one another. Hektner et al. suggests that children try to assimilate behaviour when they are with a nonfriend so that the other child accepts them. However, this finding is not evident in other literature (e.g., Walker, Hennig, & Krettenauer, 2000). Consequently, the influence of peers on social competence may be more complex than assuming that children have equal influence, and requires further research with prosocial behaviours.

Exosystem

Exosystems are social environments that children experience indirectly through their effect on parents or siblings (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). For example, parents that are stressed at work may bring that stress home and exhibit more authoritarian parenting, which then affects the well-being of the child (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000).

Dual-Earner Families

One particular family form that may experience greater stress is the dual-earner family. Children require a certain amount of resources (e.g., time, attention) to develop successfully, and investment in work may reduce the resources allocated to children (Greenberger & Goldberg, 1989). Much of the dual-earner research indicates no negative child outcomes through parent work; however this research is hampered by unrepresentative samples of volunteers and self-report data, which is vulnerable to bias. Furthermore, not all research tests for mediating influences. For example,

Crouter, Bumpus, Maguire, and McHale (1999) found parents' work pressure had no direct affect on children's well-being. However, work pressure affected parents' psychological well-being that predicted parent-child conflict, which predicted child well-being.

One coping mechanism that has been observed in dual-earner families is withdrawal. In a study by Repetti (1989), husbands withdrew from their families after a heavy day of work. Similar behaviours have been observed in women and children with both mothers and children withdrawing after the mothers had a heavy workload day (Repetti & Wood, 1997). Repetti suggests that withdrawal may be a protective function to reduce aggression and frustration within the family unit. However, the effect of family members withdrawing from each other is a decrease in social interaction. Subsequently, children's experiences of social interaction with their parents and opportunities to develop social competence are reduced. This effect requires further examination to determine the long term affects of dual-earner parents on children's social competence.

Poverty

At the opposite end of the scale, low socio-economic status is also an environmental influence that can affect children's social competence indirectly. Although low-income has demonstrated a correlation with low social competence (e.g., Adams, Hillman, & Gaydos, 1994) it would be of greater benefit to look beyond the financial state of the family to find the experiences of children in poverty that contribute to poorer social outcomes. For example, Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, and McLoyd (2002) found parents' psychological well-being was the key factor in predicting child outcomes in social competence. They assessed 319 low-income families with children aged 5-12 on parental psychological distress, level of

economic well-being/hardship (financial worry, efficacy and depression) and discipline. Children were assessed on positive behaviour, conduct problems and the teacher form of the SSRS (Gresham & Elliot, 1990).

Mistry et al. (2002) found economic hardship had an indirect effect on children's social competence and general well-being. Poverty had a negative effect on parents' psychological well-being and related to poorer parenting. This was a cross-sectional study so it does not elucidate long-term effects of poverty but it does demonstrate the indirect way that poverty can affect children's social competence through parents' psychological well-being.

Media

Another indirect influence on children's social development is the media. American estimates suggest children are exposed to media, such as television, movies, music and computers, for up to six hours per day (Chatfield, 2002). The media can portray models that influence children's social interactions (Robinson, Wilde, Navracruz, Haydel, & Varady, 2001). Özmert, Toyran, and Yurdakök (2002) reduced children's exposure to media to assess the effect it had on their behaviour. Children in the intervention group completed a six-month program to reduce their use of television, video games and videotapes. A significant decrease in children's verbal and physical aggression with reduced media use was evident. Therefore the media does affect children's behaviour, however the extent and the level of influence requires further research.

Conclusion

The aim of this review was to identify how environmental factors and child factors contribute to a child's level of social competence. Furthermore, the question

was posed in the initial scenario as to how each child achieved their level of competence. From the reviewed literature, the competence of the children could be explained by several factors. The demanding child could have a difficult temperament or experience authoritarian parenting, conflictual sibling relationships, unsupportive peers, or a negative school environment. Negative models in the media, parents with stressful jobs or financial difficulties in the family may also have contributed his level of competence. Alternatively, the shopping centre may be a problematic environment where he exhibits low social competence, or he may just be having a bad day.

Conversely, the child who is laughing may have an easy temperament or experience authoritative parents, supportive sibling and peer relationships, and a positive school environment. Positive models in the media and stress-free parents may also contribute to his level of social competence. However, while it is likely that some of the above factors contribute to high and low social competence, the direction and proportion of the influence remains unclear, as the data is predominantly correlational. With correlational data, it is not possible to ascertain if the effects are due to the child acting on the environment or the environment acting on the child. For example, a child may be exposed to a high conflict environment and consequently start to exhibit antisocial behaviours at home and at school. These behaviours may then evoke harsher parenting or teaching styles, which then elicits negative behaviours from the child. Subsequently, the child and the environment are salient in this sequence of events and experimental data is required to identify causal influences.

Furthermore, as children's experiences are a product of multiple environments, it is idealistic to attempt to discriminate the contribution of one.

Analysing these experiences in isolation ignores the interaction between the various environments. Future research cannot continue to search for dichotomies in social competence (e.g., high/low socio-economic status, divorced/married) because the picture is far more complex. Each child is unique and experiences the world differently and even siblings have different experiences through different teachers and birth order, and what is significant in one child's life may go unnoticed in another's. These experiences are the factors that amalgamate into a self-schema for current and future social interactions.

The EDI (Hart et al., 2003) has provided a clear indication that the social competence of some children in Western Australian is an urgent issue. It is essential that researchers gather the experiences of children to find significant patterns in the development of social competence that have lasting effects. These patterns can be utilised in the implementation of future preventative and intervention strategies.

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Running Head: SOCIAL COMPETENCE

**Social Competence: An Exploration of Children's Experiences within the Home
Environment**

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Abstract

Social competence was identified as an area of vulnerability for over 25% of children in some areas of Perth, Western Australia (Hart, Brinkman, & Blackmore, 2003).

The aim of the present study was to find how children at different levels of social competence experienced their home environment. Year six children's (N=20) social competence was assessed through the Social Skills Rating System (Gresham & Elliot, 1990) and the six highest and lowest scorers participated in a semi-structured interview (N=12). Content analysis was used to analyse data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Boundaries, sense of belonging and emotional safety, key elements of a sense of community, were evident in high social competence children (McMillan, 1996). Implications of this research suggest children need a sense of community within their home to develop social competence.

Key words: children, social competence, family, sense of community

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Social Competence: An Exploration of Children's Experiences within the Home Environment

Introduction

Imagine the scene. There are several families within a busy shopping centre. In one family, the child is crying and demanding attention from the mother. In another, the child is laughing and regaling stories from the day. Each child is exhibiting a different level of social competence. A casual observer may attribute the behaviour of the children to parenting. To what extent is the parenting and the home environment responsible for children's social competence?

