Social Skills

Megan M. McClelland

Oregon State University

Shauna Tominey

Oregon State University


Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Megan M. McClelland, Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, 322 Milam Hall, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331; Phone: (541) 737-9225; Fax: (541) 737-1076. E-mail may be sent to megan.mcclelland@oregonstate.edu.
Children’s social skills are important for early school success and later adjustment. Research has documented that children without adequate social skills are at risk for difficulties including peer rejection, behavior problems, and poor academic achievement. Moreover, recent research shows disturbing rates of expulsion in preschool and kindergarten which has fueled efforts to promote these skills (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Broadly speaking, social skills describe how children navigate social and learning contexts and can be conceptualized as including interpersonal skills and learning-related skills. *Interpersonal skills* refer to the ability to perform competently in social situations, including interacting positively with others, cooperating, sharing, and respecting peers. Research has found that interpersonal skills are important for peer acceptance and social adjustment throughout childhood and adolescence (Masten et al., 2005).

In contrast to interpersonal skills, *learning-related skills* are important for learning and achievement in childhood and adolescence. These skills include self-regulation and social competence (e.g., cooperation, independence, and responsibility) on classroom tasks and in learning situations. There is strong evidence that learning-related skills predict academic achievement in kindergarten and throughout elementary school (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006). Aspects of learning-related skills are also important for achievement in adolescence (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

Although interpersonal skills and learning-related skills fall under the broad social skills construct, they are separate but related constructs with differing relations to outcomes in childhood and adolescence. Whereas interpersonal skills have been mostly linked to children’s
social development, learning-related skills have been related to doing well in classroom settings and to academic success.

Underlying Developmental Processes that Support the Development of Social Skills

One of the most important influences in early childhood is neurological maturation in the areas of the brain that help children control, direct, and plan their actions. Evidence from brain research shows these skills are associated with particular patterns of frontal lobe activity, specifically in the prefrontal cortex (Blair, 2002). Rapid development in the prefrontal cortex between ages 3 to 6 means the preschool period is a crucial time for acquiring social skills (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children’s social skills vary widely, however, which may be related to differences in prefrontal cortex development, as well as other individual and environmental factors throughout childhood and adolescence (Calkins, 2004). For example, recent research has suggested that growing up in poverty is related to increased stress levels for young children, which can alter brain development in ways that are linked to social skill and self-regulation difficulties (Dearing, Berry, & Zaslow, 2006; Gunnar, 2006).

Child temperament, including children’s level of reactivity and regulation, also plays a significant role in the social development of children and adolescents. One aspect of temperament, effortful control, helps children regulate their emotions and behavior, and has emerged as being especially important for self-regulation and social competence (Rothbart & Rueda, 2005).

A large body of research has also examined the vital role that parents play in the development of their children (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000).
Although many aspects of parenting are important for children’s development, parental warmth and sensitivity have emerged as two of the most salient predictors of children’s social development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006).

The quality of the parent-child attachment relationship also predicts children’s social skills. A number of studies have found that having a secure attachment with a parent allows children to express emotion effectively and develop strong self-regulatory skills. Moreover, studies of attachment highlight the importance of the child’s behavior, including reactivity and responsiveness, in helping to shape the attachment relationship (Calkins, 2004).

**Normative Developmental Changes in Social Skills from Early Childhood Through Late Adolescence**

From early childhood through adolescence, social skill development occurs through a reciprocal and bidirectional relationship between a child’s individual characteristics (e.g., temperament) and the environment (e.g., parent warmth and sensitivity, family factors, and peers). Children begin developing social skills within the context of the parent-child attachment relationship (Rubin, Buolkowski, & Parker, 2006). It is from this relationship that children learn to read emotional cues, regulate their own emotions and behavior, and incorporate the responses of their parents into their own experiences with people and situations; a process known as social referencing (Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). From observing family members, children learn appropriate social rules and behaviors, which they apply to interactions outside of the family.

