



## **Social and emotional competence**

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### **Abstract**

The study of social competence is one of the most important areas of research into human social behaviour. The paper discusses and analyses the achievements of past research on social competence from a pedagogical perspective. First, the concept and content of social competence are defined, and next, the components of emotional competence and their functions are discussed as important factors in the operation of social competence. This is followed by an analysis of social skills and abilities and a description of measurement practices. Finally, a discussion of methods used to foster social skills and abilities concludes the paper.

**Keywords:** social competence, emotional competence, social skills, social abilities

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## **Introduction**

Social competence is one of the most widely investigated areas of human social behaviour. In recent decades, more and more emphasis has been placed in educational research on the study of the development of social competence. Social competence is increasingly recognised as vital to school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Socially competent children are more successful than their less competent peers in developing positive attitudes towards school and in adjusting to school. Moreover, they get better grades and achieve more (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004; Zsolnai, 2002).

Social - emotional indicators, including positive interactions with teachers, positive representations of self derived from attachment relationships, emotion knowledge, emotion regulatory abilities, social skills, and nonrejected peer status, often uniquely predict academic success when other pertinent variables, even earlier academic success, have been controlled for (Denham, Blair, DeMulder, Levitas, Sawyer, Auerbach-Major & Queenan, 2003; DiPrete & Jennings, 2011).

Recently more and more books and studies have been published on the issue (e.g. Anderson, 2000; Kasik, 2007; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007; Zsolnai, 2013). This has been accompanied by an increased interest in teaching social skills too (Gresham & Elliot; 1993; Tóth & Kasik, 2010; Zins, Elias & Greenberg, 2003; Zins & Elias 2006). In spite of this, there are not enough programs focused on the development of social skills that are integrated into school instruction and that stress prevention in preference to the alleviation of already existing interpersonal problems (Zsolnai, 2012).

## **Social and emotional competence**

### ***Social competence***

Social competence is an ever-changing system, which consists of social motifs and social abilities and has the function to organise social behaviour, and to trigger the operation of the individual elements of the system. The system of social abilities is composed of simple and complex abilities and their components, that is skills, routines and the social knowledge accumulated by the individual (Nagy, 2000; 2007; Zsolnai & Józsa, 2003). The effectiveness of social behaviour depends to a large extent on the quality and quantity of the individual's array of social skills. The richer the set, the greater the chances are that the individual can activate the most appropriate skill to handle a given situation.

Social competence has traditionally been defined as the complex system of social abilities, habits, skills and knowledge. In Argyle's definition (1999), social competence is an ability, the mastery of social skills, which make it possible to generate the desired effect in social relationships. Schneider's approach (1993) is very similar, viewing social competence as enabling one to engage in appropriate social behaviour, thus enhancing one's interpersonal relationships in a way not harmful to others. Rose-Krasnor (1997) defined

the construct of social competence as effectiveness in interaction, the result of organised behaviours that meet short- and long-term developmental needs. Rose-Krasnor's model of social competence includes specific social, emotional and cognitive abilities, behaviours and motivations that are primarily individual. The developing child's increasing cognitive, motor and emotional skills facilitate the growth of a variety of social abilities (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992). In this approach social competence has been operationalized using the four general areas of social skills, peer status, relationship success and functional goal-outcome assessments (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). None of these include intra-psychic or relational aspects of emotional abilities in any explicit manner.

During the past decades many researchers have called for greater awareness of emotions and emotional communication skills in social competence (e.g. Hubbard & Coie, 1994; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Nowicki & Duke, 1992). As Amy G. Halberstadt and her colleagues (2001) observed, emotional content often determines the meaning of an interaction. Emotions are integral to social interaction; as dynamic processes they create and are created by relationships with others.

Crick and Dodge (1994) developed a model of information processing mechanisms in social encounters. "Their goal is primarily one of delineating the information-processing aspects of social competence, however, so there is less emphasis on the effective sending of affective information, and on the awareness, understanding, and management of one's own affect" (Halberstadt, Denham & Dusmore, 2001, p. 80).