One definition of social competence is "the full range of skills, abilities, and cognitive processes that are involved in effective social interaction" (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2000, p.1555). Indicators of high social competence include assertion, cooperation, empathy, responsibility and self-control (Elliot & Gresham, 1993). To demonstrate social competence children require the cognitive skills to encode and interpret cues, clarify goals, access or construct responses, select a response and enact the behaviour (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

The acquisition of social competence is a significant developmental task for children as it has been linked to academic achievement (Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neill, 2001), psychological wellbeing (Katz & Woodin, 2002) and adjustment in adulthood (Sanson & Smart, 2001). The recent implementation of the Early Developmental Index (EDI) in the northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia indicates not all children are acquiring satisfactory levels of competence (Hart, Brinkman, & Blackmore, 2003). The EDI provides an index of competence on the five developmental domains of general knowledge, physical health and well-being, language and cognitive development, communication skills, and emotional maturity

through a teacher survey of 5-year olds. Results indicate over 25% of children in some postal codes are vulnerable (scoring in the bottom 10%) in social competence.

Variability in social competence can be attributed to an interaction between genetic and environmental influences (Eaton, Chipperfield, & Singbeil, 1989; Jourfield, Bethan, Neilson, & McGuffin, 2004). Genetic influences include child temperament (Sanson & Smart, 2001), verbal ability (Mostow, Izard, Fine, & Trentacosta, 2002) and intelligence (Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neill, 2001). Environmental influences include families (Katz & Woodin, 2002), schools (Barth, Dunlap, Dane, Lochman, & Wells, 2004; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004), teachers (Farmer-Dougan, Viechtbauer, & French, 1999; Wentzel, 2002), friends (Hektner, August, & Realmuto, 2003) and the media (Özmert, Toyran, & Yurdakök, 2002).

Despite these multiple influences on children's social competence, variability is often attributed exclusively to parenting practices and the home environment, with parents being held accountable for their children's failure in the social world (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Katz & Woodin, 2002). This view is reflected in legislation being introduced into Western Australia state parliament in late 2004. The legislation decrees that parents will be held responsible for their children's anti-social behaviour and forced to attend parenting classes if their children are involved in misconduct ("Gallop Eyes Parenting Contract," 2004). This insinuates that if parents had parented 'properly', the child would not be exhibiting deviant behaviour. In view of this thinking, the influence of the home environment and parenting on children's social competence needs to be considered.

The home environment is the first context in which children have the opportunity to learn social skills (Boyum & Parke, 1995). The parent-parent, parent-child and sibling relationships provide children with models of social behaviour and

opportunities to engage in social interactions (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; Lockwood, Kitzmann, & Cohen, 2001). Each experience contributes to the development of a child's self-schema of social interactions (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Self-schemas are cognitive generalisations gathered from experiences that guide and organise information about the self (Markus, 1977). Self-schemas become frameworks for future social interactions directing children's judgments, interpretation and responses in social situations (Rudolph, Hammen, & Burge, 1995).

Home Environment

A negative environment can have harmful effects for children (Jones, Abby, & Cumberland, 1998). Jones et al. (1988) found that children from predominantly negative environments formulated more self-protective goals and generated more aggressive and emotionally intense responses in social interactions. Self-protective goals focus less on appropriate social rules and other's needs. These goals generalised to other environments, which suggest the general home environment can influence behaviours beyond the home.

Parent-Parent Relationship

Children are not directly involved in the parent-parent relationship, however they have an experience of it and this provides them with a model of social interactions (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). With 51.2% of divorces in Australia in 2001 involving children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001), it is likely that some children are observing inappropriate models of interaction through the parent-parent relationship. Previous research has found that children who experience parental disagreement are less well adjusted socially (Lindsey & Mize, 2001). Furthermore, research indicates children whose parents have divorced perform lower academically

and socially, and have lower scores in well-being and adjustment compared to children from intact marriages (Amato, 2001).

However, divorce is only a label for parents that no longer live together; some married couples may experience similar stressors, such as economic strain and conflict, as divorced couples. Conflict in itself is not detrimental, rather it is the management of conflict that appears to cause negative outcomes for children. For example, Katz and Gottman (1993) found marital hostility led to mild antisocial behaviour in children, whereas marital anger and emotional withdrawal led to anxiety and social withdrawal in children. In a more recent study, Katz and Woodin (2002) found that parents who engaged in hostile-detached conflict (attacking and withdrawal) had children with more externalising problems and who were non-compliant with peers. Children with parents that were conflict-engaging or conflict-avoiding showed no indication of negative outcomes. These findings suggest that it is not the conflict per se, but the parents' use of hostility and withdrawal in conflict that leads to poorer social outcomes for children.

Findings by Kesner and McHenry (2001) suggest that while the parental relationship may provide a model for children's social competence, this model is not essential for children to achieve good outcomes. They found no significant differences in children's social skills and conflict management between never married mothers and two-parent families. It is possible that the never married mothers had not experienced the conflict of divorce. The exposure to hostility and withdrawal may be a more important factor in accounting for lower outcomes in social competence than the number of parents present in the home.

Parent-Child Relationship

Another experience in the home environment is the relationship between

children and their parents. This relationship provides children with a model of social skills and experience in interactions that add to their social schemas (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). The style of parenting characterises how responsive and demanding parents are with their children. Parenting style can be authoritarian which is demanding and obedience orientated with rigid boundaries; authoritative, which is supportive and warm with clear boundaries and expectations; or permissive, which is warm, lenient and without many requirements for children (Baumrind, 1989).

Authoritarian and permissive parenting is frequently associated with children that are less competent socially (Hart, Ladd, & Burleson, 1990; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000; Kindlon, 2001). Hart et al. (1990) investigated the effect of authoritarian parenting on children's social competence. Results indicated that mothers who were more authoritarian had children who expected to get their own way using unfriendly assertive strategies, and children who were less preferred by their peers. Children with authoritarian mothers may expect success by using forceful strategies because their experience is that forceful strategies are successful.

Parke and colleagues have found a strong association between parental warmth and children's social competence (Boyum & Parke, 1995; McDowell, Parke, & Wang, 2003). In one study, they found negative parental affect predicted children's aggressive behaviour, whereas positive affect predicted children's prosocial behaviour and high sociometric ratings (Boyum & Parke, 1995). This finding was also evident in a recent study by McDowell, Parke, and Wang (2003). They investigated parents' advice-giving and found the best predictor of high social competence was the way parents communicated advice rather than content of the advice. That is, parents who exhibited more warmth during advice-giving had children that were more competent socially.

Further research has also found that warmth and security in the parent-child relationship leads to less feelings of loneliness and increased friendships for children (Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). However, while parental warmth is associated with high social competence the relationship can be moderated by child qualities (Isley, O'Neill, Clatfelter, & Parke, 1999). Socially competent children may evoke positive expression from parents whereas low socially competent children evoke negative expression.

