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How Parent's Concerns Relate To Their Children's Social Competence

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By

Vikki Anne Negron

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Social Competence

Abstract


This study investigated the relationship between parental concerns about future expectations, child development, parent-child interaction, discipline and social competence in urban preschoolers 2.9-4.8 years of age who attended the Rochester Preschool Parent Program (RPPP). The Parental Questionnaire was used to measure parental concerns (PMHP, 1998). Social competence was measured by parent and teacher ratings on the Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (T-CRS), the Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS), and the Child Observation Record (COR; High Scope Educational Foundation, 1992; Perkins & Hightower, 2000; PMHP, 1999).

The Kruskal Wallis test and Pearson Product-moment correlations were conducted to investigate whether there was a relationship between parental concerns and teacher and parent ratings of social competence. The results of this study confirmed that parental concerns about their children's future are related to their perception of their children's social competence. Parental concerns about parent-child interaction, child development, and discipline were not related to their perception of their children's social competence. Teacher ratings of children's social competence were not related to the parental concerns previously stated. Although this investigation provided insight into the relationship between parental concern and children's social competence, the obtained evidence is largely descriptive and correlational in nature.
Introduction and review of the literature

One goal of education is to allow children to become productive members of society (Marshall et al., 1996). Children’s ability to prosper in school is best achieved when their needs are met socially and academically. Social competence in young children is correlated to their success in interacting with adults and peers throughout their life (McCabe, 1998). Children use their interpersonal skills when developing long-lasting relationships with parents, teachers and peers. Poor social-emotional skills are reflected in children’s overall level of social competence, which is, in turn, related to their school readiness and level of psychological adjustment. Social incompetence is associated with peer rejection, poor academic performance, grade retention, juvenile delinquency, school drop-out, and substance abuse (Ladd & Asher, 1990; McCabe, 1998; Ramsey & Ramsey, 1992).

Helping children develop social competence may prevent the likelihood of social maladjustment difficulties. Effective interactions with adults in various social situations are associated with a decrease in the number of social problems children develop in and out of school (Marshall et al., 1996; Price et al., 1988; Spivack & Shure, 1974). Developing these skills allows children to participate effectively in structured classroom settings, control their behaviors, follow classroom rules, and cooperate and take turns with their peers (Ladd & Asher, 1990; Price et al., 1988; Spivack & Shure, 1974).

Children’s relationships with parents are significant predictors of their later social development (Gottman, 1983). Parents can provide opportunities for social engagement and encouragement of appropriate social behavior. Parental characteristics and interpersonal functioning, parental attitudes that shape the way parents interact with their children, and the type of discipline parents use greatly influence a child’s social behavior (Hartup, 1985). In this
literature review parental concerns and how those concerns relate to their children’s social competence will be examined. Parental concerns about child development, their children’s future, parent-child interaction, and discipline will be discussed.

Theories and Definitions

Researchers have adopted a broad definition of social competence which lends itself to a holistic examination of children. Failure to take a holistic approach has been a problem in past research where the main focus has been on children’s cognitive outcomes (Raven & Zigler, 1991). Multidimensional perspectives of social competence have served to remind researchers that children adapt to a diverse set of classroom demands, which require them to demonstrate social and emotional maturity with teachers and peers, motivation to learn, and academic achievement. Interest in redefining social competence has been sparked by a growing awareness of the need to tap multiple dimensions of competence when assessing the effectiveness of intervention programs (Raven & Zigler, 1991). Social competence is also associated with children’s ability to engage in positive relationships with parents, siblings, and teachers. The concept of social competence has been expanded to include broader issues of general adjustment or adaptation to societal demands through the study of children’s relationships with family, peers, and teachers (Raven & Zigler, 1991).

Social Competence and Peer Relations

The discovery of friendships is a major step in children’s acquisition of social competence (Parker & Asher, 1987). Before children make friends, social bonds are primarily between the child and parents or other adult caretakers. Within the family, children must recognize, accept, and adapt to their relationships with parents and siblings. Parent-child interaction is the context in which many competencies necessary for social interaction begin to
develop. This relationship provides children with many of the skills needed to conduct relationships with other people, such as language skills and the ability to control impulses. The parent-child relationship builds emotional and cognitive resources that allow children to explore their social and nonsocial environments, builds a safety net permitting children to take the risk of venturing outside the family, and is source of help in problem-solving (Hartup, 1985).

When children first move outside the family unit, they discover a range of options in the selection of play partners. Through interaction with peers, children learn that they can regulate social bonds on the basis of criteria that emerge from their needs and the demands of the social situation. They also learn that their peers will not always accept them immediately. Children must often convince others of their merit as playmates, and sometimes they must anticipate and accept exclusion (Hartup, 1985; Parker & Asher, 1987). An inability to successfully negotiate the implicit social rules and exchanges among peers often results in peer rejection (LaFreneire & Sroufe, 1985). Longitudinal research has linked peer rejection with detrimental consequences during later development, including emotional maladjustment, school failure, and delinquent behavior (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Piaget and others have identified children's peer play as a primary context for the acquisition of important social competencies. Play is often the medium through which children build social collaboration skills and learn to coordinate multiple points of view. Play interactions within the peer group are critical for providing young children with feedback necessary to engage in socialization activities. Through interaction with peers in play, children are able to develop an understanding of perspectives that are different from their own. These experiences help to increase their awareness of diversity and appropriateness of social behaviors, which often leads to enhanced social competence (Hartup, 1983; Ladd & Asher, 1990). Research
has focused on the ways that play with other children presents preschoolers with emotionally challenging circumstances (Denham, 1986) and examines how young children handle these experiences, depending on their self-regulation of emotions and behaviors. Competent children are considered to be those who can control their sadness, anger, and frustration, and remain emotionally and behaviorally organized in the face of such challenges. Generally this research is carried out in laboratory contexts, using observational measures to assess children’s regulatory skills (Denham, 1986).

