What Is the Best Way to Assess Young Children's Social Competence?

What is social competence?

Social competence refers to a person's ability to get along with other people. A child's social competence is affected by how well she communicates with other children and with adults. A child's views of herself in relation to her family, peers, and the wider world also affect her social competence.

What makes social competence so important during childhood?

A young child's ability to get along with other children contributes much to all aspects of his development. How well a child gets along with others may be "the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation," according to W.W. Hartup. For example, "Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously at risk" (Hartup, 1992, p. 1). Quite a bit of research during the past 20 years suggests that children who do not have a basic level of social competence by the age of 6 may have trouble with relationships when they are adults (Ladd, 2000; Parker & Asher, 1987). The long-range risks for a child who cannot interact well with other children may include poor mental health, low academic achievement and other school difficulties, and poor employment history (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

On the other hand, a child is more likely to have better mental health, stronger relationships, and more success in school and work if he has many chances to strengthen his social competence by playing, talking, working out disagreements, and collaborating with peers and adults. It is not necessary that a child be a "social butterfly." Quality matters more than quantity when it comes to a child's friendships. Children who have at least one close friend usually tend to increase their positive feelings about school over time (Ladd, 1999). Some children may simply be more shy, more inhibited, or more cautious than others. Pushing such children to interact with peers can make them very uncomfortable. Unless a child is so extremely shy that she cannot enjoy many of the "good things of life" (parties, picnics, family outings), she will probably outgrow her shyness if adults around her handle it with calm understanding.

How does a child develop social competence?

A person's social development starts at birth. Even tiny babies begin to interact with the people around them. They respond to voices. They cry to let caregivers know they need something. They make eye contact and smile at those who feed them, hold them, or play with them.

Adults and older children, intentionally or not, are models for young children of how to behave with other people. In fact, a great deal of children's social behavior is influenced by what they observe other people doing.

Most children's social skills increase rapidly during the preschool years. It is important to keep in mind that children of the same age may not have the same levels of social competence. Research shows that children have distinct personalities and temperaments from birth. Some children may face special challenges when they interact with peers and adults. A visually impaired child may not be able to "read" peers' gestures and facial expressions. A child with hearing, speech, or language difficulties may have trouble with the day-to-day talk that helps children become friends.

Relationships within the family may also affect a child's social behavior. Behavior that is appropriate or effective in one culture may be less so in another culture. Children from diverse cultural and family backgrounds thus may need help in bridging their differences and in finding ways to learn from and enjoy one another. Teachers can help by creating classroom communities that are open, honest, and accepting of differences.

Much research suggests that pretend play can contribute to young children's social and intellectual development. When children pretend to be someone or something else, they practice taking points of view other than their own. When they pretend together, children often take turns and make "deals" and decisions cooperatively. Such findings

suggest that children in early childhood programs ought to have regular opportunities for social play and pretend play. Teachers can observe and monitor the children's interactions.

How can we evaluate a child's social competence?

The checklist below was created to help teachers and caregivers check to see whether a child's social competence is developing well. The intent of this checklist is not to *prescribe* correct social behavior but rather to help teachers observe, understand, and support children whose social skills are still forming. The list is based on research on elements of young children's social competence and on studies comparing behavior of well-liked children with that of children who are not as well liked (Katz & McClellan, 1997; Ladd & Profilet, 1996; McClellan & Kinsey, 1999).

Many of the attributes included in the checklist indicate adequate social growth if they are *usually* true of the child. Illness, fatigue, or other stressors can cause short-term variations in a child's apparent social competence. Such difficulties may last only a few days. Teachers or caregivers will want to assess each child based on their frequent direct contact with the child, observation of the child in a variety of situations, and information given by parents and other caregivers.

If a child seems to have most of the traits in the checklist, then she is not likely to need special help to outgrow occasional difficulties. On the other hand, a child who shows few of the traits on the list might benefit from adult-initiated strategies to help build more satisfying relationships with other children.

The Social Attributes Checklist

I. Individual Attributes

The child:

❑ Is usually in a positive mood.
❑ Usually comes to the program willingly.
❑ Usually copes with rebuffs or other disappointments adequately.
❑ Shows interest in others.
❑ Shows the capacity to empathize.
❑ Displays the capacity for humor.
❑ Does not seem to be acutely lonely.