Eisenberg and Fabes have also investigated parental responsiveness and children's social competence (Fabes et al., 1994; Fabes, Eisenberg, & Miller, 1990). They suggest that the way parents respond to children provides them with an experience of the rules of social interaction. In one study, Eisenberg, Fabes, and Murphy (1996) assessed parent responses to children's negative affect. They coded responses as punitive (controlling, reducing need to deal with child's negative emotions), minimising (reduced importance of child's concern or situation) or distressed (negatively aroused through children's expression of negative affect). Eisenberg, Fabes and Murphy (1996) found that when parents used minimising or punitive responses children used more avoidant coping, were less popular, less socially skilled and used less constructive methods of coping. Children whose mothers used problem-focused coping were rated higher in social functioning and popularity (Eisenberg et al., 1996), which suggests children gain constructive methods of processing and expressing emotions when parents respond to emotions constructively.

In a similar study, Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, and Martin (2001) also found children were more reactive and expressed their negative emotions more intensely when parents used minimising or punitive responses. These responses were related to

lower social competence, which suggests children may acquire the necessary skills to process and express emotions through parent responses. In addition, the combination of distressed parenting with punitive or minimising responses related to children who expressed negative emotions less frequently but with greater intensity (Fabes et al., 2001). Subsequently, children may try to control these emotions if their parents are distressed, but they are unsuccessful.

Siblings

Sibling interactions in the home environment can provide children with opportunities to experience and learn skills to be socially competent with other children (Lockwood, Kitzmann, & Cohen, 2001). Lockwood et al. (2001) found that sibling interactions carry-over into children's other relationships. That is, when children had warm sibling relationships they also had positive peer relations and high social competence; whereas children with conflictual sibling relationships experienced victimisation, rejection by peers and lower social status.

Stormshak et al. (1996) found similar associations between sibling relationships and social competence in behaviourally disruptive 6-8 year old boys. Half of the boys were in conflictual sibling relationships (more conflict than warmth) and the other half were either supportive (more warmth than conflict) or involved (equal warmth and conflict) relationships. Conflictual relationships predicted social difficulties with peers and behavioural problems and supportive relationships predicted emotional control and social competence (Stormshak et al., 1996). These findings are significant because one would expect behaviourally disruptive boys to experience negative outcomes at home and school. However, it appears that supportive sibling relationships have a buffering effect on children's relationships with others and subsequently, their social competence.

In summary, experiences of warmth, responsiveness, low conflict and support within the home environment show a relationship with high social competence.

These constructs are key elements of a psychological sense of community (McMillan, 1996). The definition of sense of community is “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Subsequently, experiences in the home environment that promote a sense of community may be valuable in promoting children’s social competence; and this may assist them in making connections in other environments.

There are several limitations in the research on social competence. School ratings of children’s social competence are frequently utilised to make comparisons with the home environment when social competence can be different between contexts (Cartledge, Adedapo, & Johnson, 1998). Furthermore, most data is gathered through teachers and parents, overlooking the child’s perspective. This research seeks to identify children’s experiences, as it would seem feasible that children could provide a more accurate voice to their experiences, and one that is not available to others as they move between contexts. The primary aim of the present research is to determine how children of differing levels of social competence experience their home environment. The second aim is to find if social competence is related to a sense of community within the home environment. Specifically, the research questions are:

1. What are the experiences of low, average and high socially competent children and how do these experiences differ in the home?
2. Do children high in social competence experience a sense of community at home?

Method

Research Design

This research used a mixed-methodology design. The quantitative component, a questionnaire, was utilised in the first phase of research to determine a standardised level of children's social competence. The qualitative component was utilised in the second phase of research to gain a grounded, holistic and descriptive understanding of children's experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An interpretivist phenomenological approach was adopted to determine the meaning children construct from their experiences (Patton, 1980). This approach was suitable because it allowed children, rather than teachers or parents, the opportunity to voice the meaning they assign to experiences.

Participants

Twenty participants, 8 boys and 12 girls, were recruited from two schools in the north metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia. School selection was based on the Census of Population and Housing (ABS, 2001) and EDI data (Hart, Brinkman, & Blackmore, 2003). In the EDI, School A had 1-7% of vulnerable children in social competence and School B had 15-28% of vulnerable children (Hart et al., 2003). School A's suburb demographics included average weekly earnings between \$1200 and \$1499, 9% one-parent families, and 5% unemployment. School B suburb demographics included average weekly earnings between \$500 and \$599, 29% one-parent families, and 18% unemployment (ABS, 2001).

Participants were in year six with an average age of 11.2 years. Approximately half of the participants in each school group had experienced divorce. There were no English as a Second Language (ESL), special needs or Aboriginal students in this sample. There were 20 participants in the first phase of research

(boys = 8, girls = 12). Eleven participants were from School A and nine were from School B. In the second phase of research, six students from each school were selected for interview (boys = 5, girls = 7), the three highest and the three lowest scorers on the student version of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS). This was an adequate sample size for a phenomenological study to sample experiences of social competence (Morse, 1994). The researcher was familiar with the students from School B through prior work at the school.

Materials

Principal, guardian or parent and child consent and information forms were required prior to the start of research (see Appendix A). In the first phase of research, the manual and questionnaires from the student version of the SSRS (Elliot & Gresham, 1990) were utilised to determine the social competence of each child (see Appendix B). The SSRS provides a rating of children's skills in cooperation, assertion, empathy, self-control and an overall rating of social competence. The SSRS has criterion and face validity, reliability of .83 and good test-retest stability (Elliot & Gresham, 1990). The student form was selected over teacher and parent forms to ascertain children's perceptions of their social competence.

In the second phase of research, a tape recorder and set of nine vignettes were used in a semi-structured interview (see Appendix C). The vignettes were generated by the researcher and based on social competence research. They covered the areas of conflict, family conventions, supervision, siblings, opportunities for interaction, communication, social support, emotion expression and perceived expectations. Each vignette included a short story about a child followed by three to five closed- and open-ended questions. Vignettes were utilised to provide children with a framework for discussion.

Procedure

Prior to research, ethics clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Services. Principal consent was then acquired and the researcher met with the year six teacher and school psychologist from each school to discuss research procedure and aims. Next, the researcher explained the purpose of the research to each year six class and distributed child and parent or guardian consent and information forms. Participants were advised that the research was confidential and assured that their peers, teachers and parents would not have access to their responses. Only children that returned consent forms participated in the research.