Kopp (1989) suggested that adaptive behavioral skills applied during play are related to children’s ability to modulate aspects of ego-control, such as the ability to delay gratification and inhibit aggression. Children who can use these strategies to successfully negotiate social situations are considered to have high levels of social competence. Children who can remain emotionally positive during the course of interactions are viewed by teachers and peers as more likable and easier to get along with than those who are not emotionally positive. For example, Denham (1986) found that 2 and 3 year-olds often match or reinforce their peers’ happy facial expressions with positive prosocial displays of their own. Peers often respond to an angry child’s displays by leaving the play area. This important linkage of children’s display of positive affect and their acceptance by peers is complicated by their temperament and early familial affect patterns. Children’s emotional reactivity, their family environments, and their ability to use specific behavioral strategies to regulate their feelings determine their success with peers (Eisenberg et al., 1993; Gottman & Fainsilber-Katz, 1989).

Children’s knowledge of emotions includes their ability to identify how others usually display their emotions (Cassidy et al., 1992) and their estimation of what others might feel in a given situation (Denham, 1986; Garner, 1996). Children’s thoughts about emotions have an
impact on how they cope with real-world peer interactions, an important factor related to social competence. Denham (1986) found that children ages 2 to 3 who demonstrated greater understanding of emotion labels and appropriate emotion expressions in hypothetical vignettes were also more likely to demonstrate greater prosocial behavior with peers. These positive associations between children’s understanding of emotion expression and their prosocial behavior have been found for both low and middle-income preschoolers (Garner, 1996).

Social Competence and Social Cognition

In the past couple of decades, child development researchers have become increasingly interested in the connection between children’s thoughts and feelings (social cognitions) and children’s behavior with peers (Dodge et al., 1986; Mitze & Ladd, 1990). Accordingly, research in this area investigates whether individual differences in children’s social behaviors are a function of underlying social-cognitive abilities. Whether children behave in friendly ways with their peers may depend on how they think about their peers as well as how much knowledge they have about initiating friendly interactions.

Pettit and Mitze (1993) developed a conceptual model that summarizes three aspects of social-cognitive functioning in early childhood. This model borrows from Dodge’s framework (Dodge et al., 1986), but delineates the social-cognitive processes that appear to specifically explain preschoolers’ social behavior. According to Pettit and Mitze, children’s ability to achieve positive peer interaction depends on three social-cognitive processes. The first process involves social knowledge. Socially competent children, compared to less skilled children, have schemas of social knowledge that are relevant to the social problems they encounter (Mitze & Ladd, 1990; Pettit et al., 1988). When faced with a social task, like joining a group of children
already at play, competent children are more likely to be successful than less competent children, because they have more cognitive strategies to review the behavioral options available to them.

The second process is reading social cues. Socio-cognitive competent children are skilled at attending to and discriminating relevant social cues (Dodge et al., 1986; Meese et al., 1993). Children who lack social perceptual skills often appear to lack good judgement because they overlook important social signals (such as their partner looking bored or irritated), attend exclusively to one type of signal (such as signs of hostility or rejection), or misinterpret a peer’s actions (such as a child’s assumption that a peer’s accidental bump was intentional and malicious) (Dodge et al., 1986; Meese et al., 1993).

The third socio-cognitive process concerns children’s relationship views and expectations. Competent children differ from less competent children in their general approach to and expectations for relationships, including their tendency to view relationships with others as rewarding. They see themselves as capable and confident in producing positive peer outcomes. The net result is that socially effective children are more likely to seek out the company of peers and to expect that peers will seek them out. Moreover, competent children anticipate that such encounters will be positive and enjoyable (Ladd & Crick, 1989).

A growing body of evidence suggests that social-cognitive factors serve as a mediator between children’s experiences with parents and their later styles of interacting with peers (Hart et al., 1993; Pettit et al., 1988; Pettit et al., 1991). Warm, positive, responsive parenting is associated with children’s positive beliefs about their own competence and the outcomes they expect in social interaction (Pettit et al., 1991). Harsh, punitive parenting predicts children’s tendencies to make misattributions about others’ behavior (Dodge et al., 1990) and to display poor interpersonal problem-solving skills (Pettit et al., 1988). No study has yet linked parents’
management practice with children's social-cognitive skills. However, Pettit and Mitze (1993) have speculated on the ways in which styles of parent-child interaction and the quality of parent teaching and advice giving may each contribute to a set of cognitive processes that are associated with social competence.

It is likely that parent-child interaction style contributes to children's social competence through distinctive social-cognitive practices. By participating in warm synchronous interactions with parents, children may learn to expect that relationships with others will be rewarding. Moreover, positive synchronous relationships may encourage attentiveness and sensitivity to social cues, which in turn allow children to better coordinate their behavior with peers. This interpersonal sensitivity is a by-product of the numerous opportunities to practice reading the cues of caregivers and then applying that practice in interaction with a sensitive partner (Pettit & Mitze, 1993). Similarly, parent-child physical play provides children with experience in detecting the emotional signals of others in an emotionally charged, exciting context. Moreover, parent-child play may enlarge children's knowledge base with respect to fun and exciting play themes and activities. In other words, because of parental play experiences, children may learn new games and play techniques that they can use with peers.