II. Social Skills Attributes

The child usually:

❑ Interacts nonverbally with other children with smiles, waves, nods, etc.
❑ Expects a positive response when approaching others.
❑ Expresses wishes and preferences clearly; gives reasons for actions and positions.
❑ Asserts own rights and needs appropriately.
❑ Is not easily intimidated by bullies.
❑ Expresses frustrations and anger effectively, without escalating disagreements or harming others.
❑ Gains access to ongoing groups at play and work.
❑ Enters ongoing discussion on a topic; makes relevant contributions to ongoing activities.
❑ Takes turns fairly easily.
❑ Has positive relationships with one or two peers; shows the capacity to really care about them and miss them if they are absent.
❑ Has "give-and-take" exchanges of information, feedback, or materials with others.
❑ Negotiates and compromises with others appropriately.
❑ Is able to maintain friendship with one or more peers, even after disagreements.
❑ Does not draw inappropriate attention to self.
❑ Accepts and enjoys peers and adults who have special needs.
❑ Accepts and enjoys peers and adults who belong to ethnic groups other than his or her own.

III. Peer Relationship Attributes

The child:
- Is usually accepted versus neglected or rejected by other children.
- Is usually respected rather than feared or avoided by other children.
- Is sometimes invited by other children to join them in play, friendship, and work.
- Is named by other children as someone they are friends with or like to play and work with.

IV. Adult Relationship Attributes

- Is not excessively dependent on adults.
- Shows appropriate response to new adults, as opposed to extreme fearfulness or indiscriminate approach.

References

Hartup, W. W. (1992). *Having friends, making friends, and keeping friends: Relationships as educational contexts.* ERIC Digest. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Katz, L. G., & McClellan, D. E. (1997). *Fostering children's social competence: The teacher's role.* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Ladd, G. W. (1999). Peer relationships and social competence during early and middle childhood. *Annual Review of Psychology, 50*, 333-359.

Ladd, G. W. (2000). The fourth R: Relationships as risks and resources following children's transition to school. *American Educational Research Association Division E Newsletter, 19*(1), 7, 9-11.

Ladd, G. W., & Profilet, S. M. (1996). The child behavior scale: A teacher-report measure of young children's aggressive, withdrawn, and prosocial behaviors. *Developmental Psychology, 32*(6), 1008-1024. EJ 543 361.

McClellan, D. E., & Kinsey, S. (1999) Children's social behavior in relation to participation in mixed-age or same-age classrooms. *Early Childhood Research & Practice* [Online], *1*(1). Available: http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v1n1/mcclellan.html.

Parker, J. G., & Asher, S. R. (1987). Peer relations and later personal adjustment: Are low-accepted children at risk? *Psychological Bulletin, 102*(3), 357-389.

Web Resources

Promoting the Emotional Well-Being of Children and Families Policy Paper No. 3: Ready to Enter: What Research Tells Policymakers about Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional School Readiness among Three- and Four-Year-Old Children
http://www.ecs.org/html/offsite.asp?document=http%3A%2F%2Fcpmcnet%2Ecolumbia%2Eedu%2Fdept%2Fnccp%2FProEmoPP3%2Ehtml

Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood: What We Know and Where to Go from Here
http://www.casel.org/downloads/SELearlychildhood.pdf

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning
http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel

Emotions Matter: Making the Case for the Role of Young Children's Emotional Development for Early School Readiness
http://www.srcd.org/Documents/Publications/SPR/spr16-3.pdf

Set for Success: Building a Strong Foundation for School Readiness Based on the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children
http://www.casel.org/downloads/kauffmann.pdf

Early Child Development in Social Context: A Chartbook. Socioemotional Development
http://www.cmwf.org/usr_doc/ChildDevChartbk.pdf

Good Beginning: Sending America's Children to School with the Social and Emotional Competence They Need to Succeed
http://www.casel.org/downloads/goodbeginning.pdf

Strengthening Social and Emotional Competence in Young Children: The Foundation for Early School Readiness and Success. Incredible Years Classroom Social Skills and Problem-Solving Curriculum
http://www.incredibleyears.com/research/article-foundation-fo-early-school-readiness-sccess-04.pdf

IEL Tip Sheets on Emotional and Social Development
http://ecap.crc.uiuc.edu/cgi-bin/iel/searchiel.cgi?searchtype=tipcategory&categories=Social/Emotional+Development

Adapted (with some additions) from McClellan & Katz (2001) Assessing Young Children's Social Competence and McClellan & Katz (1993), Young Children's Social Development: A Checklist.

Retrieved from: http://www.illinoisearlylearning.org/faqs/socialcomp.htm