The SSRS questionnaire was administered to each school within the same week. The children received standard instructions provided with the questionnaire. The researcher remained in the room and was available to explain or read questions that children did not understand to ensure individual reading ability did not prejudice the questionnaire. The teacher was not present during administration of the questionnaire. Children were assured their responses were confidential and that they could stop at any time. The questionnaire took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

The researcher scored the questionnaires by hand after leaving the school. The raw scores of each subsection (empathy, assertion, cooperation and self-control) and the total score were compared to norms on the SSRS. Children were identified as 'more' (high social skills), 'average' (average social skills) or 'fewer' (low social skills) and general trends in each school were identified. Selection for the semi-structured interview was based on the three highest and lowest scorers for each school; however, this was restricted by the availability of children on the given day.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted within one week of the questionnaire. Children were seated in a separate room that was visible to others but provided privacy and security for the child. The researcher read a standard informational paragraph to each child prior to the interview. This explained the interview procedure and reminded children that their answers were confidential and that they could withdraw from the interview at any stage. Interviews were recorded on audio tape and transcribed verbatim by the researcher at the completion of all interviews. Interviews were between 15 and 30 minutes in length.

Ethics

One ethical issue associated with this research was the possibility that children could become distressed while discussing certain topics. To address this concern, children were advised that they could withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. Additionally, the researcher ensured that children led the discussion so that they were comfortable with the topics being discussed. Furthermore, the school psychologists were aware of the research format and were available if children experienced distress.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed and reduced using content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Content analysis codes each transcript for themes, patterns and frequencies. Codes were then transferred to a question ordered matrix to make comparisons and contrasts between children high, average and low in social competence, and school A and school B (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data was also analysed by an independent researcher to check the credibility of the findings. Emerging themes were then compared to the original transcripts to check validity and ensure rigour (Nagy & Viney, 1994).

Results and Interpretation

The standardised results of the SSRS indicated School A had a larger proportion of socially competent children than School B (see Figure 1). Similar trends were evident on the subscales of cooperation, assertion, empathy and self-control (see Figure 2 and 3). The ratio of low social competence children identified in each school through the SSRS was similar to the ratio of vulnerable children identified on the EDI (Hart et al., 2003). There were no distinct effects for gender.

Figure 1. Standardised Student Rankings on the Student Version of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS: Gresham & Elliot, 1990)

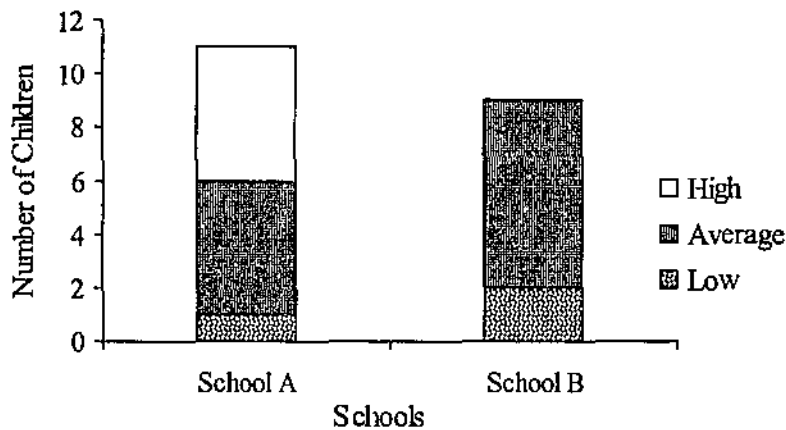


Figure 2. Standardised Student Rankings on the Sub-Scales of Cooperation (C), Assertion (A), Empathy (E) and Self-Control (S) for School A

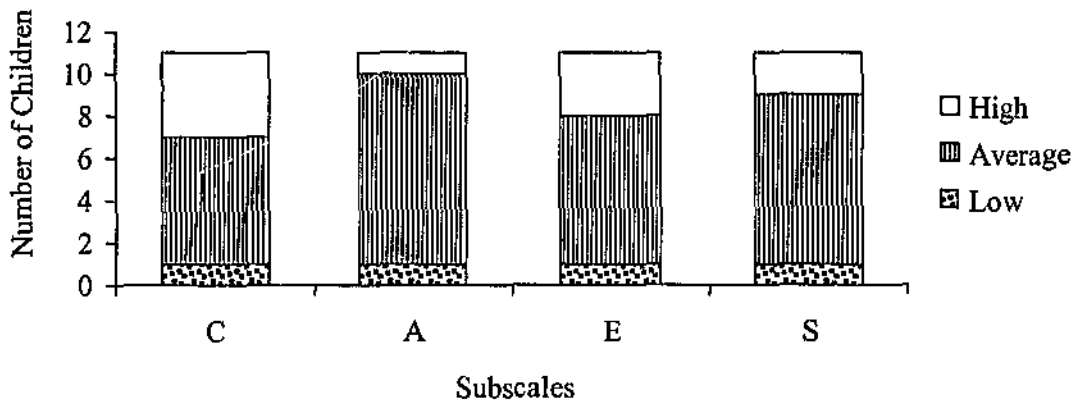
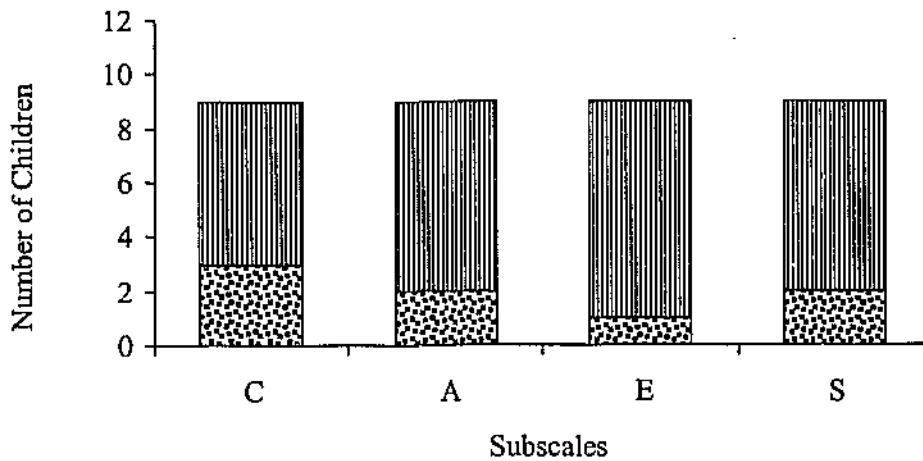


Figure 3. Standardised Student Rankings on the four Sub-Scales of Cooperation (C), Assertion (A), Empathy (E) and Self-Control (S) for School B



The three themes central to social competence that emerged from the interviews were boundaries, emotional safety and sense of belonging. These are all primary units of the reformulated theory of sense of community by McMillan (1996).

Boundaries

McMillan (1996) asserts that boundaries 'make emotional safety possible'. This is evident in children's responses with one child saying, "It's safer being where...knowing where you are and everything like that ... because my mum cares about my school life and everything." The boundaries the boy experienced communicated that his parents cared about him. The importance of boundaries for children's social competence was evident in the Supervision and Perceived Expectations vignettes.