Howes (1987a) studied social interaction and friendship formation among preschool children and their peers. Social interaction skills in this study were operationally defined as (1) ease of entry into playgroups, (2) play with peers, (3) affective expressions, and (4) behavior that leads to peer acceptance and popularity. Friendships were defined as stable relationships where children seek each other out.

In preschool children (3-5 years) social interaction is defined as social knowledge of the peer group, recognition of friends and playmates, and social perspective taking. Howes (1987a)
found that social interaction skills are limited by cognitive capabilities. She concluded that social competence at one developmental stage predicts social competence in later developmental stages. Based on classroom observations and teacher and peer ratings in childcare settings, it was determined that children don’t engage in pretend play with peers before they acquire symbolic function and an ability to communicate meaning. According to Howes (1987b), children should have acquired representational thinking by age four and should be expected to engage in pretend play with peers to foster their social interaction skills, which is an important component of social competence.

Children’s thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about relationships and social situations play a pivotal role in their social competence with peers. Dodge et. al (1990) and others have found that aggressive children who are rejected by peers tend to make inaccurate attributions of others’ intentions (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Children’s misjudgement of the intentions of others may be excited under emotionally loaded situations, such as when they feel frightened or upset (Dodge & Somberg, 1987). Young children gain knowledge of social expectations from observation, participation, experience, and instruction. They learn that different social groups have different expectations, norms, and beliefs. Social interaction within various contexts provides different learning experiences for children. The information gained by different experiences leads to a repertoire of skills and strategies for participation in social activities that require a high level of social competence (McCabe, 1998).

In summary, social competence is defined as a set of skills enabling children to interact effectively with peers and adults, manage their emotions, and solve interpersonal problems. Children learn fundamentals of social interaction from their parents. The early parent-child relationship is the forerunner of other relationships. It is in this relationship that children begin
to form expectations and assumptions about interacting with others and develop strategies for self protection and personal goal attainment. By teaching children how to deal effectively with relationships, parents help them to develop social competence (Ladd & Asher, 1990).

Types of Parental Influence

Discipline.

The effectiveness and style of parental discipline has been linked to children’s social competence. Researchers have suggested that socially competent children are likely to have parents who refrain from using harsh and punitive methods of control and instead use inductive methods, such as offering reasons for measures taken and encouraging verbal give and take (Hart et al., 1993). Extreme cases of parental punitiveness including abuse have been found to be associated with undesirable child outcomes, including aggressive behavior and peer rejection (Dodge et al., 1992). Wahler (1993) argued that exposure to aversive parental discipline eventually trains children to use similar kinds of interaction styles with family members and peers. However, it is not yet understood how this socialization influences children. Putallaz (1987) highlighted the importance of positive and agreeable parent-child interaction in fostering children’s development of social competence. For example, he found that the mothers of children who received high sociometric assessment ratings from their first grade peers were congenial and likely to focus on others’ feelings. Moreover, mothers who engaged their children in positive and agreeable ways had children who displayed similar styles in their interactions with peers.

Parent’s Role in Promoting Social Competence.

A degree of parental involvement in organizing and managing children’s social contacts is associated with positive peer relations (Ladd & Golter, 1988; Parke et al., 1988; Russell &
Finnie, 1990). Accordingly, parents who think it is important for their children to be socially competent are more likely to be involved in promoting it.

It has been found that mothers who valued the developmental importance of social skills had children who were more likely than other children to demonstrate social competence in the classroom (Rubin et al., 1989). These children initiated peer play, used appropriate requests to attain their goals, and were successful in achieving their goals. Mothers who did not believe so strongly in the importance of social skills had children who demonstrated less social competence than other children. These latter children frequently attempted to control the behavior of others, cried to achieve their goals, and showed indications of being hyperactive and distractible. It may be that parental involvement in promoting the development of social competence is mediated by strong beliefs in the importance of social skills, as well as individual temperament and psychological characteristics of the child. When a socially competent child demonstrates poor social performance, parents who place a relatively high value on social competence are likely to be the most involved and responsive. Over time, such involvement may be positively reinforced by the child’s acquisition of social skills (Rubin et al., 1989).

Parents who promote social competence in their children recognize that children play an active role in their own learning by exploring, experimenting, and gaining knowledge independently. Mothers who believe in such learning sometimes use indirect teaching strategies (e.g., asking questions, making suggestions, giving explanations) over directive strategies (e.g., issuing imperatives, giving directions) (Skinner, 1985). Rubin et al. (1989) found that mothers who indicated they would use indirect teaching strategies to help their children learn social skills (e.g., arrange opportunities for peer play) had preschool children who, in the classroom, were assertive and prosocial in meeting their social goals. Mothers who said they would use power-
assertive, directive strategies had youngsters who were unassertive, fearful, anxious, and adult-oriented.

Parents who promote social competence in their children generally view them optimistically, dismiss their negative behavior as situationally caused, and attribute their positive behavior to stable, internal traits. Parents who think that their children are to blame for their behaviors tend to feel negative about these behaviors and endorse the use of force in dealing with them (Dix & Lochman, 1998; Dix et al., 1989). According to Rubin et al. (1989), mothers with socially competent preschool children believed that social skill development is caused by factors external to their children such as parental teaching and the provision of opportunities for peer play, whereas mothers whose children did not demonstrate social competence believed that the development of social competence was caused by factors internal to the child (e.g., "just born that way," "too insecure"). Because external attributions focus on modifiable conditions, these attributions may be conducive to constructive ways of teaching children social skills. Internal attributions, on the other hand, lead to parents denying or minimizing the role they or their children play in enacting positive social change.