Saarni (1990, 1997, 1999) was the first theorist to emphasize the internal experiential aspects of competence and the importance of genuineness of emotional experience, and asserts that emotional competence is 'contextually anchored in social meaning' (1999, p. 2). She stresses the role of culture in determining how these aspects are expressed.

### ***Emotional competence***

The concept of emotional competence emerged in the literature in the past decade (Denham et al., 2003; Denham et al., 2004; Denham, Bassett & Wyatt, 2007; Dowling, 2001; Parke, 1994). Researchers studying emotional competence claim that emotional and social competence are closely intertwined. At the same time, they firmly believe that emotional competence is a construct of its own right, and as such, it must be investigated as an independent phenomenon (Denham et al., 2003). Until recently, research has largely focused on the complex relationship between social and emotional competence in children and on how they influence each other during the course of children's social and emotional development (Smith & Hart, 2004; Webster-Stratton, 2002).

Emotional competence comprises three basic components. They are (a) the expression of emotions, (b) the understanding of emotions and (c) the experience of emotions (Denham et al., 2003; 2004). The appropriate *expression of emotions* is of primary importance in social interactions, and the way an individual communicates his or her negative and positive emotions to others is also a crucial factor influencing the evolution of his or her

relationships. The second component of emotional competence is the *understanding of emotions*. Children and adults who understand their own and others' emotions (e.g. those who can discern what emotions facial expressions 'hide') are much more likely to be successful in their relationships than those who lack this ability (Denham et al., 2003; 2004; 2007). The third component is the *experience of emotions*, the function of which is to recognize and regulate emotions of varying intensity. This includes all those external and internal processes that are responsible for monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional reactions when pursuing a particular social goal (Thompson, 1994). In addition, previous research has provided evidence that there is a strong relationship in childhood between the effective regulation of emotions and the developmental level of social competence (Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, Murphy & Holgren, 1997; Eisenberg, Guthrie, Fabes, Reiser, Murphy & Holgren, 1997).

Building on Saarni's work, Amy G. Halberstadt, Susanne A. Denham and Julie C. Dunsmore (2001) use the term *affective social competence* for their model. The authors chose this term because they wanted to emphasize the integral and dynamic relationship between affect and social interaction. Affective social competence (ASC) has three basic components: sending affective messages, receiving affective messages and experiencing affect. Within each component there are four abilities: (a) awareness, (b) identification, (c) working within a social context and (d) management and regulation. These abilities develop in sequence as children mature and become more experienced with their own emotions and with social interactions. Each ability is linked hierarchically within each component and across components. The authors depict their model "as a pinwheel, a children's toy that rotates in the wind, to emphasize the constantly changing nature of social interactions, and the knowledge of process that is implied in the continual integration of the various components of affective social competence within the ever-changing social world" (2001, p. 87).

The complex relation of social and emotional competence is a largely undiscovered field, but the research results of the past few years indicate the importance of this issue. It can be assumed that emotional competence plays a crucial role in the development of social competence, especially in childhood.

### **Social skills and abilities**

It is also a widely accepted thesis that social competence consists in the possession of different *social skills and abilities* (Argyle, 1999). The literature discusses over a hundred social skills, of which communication skills are regarded as the most important. The appropriate application and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication signals, such as eye contact, posture, social distance, facial expressions and speech tone are essential for a person to be successful in interpersonal relationships (Argyle, 1999). Among social skills, Spence (1983) distinguished the sets of microsocial and macrosocial skills. The former includes verbal and non-verbal communication and social perception;

the latter comprises empathy, helping behaviour, co-operation, altruism, and conflict-resolution skills.

One of the basic characteristics of social skills is that they are acquired through learning (Argyle, 1999; Dowling, 2001; Gresham & Elliot, 1993; Webster-Stratton, 2002). Furthermore, social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) has shown that children's social learning is influenced most by imitation, reinforcement and modelling.