Supervision

All children advocated their parents were like the authoritative parents in the supervision vignette, however, differences in their experiences indicated diverse styles of parenting. Low Social Competence (SC) children could only provide a vague description of parental boundaries, such as "go home early or something" or

“don’t go too far” and these children believed their parents did not always know where they were or who their friends were. Average SC children were able to give several details on boundaries but only some children felt their parents knew their whereabouts and friends. High SC children were able to state parental expectations clearly and believed their parents knew all their friends and whereabouts at all times. Low SC children’s unclear boundaries are indicative of more permissive parenting whereas high SC children’s clear boundaries are more authoritative. Average SC children appeared to experience a more lenient form of authoritative parenting.

Perceived Expectations

Almost all children believed manners were ‘really important’ however low, average and high SC children perceived their parents to have different expectations. Low SC children felt they experienced low to average expectations regarding manners and average SC children perceived their parents to have different expectations in different contexts. For example, children said they “put their manners on” when people were visiting or when they went out. Conversely, high SC children indicated their parents expected manners at all times and it appeared to be automatic for these children with one child saying, “My mum and dad always say to say please and thank you and it just pops out of our mouth anyway.”

Low and average SC children held self-protective goals for using manners, such as friends wouldn’t play with you, you won’t get in trouble and people think you’re a good person. Conversely, all high SC children held prosocial reasons for using manners, such as to show you’re thankful and not to be rude, mean or nasty to other people. This is consistent with previous research with low SC children formulating more self-protective goals and high SC children formulating more prosocial goals (Jones, Abby, & Cumberland, 1998).

Parenting style patterns were similar to the supervision vignette with low and average SC children experiencing lenient expectations similar to permissive parenting, and high SC children experiencing clear expectations reflective of authoritative parenting. Cloud and Townsend (1992) assert external boundaries provide children with internal boundaries. Subsequently, if parents are setting appropriate physical boundaries for children this may assist them in developing appropriate boundaries for social interactions.

Emotional Safety

Emotional safety was the second theme that emerged from the interviews and was evident in the Communication, Emotion Expression and Conflict vignettes. Emotional safety requires empathy, understanding and caring (McMillan, 1996).

Communication

All low SC children indicated there was not time to talk in their house and it was hard to talk to their parents. One girl stated, "I've always wanted to tell my mum ... but I'm scared because if I tell mum then ... they'll start fighting again." Another boy said it was, "Hard, because...I'm still young and they won't sometimes take it serious." Conversely, average and high SC children felt there was always time to talk and found it easy to talk to their parents.

All children, except for one low in SC, felt their parents listened to them. Most children indicated they knew their parents were listening because they 'did something about it', stopped what they were doing, stuck to the subject or 'looked at them'. The child that felt his parents didn't listen said, "I got in trouble a few days ago and I told her and she was doing the dishes and she wasn't listening and she had to come to school and she said the wrong things." He said that when people listen they stop what they are doing and sit next to you.

Prior research has found that children with secure and warm parental relationships are liked more by peers, have more friendships and are less lonely (Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). It is evident that when parents listen to children and make time to talk with them it communicates to the child that they are important and understood. This is reflected with one child saying, "I feel important cos I know that they're listening to me because they know it's serious and they know that it would be bothering me." Consequently, this feeling of being understood appears to contribute to children's sense of emotional safety and social competence.

Emotion Expression

Most low SC children said it was 'okay' to express negative emotions; however, their strategies were contradictory as they tried to keep negative emotion in or 'forget it'. They also reported their parents would tell them to 'stop it' if they were sad or angry. Low SC children did not find these strategies successful. One child said, "Sometimes I just try to forget it ... but sometimes it is stuck with you and your face...people can tell."

All average and high SC believed it was okay to be angry or sad. One girl said, "It is alright because that's just your emotions and if you keep it in, like if you cover up it'll just keep on bothering you." However, average SC children generally used avoidant strategies that physically removed or distracted them from the situation (e.g., go to room or play a game), whereas high SC children tried to find a resolution by talking about the problem. Both average and high SC children perceived their parents approved of emotion expression. One high SC girl explained how her mother does not like them to say, "Ohh you silly boy or whatever...get angry," indicating the mother does not endorse children's use of punitive or minimising responses.

These experiences are consistent with previous research where children used more avoidant coping and were lower in social competence when parents minimised or responded punitively to children's negative emotions (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996). Fabes et al. (1996) also found when children tried to 'keep it in' the emotion was often released more intensely but less frequently. A low SC child reflected this when she said, "I'd get in a cat fight and I wouldn't want that ... I wouldn't mean to but sometimes I can't stop myself." If parents do not empathise and understand children's emotions it is not providing children with a safe and trustworthy environment for them to express themselves.

Conflict

A climate of conflict in the home environment can lead to lower social outcomes for children (Jaycox & Repetti, 1993). All low SC children indicated the high conflict vignette was like their home and most children withdrew to cope with conflict (e.g., hiding). Conflict had a clear effect on their wellbeing with children saying, "It makes me feel really bad and sad" and "... they fight at night and I get really sad and I have to hide under the pillow." Conversely, all average and high SC children experienced low conflict at home and children used discussion and compromise as methods of resolving conflicts.

Divorce was a factor in some conflict. One low SC child said, "... my mum and dad get in a lot of fights because they still go to each other's house to drop off the kids ... us." However, a high SC child whose parents were divorced indicated her parents didn't get on but communicated successfully. This suggests conflict and low social competence do not always accompany divorce. Rather it is the way parents manage conflict that provides children with a model that can transfer to other contexts and relationships (Rudolph, Hammen, & Berge, 1995). Furthermore, when

conflict is managed with hostility and withdrawal it is likely that empathy, understanding and caring are less frequent in the home environment, reducing children's sense of emotional safety.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging was the third theme that emerged from the interviews. It is developed through acceptance, commitment and faith that you belong (McMillan, 1996). Lee and Robbins (1998) define sense of belonging as one's sense of social connectedness. Sense of belonging was evident in the Social Support, Family Conventions and Opportunities for Social Interaction vignettes.

Social Support

Social support can enhance children's sense of connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Low SC children could name several sources of support at school, including the teacher and their peers; however, they could not identify anybody at home. One low SC child indicated the need for her father:

I'm just hoping that he will maybe realise that I still need him and he'll come to me. I need someone who is a boy because I have no boys in my family. I need someone to show me how to react to other boys and stuff like that ...

High SC children indicated multiple sources of support at school and home. A child with divorced parents said she could talk to either parent about problems and was able to phone her non-residential parent at any time. Another boy said, "[My parents] help me along and they're not mean and nasty about it and say like ... oh just fight your own battles and be like ... put up with it ... they help you."