Parents choose the environment their children will be exposed to when engaging in peer contact. This occurs through choosing preschool or daycare programs, looking for a neighborhood to live in, and involving their children in different community settings where peers are present. These settings include parks, libraries, pools, art classes, sports, and scout programs (Berg & Medrich, 1980; Garbarino & Gillian, 1980; More & Young, 1978). The neighborhood presents a variety of social opportunities. It can be considered one of the most important contexts for the socialization of young children. Children spend most of their time involved in peer activities within the neighborhood. Children appear to have greater access to peers and
larger social networks when their neighborhoods have large child populations and houses are close in proximity together with sidewalks and playgrounds. Not all children live in neighborhoods with these advantages. The physical isolation or inaccessibility of some homes may create barriers for contact with peers. Urban environments that are dangerous limit children's peer contacts (Berg & Medrich; 1980; Garbarino & Gillian, 1980; More & Young, 1978).

Many community settings and activities may facilitate development of early social competence. Parents play an important role in facilitating children's access to these resources. Little research is available on the effects of structured activities that serve as settings for peer interaction (e.g., playgroups, gymnastics, story hour) on preschoolers. However, some data is available on unstructured activities such as those that occur in parks, playgrounds and libraries. These activities present the opportunity for informal peer contact. Bryant (1985) conducted a study of community supports for children and found that involvement in unstructured activities enabled children to develop perspective-taking skills. He hypothesized that children's efforts to construct their own activities in this context lead to greater autonomy, control, mastery, and ultimately, social competence.

Ladd & Price (1987) provided evidence to support Bryant's findings. Their study examined factors affecting children's transition from preschool to kindergarten. They asked parents to report the number of unstructured peer activities in which their children participated on a regular basis (e.g. swimming, library, Sunday School). They found that those children who were exposed to a narrow range of peer contexts in the community had weaker peer relations and a lower level of social competence at the beginning of kindergarten than those who had experienced a broader range of contacts.
When describing parental management practices, it is necessary to distinguish between parent’s orchestration (specific attempts to arrange and manage peer’s activities) and parental guidance (instruction and advice about peer issues). With respect to the former, some evidence suggests that parents not only take on an active role in initiating and organizing peer contacts for their children, they also employ strategies in these efforts that are associated with children’s social competence. Ladd & Golter (1988) studied parents’ efforts to initiate nonschool (in-home) play contacts with preschoolers using a telephone-log methodology. Data on parents’ initiations and preschoolers’ nonschool peer relations were gathered when children were in preschool. Measures of children’s classroom peer relations were obtained after they entered kindergarten. Approximately half of the parents had initiated one or more peer contacts. Children of parents who did initiate peer contacts were more likely to have a wider range of nonschool playmates and a larger number of consistent playmates in this context.

Further evidence of the importance of parental mediation was reported by Krappman (1996) in a study of German school-age children and their family. Krappman assessed parents’ efforts to arrange and organize children’s peer relations and found that parents who were active in this role tended to have children who developed closer, more harmonious ties with peers. Early playgroup experience was assessed by Ladd & Price (1987) in a study of young children’s transition to preschool. Results indicated the benefits of early playgroup experience. For children aged 41-55 months, involvement in a larger number of playgroups was positively associated with several measures of school adjustment, including their ability to adjust to classroom routines.

In summary, by exposing children to a variety of social situations, parents help their children develop social competence and become effective members of society (Ladd & Asher,
Parents who believe social competence is important and who recognize their children’s capacity for autonomous learning tend to have children who demonstrate social competence. Parents who think external factors are responsible when difficulties occur, tend to be involved, sensitive, and responsive in their parenting behavior also tend to have children who demonstrate social competence (Ladd & Asher, 1990).

**Future Expectations and Social Competence**

There was no research found on the relationship between future expectations and social competence. However, the social competence literature suggests that poor social competence is related to peer rejection, poor academic performance, grade retention, juvenile delinquency, school dropout, and substance abuse (Ladd & Asher, 1990; McCabe, 1998; Ramsey & Ramsey, 1992). When children are experiencing the behavioral sequelae of poorly developed social competence, their future prospects are in jeopardy.

**Poverty and Social Competence**

Unfortunately, the acquisition of social competence for an increasing number of our young children is adversely affected by poverty. Children who are under the age of six are more likely to be living in families who have incomes below the poverty line than children ages six to seventeen. In 1998, twenty-one percent of children under age six lived in poverty, compared with seventeen percent of older children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2000). Ethnic minority groups and large urban areas are disproportionately represented where schools and social service agencies are overwhelmed by urban crime and violence.

A prevalent theme in the literature is that the chronic stress associated with poverty has a negative impact on the emotional lives of parents and children. Faced with persistent financial
concerns and other stressors, low-income parents show less nurturance, less responsiveness to the social-emotional needs of their children, and more reliance on physical punishment and coercion to gain obedience than middle-income parents (Alvy, 1988; McLoyd, 1990). This pattern of parenting behavior has been associated with risk of lower social-emotional functioning as well as behavior problems in school and with peers (McLoyd, 1990; Patterson et al., 1991). Therefore, research with this population is especially important as a basis for the development of creative intervention programs that foster social competence in this population of at-risk children. Increasing low-income children’s social competence may provide them with a protective factor to combat other life stressors.

As the review of the research has illustrated, much is known about parent’s role in promoting social competence. However, there has been no research addressing how parental concerns relate to their children’s social competence. This study examines parental concerns about their children’s future, child development, parent-child interaction, and discipline in an urban setting.