In early childhood, children have exposure to other children in childcare settings. As toddlers, children engage primarily in solitary play, but interactions with other children increase
with age. Positive interactions with peers help children develop interpersonal skills, communication skills, emotional understanding/regulation, the ability to control aggressive behaviors, and early learning-related skills. A number of developmental changes occur in early childhood that also facilitate the development of social skills, including a significant increase in vocabulary (Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006) and brain maturation in the prefrontal cortex (Blair, 2002). These developmental changes lead to an improved ability to communicate and regulate feelings and behaviors. Children also begin to develop empathy and gain an understanding of the feelings, desires, and beliefs of their peers; skills which continue to impact social development throughout childhood and adolescence.

Friendships become increasingly important in middle childhood and adolescence, especially for the development of social skills. As children improve their ability to understand the emotions of others, they build increasingly mature friendships and strengthen their interpersonal and learning-related skills. Children and adolescents who have difficulty empathizing or self-regulating have few positive social interactions and are likely to be rejected or neglected by peers, which can significantly impact social well-being and academic outcomes (Rubin et al., 2006).

<H1>Relationships between Social Skills Development and Social and Academic School Adjustment</H1>

A large body of evidence supports the role that children’s social skills (including interpersonal skills and learning-related skills) play in social and academic success. In general, children’s interpersonal skills have been linked to social outcomes whereas learning-related skills have predicted academic success. Interpersonal skills are especially important for social
adjustment in childhood and adolescence. For example, one study found that poor interpersonal skills (e.g., externalizing problems) in childhood, predicted academic problems in adolescence, which in turn, led to internalizing problems in adulthood (Masten et al., 2005).

There is also strong evidence that learning-related skills predict early academic achievement (McClelland et al., 2006). For example, one study found that prekindergarteners who had difficulty using learning-related skills to complete goal-directed activities scored lower on a standardized cognitive achievement measure. These children also exhibited more risk factors, such as family problems, lower parental education, and behavioral or emotional problems (Bronson, Tivnan, & Seppanen, 1995). Another recent study found that the gains in learning-related skills, specifically self-regulation, predicted gains made in early literacy, vocabulary, and math skills over the prekindergarten year in a diverse sample of children across two sites in the United States (McClelland et al., 2007).

Other research in elementary school has demonstrated that kindergarten learning-related skills significantly predicted reading and math achievement between kindergarten and sixth grade, and growth in literacy and math from kindergarten to second grade (McClelland et al., 2006). Finally, in one recent study, aspects of learning-related skills, such as self-discipline, were stronger predictors of academic performance than intelligence test scores in adolescents (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

A number of studies also support relations between interpersonal skills and learning-related skills for children’s school adjustment. For example, research has shown that children’s self-regulation positively relates to social competence, and that strong self-regulation can buffer otherwise negative outcomes (Lengua, 2002). Taken together, research suggests that promoting
interpersonal skills and learning-related skills in young children and adolescents is one way to ensure strong social and academic skills.

**Assessing Students' Social Skills**

A variety of methods are used to assess children’s social skills. When determining a method of assessment, it is essential to select instruments that are reliable, valid, and feasible given cost and time limitations. It is also critical to choose measures that are appropriate for the age, developmental stage, and special needs of the target population (McClelland & Scalzo, 2006).

Naturalistic observations are one of the best methods for assessing interpersonal and learning-related skills. Typically, observations are conducted at school where there is ample opportunity to observe children interacting within social and learning environments. Observers should be objective and trained in how to code and record the frequency, duration, and interval of behaviors that are being assessed. Although observation provides a rich source of information, it is time-consuming and most useful for initial assessments rather than ongoing evaluation (McClelland & Scalzo, 2006).

Behavior rating scales also measure interpersonal and learning-related skills, but are less time-intensive and more cost effective than observations. They have high levels of reliability and validity and can be used to assess children who are too young to report their own behaviors. They do not, however, provide information about the antecedents and consequences of behavior.

Structured and unstructured interviews provide useful information regarding a child’s social context, although they lack reliability and validity. Another limitation of interviews is that
children often provide biased responses as they can be suggestible and influenced by social desirability.

Role-play, most commonly used by clinicians, allows direct observation of social skills when naturalistic observation is not possible. In role-play, children are asked to respond to a scenario or staged interaction. Although they can be used to elicit low-frequency behaviors that might not otherwise occur, role-play lacks generalizability because children may not respond to role-play as they would to real-world situations (Merrell, 2001).