Average SC children could also name several sources of support at school but over half of children could not name anyone at home. One boy said, "[Dad] usually comes home about half an hour after I go to bed so there's not really much time to

ask him." Another girl said she wouldn't talk to her mother because, "... if it was one of my closest friends and she knew them she wouldn't listen cos she knew that the friend wouldn't be like that." These children are experiencing a certain level of support but it appears to be unreliable. That is, they cannot trust that their parents will believe them or be there when they need them.

The children's experiences reflect prior research that found parental support was positively associated with general competence for children and highly social competent children are more knowledgeable about their social networks and have larger networks of support (Amato, 1989; Corrie & Leita, 1999). Children understood the importance of parental support. One boy high in SC explained why it was so important, he said, "It could help you with like your attitude towards life and things even sporting events because they're like they're there supporting you and you'll do better if they are not there you feel sad sort of thing."

Family Conventions

Almost all high and average SC children believed it was important to spend time with their family. Their reasons ranged from staying together, not fighting, getting to know their parents, warmth, and talking to their parents about 'bad' things. Only one low SC child felt it was important to spend time with her family so that someone would take care of her.

When asked to describe mealtimes at their home, all low SC children said they did not eat together, the television was always on and they did not talk. One child said he sat "two metres away on the couch" during mealtimes suggesting low SC children may be physically as well as socially disconnected. Conversely, when high SC children described mealtimes they said their family ate dinner together with the television off and their family talked frequently. Children of average SC had a

combination of both low and high SC children's experiences.

In a survey of over 650 adolescent children, Kindlon (2001) found children had a higher sense of belonging when they ate meals with their family. He asserts mealtimes can be the 'glue' that holds families together. Family interactions, particularly mealtimes, provide children with opportunities to connect with their family in social interactions (Boyum & Parke, 1995). Each connection develops children's self-schema of social interactions (Markus, 1977) and promotes their connection to their family. Children that are connected through regular exchange with parents are able to discuss difficult issues. One child said:

It's important that way you are closer to your family and you don't feel awkward around them. It helps you ... because if you like want to tell them something like really hard to tell them you can't feel funny around them you can just go straight out and say it.

Opportunities for Social Interaction

Low SC children indicated their experiences were nothing like the boy in the vignette who was actively involved in clubs and sports. Barriers to participating in activities included not being allowed, stress and money. One low SC child, when asked what she did after school, said, "I just sit in my room." Half of the average SC children felt they had many opportunities after school and the other half felt their opportunities were limited. Barriers for these children included caring for younger siblings, money and family commitments. Conversely, high SC children had many opportunities for social interaction and they perceived no barriers.

Children high in SC were connected in multiple environments and average SC children had some elements of connection in their experience but not to the extent of high SC children. Conversely, low SC children were connected at school

but not in other environments, and particularly not at home. Children are missing vital opportunities to connect with their family and develop a sense of belonging.

Siblings

No significant patterns emerged between low, average and high SC children within the sibling vignette. Most children appeared to enjoy their sibling relationship and perceived that sibling and school relationships were separate. A high SC boy said, "I'd say they are separate because I don't think you should bring your home issues into school or your school issues at home to your sisters but maybe to your mum or dad." This is contrary to research that asserts children's relationships carry over into other contexts (Lockwood, Kitzmann, & Cohen, 2001). However, effects may be absent because children are unaware of the influence or because sibling relationships are more influential in adolescence (Amato, 1989).

Schools

School A and School B differed on two issues. Some children in School B commented that money was a barrier to participating in activities. One child said, "... we don't really have much money and I could join a club or do something like go swimming." The financial barriers may affect the number and quality of opportunities children have to connect with others. The second issue, which was unique to School A, was the experience of parental absence due to work commitments. Children require a certain amount of resources (e.g., time, attention) to develop successfully, and investment in work may reduce the resources allocated to children (Greenberger & Goldberg, 1989). The extents of these relationships are beyond the scope of this study, but are worth pursuing in future research.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to find how children at different levels of social competence experienced their home environment. Specifically, the research aimed to find patterns of experiences within children of low, average and high competence. The results suggest that high SC children experience home environments with clear boundaries, quality family time, low conflict, open communication, high social support, and multiple opportunities to connect with others. Low SC children's experiences were opposite to high SC and average SC children were a combination of these experiences. The experiences that differentiated low SC from average SC children were high conflict, less time to talk with parents and parents' use of punitive and minimising responses.

The second aim of the study was to find if children high in SC experienced a sense of community within their home environment. Boundaries, sense of belonging and emotional safety, elements of a sense of community, were evident in high SC children's experiences but not in low SC children.

A potential limitation of this research is the accuracy of children's self-evaluations in the questionnaire. Additional data from parents or teachers may provide a more balanced view in future research. A second limitation is that children's experiences may be a result of their own behaviour. For example, prosocial children may elicit more warmth from their parents than children with less social skills. This problem could be addressed by utilising elements identified within this research in an experimental design. Finally, while there were no obvious effects, the researcher's familiarity with children from School B may have affected rapport or children's openness within that school. In future research, an independent interviewer would be more suitable to ensure consistency between schools.

Implications

While this study utilised a small sample and cannot be generalised, there are several implications that can be drawn from the findings. One implication is that it may be beneficial for families to develop a sense of community within their home. This may mean putting away the video games, spending time as a family or making a commitment to spend time talking and listening to one another. Whilst it is acknowledged that the home environment is not the sole provider of children's competence, it appears that children need to be connected to their family before they can connect to the wider community; and if children experience a home environment with a sense of community, they may be more resilient in other environments.

The wider community can also play a role in supporting the family. Financial strain, marital disruption and work commitments are just some of the pressures that threaten the security and sense of community in families. Government agencies, churches and schools can all support families and assist them in providing a secure environment for their children. Furthermore, community groups need to be aware that they may be providing a sense of community that children are not experiencing at home, and this opportunity to promote children's sense of belonging, emotional safety and boundaries should be valued.

The EDI has provided a clear indication that the social competence of some children in Western Australian is an urgent issue (Hart et al., 2003). Children with low social competence today become adults with low social competence tomorrow; and these children are the parents and leaders of the future. Families, schools and community groups should be working together to promote children's sense of community within multiple environments. While parenting and the home environment have an effect on children's competence, we all can have an impact.

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Appendix A

Information Form for Parent/Guardian

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am writing to request your permission for your son/daughter to participate in a survey and short interview. I attend Edith Cowan University and I am currently completing Honours in Psychology. This research is a part of my course requirement and looks at levels of social competence in children and factors that are common to socially competent children.

Your child will be required to complete a survey that will take approximately 10 -20 minutes. Following completion of the questionnaires, several students will participate in a brief informal tape-recorded interview. The interview will consist of five short descriptions of a social interaction and your child will be asked to comment on the interaction.