It is expected that social competence will be significantly higher for children whose parents predict that their child will have a positive future than for children whose parents are not sure about their child’s future. Social competence will be measured by teacher and parent rating composite scores on the Teacher-Child Rating Scale-2.1 (T-CRS; Perkins & Hightower, 2000) and the Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS; PMHP, 1999). Parental concern about their children’s future will be measured by the Parental Questionnaire (PMHP, 1998). Children will be assigned to one of three groups depending on their overall score of future expectations. The Kruskal Wallis statistical test will be used to compare the means between the three groups.
Pearson product-moment correlations will be conducted if the mean scores are found to be significantly different.

It is expected that social competence will be significantly higher for children whose parents show concern about parent-child interaction, child development, and discipline than for parents who show no concern about these areas. Social competence will be measured by teacher and parent rating scale composite scores on the T-CRS and P-CRS. Parental concerns will be measured by the Parental Questionnaire (High Scope Educational Foundation, 1992; Perkins & Hightower, 2000; PMHP, 1998; PMHP, 1999). Children will be assigned to one of four groups depending on their overall scores of parent-child interaction, child development, and discipline. The Kruskal Wallis statistical test will be used to compare the means between the four groups. Pearson product-moment correlations will be conducted if the mean scores are found to be significantly different.

It is expected that social relations will be significantly higher for children whose parents predict that their child will have a positive future than for children whose parents are not sure about their child’s future. Social relations will be measured by teacher ratings on the Social Relations Subscale of the Child Observation Record (COR; High Scope Educational Foundation, 1992). Parental concern about their children’s future will be measured by the Parental Questionnaire (PMHP, 1998). Children will be assigned to one of three groups depending on their overall score of future expectations. The Kruskal Wallis statistical test will be used to compare the means between the three groups. Pearson product-moment correlations will be conducted if the mean scores are found to be significantly different.

It is expected that social relations will be significantly higher for children whose parents show concern about parent-child interaction, social development, and discipline than for children
whose parents show no concern about these areas. Social relations will be measured by teacher ratings on the Social Relations Subscale of the Child Observation Record (COR; High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1992). Parental concerns will be measured by the Parental Questionnaire (PMHP, 1998). Children will be assigned to one of four groups depending on their overall score of parent-child interaction, social development, and discipline. The Kruskal Wallis statistical test will be used to compare the means between the four groups. Pearson product-moment correlations will be conducted if the mean scores are found to be significantly different.

Method

Participants

The data used in this investigation was collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership (RECAP) and provided to this investigator by researchers at the Children’s Institute in Rochester, New York (Montes, et al., 2000). RECAP is a community-wide evaluation system which assesses early childhood education services. RECAP’s main purpose is to provide valid and reliable information to parents, educators, and policy-makers to make decisions and create programs related to early childhood services. Many early childhood programs participate in RECAP including ABC Headstart, Rochester City School District, Family Resource Centers of Rochester, and Rochester Preschool Parent Program (RPPP) (Montes et al., 2000).

Data, on ninety-four students (44 males and 50 females), collected by the RPPP staff in September 1999 was provided. The students’ ages ranged from 2.9 to 4.8 years. Participants were from ten preschool classrooms in the Rochester City School District. In each preschool classroom, the number of students ranged from 5 to 31, with an average of 15.4 students per
classroom. The number of staff per classroom ranged from one to five, with an average of 2.5. The ratio of students to staff ranged from 2.5:1 to 16:1 children per staff member, with an average of 6.6:1 (Montes et al., 2000). Gender, ethnicity, parental status, and marital status information are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Rochester Preschool Parent Program.**

The Rochester Preschool Parent Program is a Rochester City School District program for parents and their three and four-year-old children who reside in the city of Rochester. The purpose of this program is to increase children’s potential for school success by offering child-centered instruction and to help parents develop effective parenting skills. This program combines developmentally appropriate experiences for children with weekly educational parent group sessions for 28-36 weeks. This program is free and accessible in 17 neighborhood locations. RPPP currently operates 30 groups in 17 sites (16 public schools and one YMCA). Each classroom is staffed with a certified preschool teacher and a paraprofessional. The weekly parent group is staffed by a facilitator (Parent Group Leader). Parents are asked to volunteer in the classroom once per month (Rochester Preschool Parent Program, 2000).

**Measures**

**Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS).**

Teachers rated each child in this investigation on the Teacher Report of the Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (T-CRS; Perkins & Hightower, 2000). This scale consists of 32 behaviorally oriented items measuring different aspects of children’s social competence. Each question is measured on a five-point Likert scale from “Strongly Disagree” to Strongly Agree.” This measure includes four primary scales developed through factor analysis, namely: (1) task orientation (2) behavior control (3) assertiveness and (4) peer social skills. Task Orientation
Social Competence measures a child’s ability to concentrate on school related tasks. Examples of items on this scale are: “Functions well even with distractions,” and “Has difficulty following directions.” Behavior Control measures a child’s ability to adapt to limits presented to him/her by the school environment or limits the child has for him/herself. Examples of items on this scale include: “Accepts imposed limits,” and “Disruptive in class.” Assertiveness assesses a child’s interpersonal skills and confidence in interacting with peers. Examples of items are: “Defends own views under group pressure” and “Anxious, Worried.” Peer Social Skills assesses how well a child gets along with his/her peers. It includes items such as: “Has many friends,” and “Has trouble interacting with peers.” (Perkins & Hightower, 2000).

Each of these scales contains eight items, four measuring competency behaviors that are positive and four measuring problem behaviors considered negative. For purposes of this investigation, the T-CRS total score (overall level of adjustment consisting of an average of the competency and problem behaviors) was used (Perkins & Hightower, 2000).