Sociometric techniques assess peer relationships and interpersonal skills by asking children to rank classmates and identify peers they like/dislike and peers who exhibit specific behaviors, such as aggression. The reliability and validity of sociometric techniques are very strong, but there are many practical constraints. Sociometric techniques often require consent from all parents in a classroom, and parents are often reluctant to consent for fear that participation will reinforce social rejection (Merrell, 2001).

Risk and Protective Factors for Positive Social Skills Development

Research documents that children who are disadvantaged or of minority status may be at risk for having difficulty socially and academically in early childhood. For example, recent studies have linked growing up in poverty to a number of risk factors including poor achievement on cognitive and language outcomes, increased behavior problems (both externalizing and internalizing), increased stress levels, and difficulties with self-regulation and emotion regulation (Dearing et al., 2006). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds also have been found to exhibit poorer learning-related skills and do worse on academic indices throughout
elementary school compared to their peers (McClelland et al., 2006). These results suggest that income level and minority status can be risk factors in the development of social skills for children and adolescents.

One protective factor of children’s social skills development is parenting. Parents who are warm and sensitive and set appropriate limits for children are more likely to have children with strong interpersonal and learning-related skills. For example, research has found that children’s stress levels can be buffered by sensitive parenting, which can enhance children’s social and emotional development (Gunnar, 2006). Finally, children of chronically depressed parents are more likely to have lower social skills in early childhood (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003), making it especially important to work with parents to effectively promote children’s social skill development.

A number of studies have found that social skills deficits have been more often documented in boys than girls. Compared with girls, boys are more likely to be suspended and expelled at every grade level, drop out of school, exhibit behavior problems, and have lower education levels (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Research also indicates that girls have stronger aspects of learning-related skills and more adaptive classroom behavior than boys. One recent study found that girls had significantly stronger levels of self-regulation in kindergarten than boys, and there were greater numbers of boys scoring at the lowest levels on self-regulation over the school year compared to girls (Matthews, Ponitz, & Morrison, 2007).

Taken together, it is clear that a number of factors contribute to children’s positive social skill development. Effective strategies for strengthening social skills involve a multi-faceted approach to working with children and parents.
The teacher-child relationship plays a significant role in facilitating social skill development. Numerous studies have found that warm teacher-child relationships are associated with high levels of cooperation, social-competence, and learning-related skills in early childhood and elementary school. Teacher-reported negativity, however, has been associated with social difficulties in children. The ratio of teachers to children in the classroom also relates to children’s social skills. A smaller teacher-child ratio allows opportunities for children to work with teachers in small groups or one-on-one, and organization of children into smaller groups has been found to promote positive interpersonal and learning-related skills (Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta, 2005).

In addition to teacher factors, the classroom environment can facilitate the development of social skills. Classrooms that best promote these skills are child-centered and provide a stimulating, organized environment with ample opportunity for interaction (Cameron, Connor, & Morrison, 2005). Children demonstrate higher interpersonal and learning-related skills in classrooms where teachers provide organization and guidance, such as modeling appropriate social behaviors and problem-solving skills. Teachers can facilitate social problem-solving by demonstrating how to talk through the steps of a problem and by creating opportunities for children to practice social skills.

Children with social skills deficits most often have difficulties with one or more of the following areas: cooperation, communication, emotional understanding and regulation, aggression, and problem-solving (Bierman & Erath, 2006). To effectively help children who have social skills deficits, teachers can provide instruction and modeling of appropriate
behaviors and responses. In young children, teachers can also create opportunities for children to practice and generalize social skills through classroom interactions. As children practice social skills, teachers should provide positive feedback to promote appropriate behaviors and redirect inappropriate behaviors.

Social skills (interpersonal skills and learning-related skills) are important for academic success and social well-being from early childhood through adolescence. Children without adequate social skills are at risk of peer rejection, behavior problems, and poor academic achievement. A combination of child, parent, and environmental factors influence the development of social skills and it is therefore essential for teachers and researchers to consider a child’s context and use multi-faceted strategies to effectively promote positive social skills development.