It is expected that the process will be an enjoyable one for your child, however if your child experiences any stress or discomfort they may withdraw at any time without consequence. There are two numbers at the end of the letter that may be used if they need to talk to someone following the research. Please note that all surveys and interviews will remain confidential. After they have been scored, the surveys will be shredded and tapes will be erased. If you have any questions regarding the project of "The Acquisition of Social Competence: The Experience of Western Australian Children" please contact me on 94477520 or my supervisors Dr Lisbeth Pike on 6304 5110 or Dr Paul Murphy on 6304 5048. If you would like to speak to an independent person regarding the research, please contact Dr Craig Speelman, Head of School on 6304 5724.

Thank you for your time,

Mandie Shean

School of Psychology

Edith Cowan University

Crisis Care 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008

Centrecare 9325 6644

Consent Form for Parents/Guardians

I.....(print name) have read the information and have been informed about all aspects of the research project and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent for my child to participate in this activity, realising that they may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided they are not identifiable.

I understand that they may be interviewed and the interview will be audio recorded. I also understand that the recording will be erased once the interview is transcribed.

Parent/Guardian's signature _____

Date _____

Information Form for Student

Dear Student,

Thank you for helping me with my research. My name is Mandie Shean and I attend Edith Cowan University. This research is a part of my Honours in Psychology course.

Why do I need your help? Your answers will help me to make life better for other children. By listening to your answers, I can find ways to teach children better social skills. I would rather listen to things you have to say than try to guess what you think.

What do you have to do? You will be given a survey that you will fill out in your class with the rest of your class. It will take 10 - 20 minutes and I can help you to fill it out if you need help. A few weeks after the surveys, I will come back to school and ask some of you to listen to some very short stories and ask what you think of the story. This will take about 15 minutes.

Who will see what you say? Your survey and interview are confidential. That means I am the only person who will see or hear what you say and I will not show your survey to anybody else and I will not talk about you to anybody.

If you feel uncomfortable at any time during the survey or interview, you can stop. If you want to stop, you will not get in trouble. It is entirely up to you if you participate in the research. If you feel like you need to talk to someone after the survey or interview, talk to your mum or dad and then ask them to call the principal if you still have questions. If you would like to participate then please fill in the consent form on the next page.

Thank you,

Mandie Shean
School of Psychology
Edith Cowan University

Consent Form for Participant

Please read the following information and sign at the bottom of you agree to participate in the study.

- I have read the information sheet provided
- I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions I have asked have been answered
- I agree to participate in the study and I understand I can pull out at any time
- I agree that the research information may be published and that I will not be identified
- I understand that I may be interviewed and that the interview will be erased after it has been written down

Participant _____

Date _____

Information Form for Principal

Dear Principal,

My name is Mandie Shean and I am currently completing a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with Honours at Edith Cowan University. I would like to request your permission to conduct my research project at your school. This research is part of my course requirement and has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences. The project looks at varying levels of social competence and the experiences that are common to children at each level. The information will be valuable for future educational and social programs intending to develop social skills within children.

The target group for the project is Year 6. Each child will complete a Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) questionnaire that will take approximately 10 – 15 minutes. One week after the questionnaires have been completed, six students will be selected to participate in an informal tape recorded interview. The interview will consist of short descriptions of social interactions and children will be asked to comment on the interactions. Individual data will be confidential to the researcher. On completion of the research, questionnaires will be shredded and tapes erased to protect the identity of the children.

I do not anticipate that this will be stressful for the children. If they do feel uncomfortable or stressed they may withdraw from the questionnaire or interview at any stage without consequence. However, I will discuss this project with the school psychologist prior to the start of research so they are aware of the possible outcomes. In the event that a child experiences stress or discomfort, I will notify you immediately so you can decide the subsequent course of action.

There are great benefits to this research. It will allow children to vocalise their perspective and reveal essential factors in socially competent children. Additionally, the Early Development Index 2003 (EDI) has identified many children within the north metropolitan area as 'vulnerable' in social competence. This research will provide this school with relevant data to strategise and plan social skills programs within the school. Finally, the outcomes from this study will provide an excellent framework for writing programs of a preventative nature within the wider community.

The proposed research period is between May and June in second term of 2004. I expect to be in the school on three occasions, one to explain the project and two to gather data. If you have any questions regarding the project of "Social Competence in Children: An Exploration of the Experiences of Western Australian Children" please contact me on 9447 7520 or my supervisors Associate Professor Lisbeth Pike on 6304 5110, or Dr Paul Murphy on 6304 5048. If you would like to speak to an independent person regarding the research, please contact Dr Craig Speelman, Head of the School of Psychology on 6304 5724. If you are willing for the research to be conducted in your school, please fill in the attached consent form and return in the self-addressed envelope.

Thank you for your time,

Mandie Shean
School of Psychology
Edith Cowan University
15 April 2004

Consent Form for Principal

I _____ (print name) have read the information and have been informed about all aspects of the research project and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent for _____ Primary School to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw participation at any time.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided the children and this school are not identifiable.

I understand that they may be interviewed and the interview will be audio recorded. I also understand that the recording will be erased once the interview is transcribed.

Principal's signature

Date

Social Skills

Rating System

Grades 3-6 Social Skills Questionnaire

Frank M. Gresham and Stephen N. Elliott

Directions

First write the information about yourself in the box below. Then turn to page 2.

Student Information

Name _____		
First	Middle	Last
<input type="checkbox"/> Boy	<input type="checkbox"/> Girl	Today's date _____
		Month Day Year
Grade _____	Age _____	Birth date _____
		Month Day Year
School _____		
Teacher's name _____		

This paper lists a lot of things that students your age may do. Please read each sentence and think about yourself. Then decide **how often** you do the behavior described.

If you **never** do this behavior, circle the 0.

If you **sometimes** do this behavior, circle the 1.

If you **very often** do this behavior, circle the 2.

Here are two examples:

	How Often?		
	Never	Sometimes	Very Often
I start conversations with classmates.	0	1	2
I keep my desk clean and neat.	0	1	2

*This student **very often** starts conversations with classmates. This student keeps his or her desk clean and neat **sometimes**.*

If you change an answer, be sure to erase completely. Please answer all questions. When you are finished, wait for further directions from your teacher.

Be sure to ask questions if you do not know what to do. There are no right or wrong answers, just your feelings of how often you do these things.

Begin working when told to do so.