Data collection for the T-CRS normative sample occurred during the 1998-1999 school year, mostly in the states of New York and Texas at sites who were familiar with PMHP Inc. The preliminary normative sample of the T-CRS consisted of 417 T-CRS forms from New York and 125 T-CRS forms from Texas. Two hundred and eighty-five T-CRS forms were also collected across nineteen other U.S. states. Teachers from randomly selected schools completed forms on four students randomly chosen from their classroom (Perkins & Hightower, 2000).

The final normative sample consisted of 700 children (391 boys, 309 girls) rated by their classroom teacher. Ages of the children in the sample ranged from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade with most coming from 1st through 6th grade. The sample was ethnically and racially distributed as follows: 65.7% White, 17% Hispanic, 12.7% African-American, 1.6% Asian, .9%
Native American, and 2.1% other. T-CRS normative data was gathered on preschool children from six agencies that are involved with the RECAP. The population sample used to create preschool norms consisted of 1612 urban preschool children (818 boys, 794 girls) from Rochester, New York (Perkins & Hightower, 2000).

Table 3 lists internal consistencies for the T-CRS scales, based on the normative sample (n = 700). Stability was measured using the pre and post-test scores for each of the scales taken about seven months apart. Test-retest reliability between pre and post-tests scores for each scale is shown in Table 4 for urban and suburban samples. These results demonstrate the reliability of the T-CRS.

Content validity for the T-CRS was established based on feedback given from teachers, psychologists, and other people who frequently used this and other instruments measuring socioemotional adjustment. The 32 items on the final version of the T-CRS were considered to symbolize the most salient characteristics of socioemotional adjustment (Perkins & Hightower, 2000). When the T-CRS was finalized, scores of 160 children who were demographically matched on sex, race, socioeconomic status, type of school (urban, suburban, rural), and grade, from both at-risk and random samples, were compared. Children who were placed in the at-risk sample were considered to be at-risk for academic problems because they exhibited social, emotional, behavioral, and learning problems. The at-risk children were part of the Primary Mental Health Project, a school intervention which addresses the needs of at-risk children who are doing poorly in school because of behavioral and/or socioemotional problems. Children were randomly selected by their teachers to have their socioemotional adjustment rated (Perkins & Hightower, 2000).
The T-CRS's construct validity was measured using the normative sample for Goodness of Fit. Values above .90 are considered to be a good fit, with 1.00 being a perfect fit. Values approaching 0.00 on any index are considered to be a poor fit. Table 5 shows the results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the T-CRS items. A Goodness-of-fit Index of .98 supports the factor analysis. Table 6 presents the correlations among the four factors of the T-CRS. The results from the reliability and validity data analyses show evidence that the T-CRS is both a reliable and valid measure for children's socioemotional adjustment.

Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS).

Parents rated each child on the Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS; PMHP, 1999). This scale consists of 39 behaviorally oriented items measuring different aspects of children's social competence as observed by the parent, mainly in the home setting (Montes et al., 2000). Each question is measured on a five-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." This scale is divided into six subscales of socioemotional competence which are similar to those of the T-CRS: (1) peer social skills (2) negative social behavior (3) assertive social skills (4) task orientation (5) shy-anxious behavior and (6) frustration tolerance. Peer Social Skills assesses how well a child gets along with his/her peers. It includes items such as: "Likes to play with other children" and "Makes friends easily." Negative Social Behavior items are associated with poor social skills. Items such as: "Irritates friends" and "Bothers other children" are included. Assertive Social Skills assesses a child's interpersonal skills and confidence in interacting with peers. Examples of items are: "Is a self-starter" and "Is self-motivated." Task-Orientation measures a child's ability to concentrate on school related tasks. Examples of items on this scale are: "Follows rules" and "Completes things he or she starts." Shy-Anxious Behavior items are associated with displaying nervous, withdrawn behaviors. It includes items
such as: "Gets nervous easily" and "Is shy, withdrawn." Frustration Tolerance measures a child's ability to handle frustration when things do not go his/her way. Examples of these items are "Deals well with failure" and "Deals well with frustration."

For purposes of this investigation, the P-CRS total score (overall level of adjustment which consists of an average of the competency and problem behaviors) will be discussed. The P-CRS is still being developed. Developmental norms, reliability data, and validity studies are in progress.

**Child Observation Record (COR).**

Teachers rated each child in the investigation on the Social Relations Subscale of the High Scope Child Observation Record (COR), an evaluation instrument used with preschool children to assess children’s behavior in six developmental categories including initiative, social relations, creative representation, music and movement, language and literacy, and mathematics (High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1992). Social relations are defined as how well children deal with daily situations that test social skills. Examples of items on the Social Relations subscale include: "Relating to other children," "Making friends with other children," and "Engaging in social problem solving." For each item, teachers rate the child's level of social behavior on a Likert scale ranging from "Child does not yet engage in this activity" to "Child engages in complex interactions with other children."

The COR’s reliability and validity were studied using ratings of children’s behavior conducted by 64 teams of Head Start teachers and assistant teachers in southeastern Michigan. The teaching teams observed about 2500 children each year. The ethnic composition of the children in this sample was: 51% Black, 26% White, 14% Arab, 7% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 1% Native American. The teaching teams completed two rounds of observation in the fall of
1990 and spring of 1991. The project staff observed classes and evaluated a subsample of 98 children with the McCarthy Scales of Children’s Abilities (High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1992).

COR data was completed by the teachers and assistants in the fall of 1990. Internal reliability consistency coefficients were acceptable and ranged from .80 to .93 for teachers and .72 to .91 for assistant teachers. Concurrent validity of the COR with the McCarthy Scales of Children’s Abilities and other variables (children’s age and gender, mothers’ and fathers’ years of schooling, and mothers’ and fathers’ employment status) was demonstrated by Pearson product-moment correlations. Correlations of COR ratings with McCarthy Scales ranged from .27 to .66. There were strong correlations between COR ratings and children’s ages, ranging from .53 to .61. Children’s sex did not correlate with COR ratings. This suggests that there was no gender bias in the perceptions of the observers. There were slight correlations of COR ratings with socioeconomic status variables ranging from .14 to .28. Based on the statistical analyses presented, it can be concluded that the COR may be an acceptable tool to measure children’s overall development (High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1992).

The Parental Questionnaire.

The Parental Questionnaire (PMHP, 1998) provides information about how much concern is rated by parents about their children and themselves. Four areas of the scale include: (1) predictions about their children’s future (2) child development (3) parent-child interaction and (4) their views on discipline. Each question on the future relations scale is measured on a five-point Likert scale from “Not at all sure,” to “Very Sure.” Examples from the future expectations scale include items such as “Things will work out for your child” and “Your child will have a happy life.” Each question on the other three scales is measured on a four-point Likert scale.
from “Not at all concerned” to “Very Concerned.” The child development scale consists of items such as “Helping my child get along with other children” and “Helping children learn new things.” Examples from the parent-child interaction scale include items such as “Listening to and talking with my child” and “Showing my children affection without spoiling them.” The Parental Questionnaire is still being developed. Developmental norms, reliability data, and validity studies are in progress.

Procedure

With permission from the Director of RPPP and researchers at the Children’s Institute, an archival data set of parent and teacher ratings from September of 1999 was obtained. This data set, which consisted of social competence ratings of students enrolled in ten classes of the RPPP, was analyzed. All identifying information was removed from the data set. All information was gathered on computerized scan forms and entered into a statistical data log.

Results

It was expected that social competence, as measured by teacher and parent ratings scales, would be significantly higher for children whose parents predicted that their child would have a positive future than for children whose parents were not sure about their child’s future. Children were assigned one of three groups depending on their overall score of social competence. The Kruskal Wallis statistical test was used to compare the means between the three groups. There was no significant difference in teacher rated social competence between groups of parents with different future expectations $H' (2, N = 89) = .930, p = .638$.

There was a significant difference in parent ratings of social competence between groups of parents with different expectations for their child’s future $H' (2, N = 91) = 10.1, p = .006$. Out of a sample of 91, twelve parents were somewhat unsure if their children would have a
positive future and selected a “3” as their future expectations rating. Their social competence ratings had a mean rank of 25.92. Sixty-three parents were somewhat sure that their children would have a positive future and selected a “4” as their future expectations rating. Their social competence ratings had a mean rank of 46.87. Sixteen parents were very sure that their children would have a positive future and selected a “5” as their future expectations rating. Their social competence ratings had a mean rank of 57.63. A significant positive correlation between parent ratings of future expectations and parent ratings of social competence was supported by a Pearson product-moment correlation ($r = .376$, $p < .000$).

It was expected that social competence, as measured by teacher and parent ratings scales, would be significantly higher for children whose parents showed concern about parent-child interaction, child development, and discipline than for children whose parents showed no concern about these areas. Children were assigned one of four groups depending on their overall scores for social competence. The Kruskal Wallis statistical test was used to compare the means between the four groups. There was no significant difference in teacher ratings of social competence between groups of parents concerned about interacting with their children $H' (3, N = 83) = 3.57$, $p = .311$), child development $H' (3, N = 84) = 2.51$, $p = .473$), and discipline $H' (3, N = 82) = 2.23$, $p = .526$). There was also no significant difference in parent ratings of social competence between groups of parents concerned about interacting with their children $H' (3, N = 85) = 4.01$, $p = .260$, child development $H' (3, N = 86) = 2.92$, $p = .404$), and discipline $H' (3) N = 84) = 6.11$, $p = .106$.

It was expected that social relations, as measured by teacher ratings, would be significantly higher for parents who predicted that their children would have a positive future than for parents who were not sure about their future. Children were assigned to one of three
groups depending on their overall score of social competence. The Kruskal Wallis statistical test was used to compare the means between the three groups. There was no significant difference between teacher ratings of social relations and groups of parents concerned about their children's future $H'(2, N = 80 = 1.16, p = .560)$.

It was expected that social relations, as measured by teacher ratings, would be significantly higher for children whose parents showed concern about interaction, child development, and discipline than for children whose parents showed no concern about these areas. Children were assigned to one of four groups depending on their overall score for parent-child interaction, child development, and discipline. The Kruskal Wallis statistical test was used to compare the means between the four groups. There was no significant difference in teacher ratings of social relations between groups of parents concerned about interacting with their children $H'(3, N = 74) = .423, p = .936)$, child development $H'(3, N = 75) = .212, p = .976)$, and discipline $H'(3, N = 73) = 4.13, p = .195$.

Discussion

The present study investigated how parental concerns relate to their children’s social competence. There was no relationship between teacher ratings of social competence and any parent ratings. Whether parents were concerned about helping their children get along with their peers did not effect how teachers rated children’s popularity with peers, ability to handle conflict, ability to express feelings, and ability to work with others towards a common goal. This finding may have occurred because teachers and parents are rating children’s social competence in different environments and social situations. Children may demonstrate different social competencies in school than at home.
There was a significant difference in parent ratings of social competence between groups of parents with different expectations for their child’s future. Parent ratings of future expectations and social competence were positively correlated; the more certain parents felt that their children’s future would be positive, the higher they rated their children’s social competence. This finding is consistent with McCabe’s argument that social competence in young children is correlated with their success in interacting with adults and peers throughout their life (McCabe, 1998). Children who are experiencing the repercussions of poorly developed social competence may not have as positive a future as socially competent children who are not experiencing these repercussions.