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY How Often?					Social Skills	How Often?		
C	A	E	S			Never	Sometimes	Very Often
					1. I make friends easily.	0	1	2
					2. I smile, wave, or nod at others.	0	1	2
					3. I ask before using other people's things.	0	1	2
					4. I ignore classmates who are clowning around in class.	0	1	2
					5. I feel sorry for others when bad things happen to them.	0	1	2
					6. I tell others when I am upset with them.	0	1	2
					7. I disagree with adults without fighting or arguing.	0	1	2
					8. I keep my desk clean and neat.	0	1	2
					9. I am active in school activities such as sports or clubs.	0	1	2
					10. I do my homework on time.	0	1	2
					11. I tell new people my name without being asked to tell it.	0	1	2
					12. I control my temper when people are angry with me.	0	1	2
					13. I politely question rules that may be unfair.	0	1	2
					14. I let friends know I like them by telling or showing them.	0	1	2
C	A	E	S		SUMS OF HOW OFTEN COLUMNS			

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY How Often?				Social Skills (cont.)	How Often?		
C	A	E	S		Never	Sometimes	Very Often
				15. I listen to adults when they are talking with me.	0	1	2
				16. I show that I like compliments or praise from friends.	0	1	2
				17. I listen to my friends when they talk about problems they are having.	0	1	2
				18. I avoid doing things with others that may get me in trouble with adults.	0	1	2
				19. I end fights with my parents calmly.	0	1	2
				20. I say nice things to others when they have done something well.	0	1	2
				21. I listen to the teacher when a lesson is being taught.	0	1	2
				22. I finish classroom work on time.	0	1	2
				23. I start talks with class members.	0	1	2
				24. I tell adults when they have done something for me that I like.	0	1	2
				25. I follow the teacher's directions.	0	1	2
				26. I try to understand how my friends feel when they are angry, upset, or sad.	0	1	2
				27. I ask friends for help with my problems.	0	1	2
				28. I ignore other children when they tease me or call me names.	0	1	2
				29. I accept people who are different.	0	1	2
				30. I use my free time in a good way.	0	1	2
				31. I ask classmates to join in an activity or game.	0	1	2
				32. I use a nice tone of voice in classroom discussions.	0	1	2
				33. I ask adults for help when other children try to hit me or push me around.	0	1	2
				34. I talk things over with classmates when there is a problem or an argument.	0	1	2
C	A	E	S	SUMS OF HOW OFTEN COLUMNS	Stop. Please check to be sure that all items have been marked.		

SUMMARY**SOCIAL SKILLS**

HOW OFTEN? TOTAL			BEHAVIOR LEVEL		
	(sums from p. 2)	(sums from p. 3)	(see Appendix A)		
			Fewer	Average	More
C	+	=			
A	+	=			
E	+	=			
S	+	=			
Total (C + A + E + S)					

(see Appendix D)

Standard
ScorePercentile
Rank

(see Appendix E)

SEM

Confidence Level
68% ☐ 95% ☐Confidence
Band
(standard scores)

to

Appendix C

Interview Schedule

Thank you for helping me with my research. Your answers will be very helpful in finding out how kids experience things in their life.

The interview works this way. I am going to read you eight short stories. After I have read each story to you, I will ask you two to three questions about that story. There are no right or wrong answers but I would like you to answer the stories as honestly as you can. I am not looking for a special answer; I just want to know that you think. Remember that I am the only person who will hear what you say.

I am going to record the interview so that I don't have to memorise everything you say. Some stuff may not seem important but it might be very helpful to me later on.

Let me know if you would like me to reread the story or explain something. We can stop at any time. Just tell me if you would like to stop and we can take a break, or stop the interview without finishing the questions.

Vignette 1 – Supervision

Jill is allowed to do what she likes without asking her parents. She comes and goes when she pleases and they don't seem to mind. Her parents don't really check on school stuff either and she can hang out with anyone without it being too much of a drama. Some of her friend's parents have to know everything about where they are going and when they will be home.

- Would your parents be like Jill's or like her friends?
- Describe what would happen if you wanted to go out (e.g., movies)?
- How involved are your parents at your school? (Reading, assemblies, parent interviews)
- Do your parents always know where you are, who your friends are?

Vignette 2 – Family Conventions

When it is time for dinner in John's house everybody gets in and helps. They all have a job to do to help get dinner ready. When dinner is ready, the TV is turned off and everybody sits at the table. They usually talk about what happened during the day and anything interesting. Nobody leaves the table until everyone is finished. It's usually a fun time with somebody being told to eat their vegetables before dessert.

- Describe what mealtime is like for your family?
- What sort of things do your family do together?
- How important is it for you to do things with your family? Why?

Vignette 3 – Conflict

There seems to be a lot of stress around Rachel's house at the moment and everybody seems to be angry. When Rachel gets home, she is never sure what she'll find. A lot of the time, she goes out again or just stays in her room. Sometimes she doesn't even want to go home.

- Is this a lot like your home, a bit like your home or nothing like it?
- Describe how people deal with disagreements in your house.
- How does this affect you?

Vignette 4 – Opportunities for social interaction

After school on Tuesdays Brock goes to soccer practice and on Wednesdays he has music practice. Other days he goes swimming, or has friends over to go riding or play basketball. He is always out doing something! Money isn't a problem and there are always heaps of things near his house for him to do.

- a) Is this like what you do after school? Tell me what things you do after school.
- b) Is there anything stopping you from doing more of the things you like?

Vignette 5 – Perceived Expectations

James doesn't worry too much about his manners. He knows no one else is worried. His family is casual about that sort of stuff. Everyone knows he is thankful; he just doesn't have to say it, that's all. Everyone gets on fine without being all polite and formal. He notices it is different at school and makes sure he says 'yes sir' 'no sir' to keep out of trouble with the teachers.

- a) Is your family casual about that sort of stuff too?
- b) What kind of behaviour would your parents expect?
- c) Explain how important you think manners are

Vignette 6 – Role Models

Jessica is in class and she feels that the teacher is rushing through some of the lessons. She is finding it hard to keep up with the important facts and doesn't know what to do. Should she say something to the teacher or perhaps ask the other kids what they think? She thinks about it and decides to ask someone else what he or she or she would do.

- a) If you had a problem, whom would you go to? Why would you ask that person?
- b) Has that person given you advice before?

Vignette 7 – Communication

There is a lot of coming and going in John's house. He doesn't get a lot of chances to sit down and chat with his Dad. Sometimes he wished there was more time so he could talk about some of the things that are bothering him. It's just that people in his family don't talk that much. Mostly it is just quick stuff about what needs to be done rather than a serious conversation.

- a) Do you feel your family is like John's without time to talk about things?
- b) Do you find it hard or easy to talk to your parents about your day? What makes it (hard/easy) to talk to them?
- c) Do you feel like your parents listen to you? How do you know? How does that make you feel?

Vignette 8 – Understanding of Expression

Sometimes when Jane gets angry or sad she isn't really sure what to do about it. She is not even sure if it's okay to feel that way. She thinks that it is probably better to just pretend she is happy, as that seems to be the right thing to do.

- a) Is it okay for Jane to get angry or sad?
- b) What do you do when you are angry or sad?
- c) How do you know what is the right way to act?
- d) How would your parents act if you were sad or angry?

Vignette 9 – Siblings

- a) Do you have any brothers or sisters?
- b) Do you generally get on with them?
- c) Do you think what happens between your brothers and sisters at home affects you at school or are they separate?