According to responses on the Parental Questionnaire and the P-CRS, some parents who rated their children’s level of social competence high were not as concerned about interacting with their children as parents who gave their children’s social competence a low rating. Parents who rated their children’s level of social competence high did not indicate that they were concerned about listening to and talking to their children, helping their children to understand their feelings, or organizing time to be with their children. These parents may have felt that their children interacted effectively with peers and adults in social situations and, therefore, they were less concerned about interaction. Perhaps these parents felt that they have a good relationship with their children and that they would be perceived as not having a positive relationship with their children or as inadequate parents if they showed concern about interacting with their children. Thus results should be interpreted with caution because the parents may have misinterpreted the questions.

Findings indicate that parents who felt their children’s social competence was high were also less concerned about discipline than parents who felt their children’s social competence was
low. Perhaps parents believed this question implied that discipline is a problem and, therefore, may not be endorsed. Also, if parents felt that their children had a high level of social competence, they may have thought that whatever discipline system they were using was effective, and, therefore, did not express concerns about discipline. Parents of children with low levels of social competence may have shown concern about how to discipline their children because they may have felt that the methods they were using were not effective.

**Limitations of this Study**

An important limitation in this study was the wording of the Parental Questionnaire which may have skewed the results. On the future expectations scale, each question is measured on a five-point Likert scale from “Not at all sure” to “Very Sure.” However, parents used only responses 3, 4, and 5. Most parents were somewhat sure that their children had a positive future. They may have felt that their children were very young and resilient. Parents may not have related their child’s ability to interact socially with adults and peers, his/her future ability to get along with peers and adults, complete high school, obtain a job, avoid trouble, and handle difficult social situations. On the child development, discipline, and parent-child interaction scales, the response profile ranged from 1-5, one being “Not at all concerned” and five being “Very Concerned.” The directions stated that all parents have some concerns. Parents may have felt obligated to state concerns even if they didn’t have any, or alternatively they may have felt that if they showed any concerns, they would be considered “bad parents.”

The threat of parent and teacher bias was a limitation in this study. Social competence was rated by parents and teachers who saw the children in different settings and social situations. The discrepancy between parent and teacher ratings indicates a need to utilize multi-method, multi-rater methods in observational assessment. These raters should have a clear understanding
of the definition of social competence and have no relationship with the children. This would allow for a universal perception of social competence and eliminate parent and teacher biases. It would also provide more meaningful results for future researchers.

Another limitation of this study is the reliability and validity of the rating scales. The two teacher rating scales (COR and T-CRS) have been normed on preschool populations and have a significant amount of reliability and validity data (High Scope Educational Research, Foundation, 2000; Perkins & Hightower, 2000). However, no reliability and validity data is available for the two parent rating scales (Parental Questionnaire and the P-CRS) (PMHP, 1998; PMHP, 1999). No correlation was found between the T-CRS and the P-CRS composite scores.

The fact that the construct of social competence may have not been fully represented in the measures used for this study is also a significant limitation. The social competence literature indicates that social competence is defined as a set of skills enabling children to interact effectively with peers and adults, manage their emotions, and solve interpersonal problems (Ladd & Asher, 1990; Ladd & Crick, 1989; Howes, 1987a; Pettit & Mitze, 1993). Peer sociometric ratings, vignettes that require children to demonstrate social competencies in different social situations, and multiple parent and teacher measures are suggested for investigators who wish to conduct future research.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study confirm that parental concerns about their children’s future are related to their perception of their children’s social competence. However, parental concerns about parent-child interaction, child development, and discipline are not related to their perception of their children’s social competence. Teacher’s perceptions of children’s social competence are not related to the parental concerns previously mentioned. Although this
investigation gives some insight into relations that may exist between parental concern and children’s social competence, the existing evidence is largely descriptive and correlational in nature.
References


Table 1

Gender and Racial Information of the Sample (N = 94)

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<th>Characteristic</th>
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<th>Percent</th>
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Table 2

Parental Status, Race, and Marital Status of the Parents

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<th>Percent</th>
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<td>5.3</td>
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<td>Uncle</td>
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<td>3.2</td>
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<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>44.6</td>
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Table 3

Alpha Reliabilities for the T-CRS 2.1 Primary Scales (N = 700)

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<th>Scale</th>
<th>Coefficient Alpha</th>
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<tr>
<td>Task Orientation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Control</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Social Skills</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

Stability of T-CRS 2.1 as Measured by Correlations between Time 1 and Time 2, Seven Months Apart, by Sex and Locale

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<th>Female</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>n</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task Orientation Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control Assertiveness</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>114</td>
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<td>Peer Social Skills</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>114</td>
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Note. All correlations significant, p < .001.

Note. At this time, we do not have the rural pre-post data for the stability analysis.

*Significant difference in means (p < .05), but when corrected for the number of comparisons, difference in means was not significant.

Table 5

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of T-CRS 2.1 items (N = 654)

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Note. All loadings significant at p < .05.

### Table 6

**Correlations Between T-CRS 2.1 Scales**  \((N = 700)\)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Behavior Control</th>
<th>Assertiveness</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Peer Social Skills</td>
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**Note.** All correlations are significant, \(p < .01\).