It is an inherent characteristic of social skills that they reflect the specific requirements of the surrounding culture (Saarni, 1999). In countries where deviation from social norms is less tolerated, there is considerably more pressure on parents and children to avoid deviation from norms of accepted social behaviour. The majority of non-verbal communication signals are culture bound too. In some cultures downcast eyes are a sign of respect rather than an indication of social anxiety or shyness. Girls or women in some cultures may be considered immodest if they look at others, particularly adult males, too directly.

Moreover, culture can even modify the meaning of those signals that are present in most cultures. Significant differences can be observed in the prosocial behaviour of children from different cultures, too (e.g. Cole & Tan, 2007; Damon, 1983). The examples above demonstrate that social behaviour and its constituents, social skills are, to a large extent, culture specific.

### **Assessment of social skills and abilities**

Assessment of social skills and abilities needs to include an *interview* with the child, parents and teachers if possible, *observations* of the child in structured and unstructured situations, assessment measures that may include *rating scales* completed by the child, parent and teacher, and possible use of *role play* and *situational coaching*. The range of possible measures varies by the age of the child; e.g. the behaviour self-rating scales are not helpful for preschool children (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007).

#### *a) interviews*

An interview with a child must be geared to his/her developmental level and the questions of the interview need to draw out both the child's strengths and difficulties. The interviewer has to use short and concrete questions. It is better to ask closed questions than abstract questions. For example, "who are your friends" rather than "what do you like in a friend?"

#### *b) observations*

Observing a child when classes are changing or when he/she is in unstructured situations is helpful to understand his/her social skills and abilities. Observations can be formally conducted and coding systems are readily available (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007).

*c) self-report measures*

Self-esteem is a very important issue and has been linked to social adjustment. Many questionnaires provide a global rating as well as scores in other domains of functioning (i.e. academic etc.). Most self-report measures also have parent and/or teacher versions.

*d) peer nominations*

Peer nominations have been used to determine the acceptance of a child within his/her peer group. There are several forms of this type of measurement. This technique uses two dimensions: social preference (popular, average, rejected categories) and social impact (neglected, average, and controversial).

### **Social skills development programs**

In the 1970s researchers realised that social skills development should be systematically assessed as early as at lower primary school age. One of the school-based experiments starting at this time was Staub's (1971) study, which was based on the premise that helping behaviour is greatly influenced by the child's level of empathy. Staub combined learning modelled behaviours with a role-play technique because he hypothesised that role-play, and, more specifically, role-switching has an empathy-boosting effect. The study of Spivack and Shure (1976) is outstanding among cognitive developmental programs targeting social behaviour. The authors designed a ten-week program to train children to resolve different social situations with the help of puppets, stories and role-play. These pioneering experiments have been followed by several similar programs over the past decades. There are more and more social skills development programs implemented in school environments (e.g. Konta & Zsolnai, 2002; Stephens, 1992; Weissberg, Barton & Shriver, 1997; Webster-Stratton, 2002; Zsolnai & Józsa, 2003). Over the past three decades a variety of social skills programs have been developed to help teachers with the difficult task of teaching children interpersonal behaviours.

### **Content of social skills training**

SST may be used to teach person specific sets of social competence. A common focus of SST programs is communication (verbal and nonverbal) skills. Another common focus of SST involves improving an individual's ability to perceive and act on social cues. Many people have problems communicating with others because they fail to notice or do not understand other people's cues, whether verbal or nonverbal. Learning to understand another person's spoken or unspoken messages is very important.

SST programs have employed a variety of methods: strategies that incorporate a cognitive-behavioural approach; coaching or direct instruction to teach targeted social skills; recreation or social skills games, reinforcing appropriate behaviour and providing positive verbal, social and physical feedback; and teaching theory of mind or the ability to infer emotions and mental states of other people (Chen, 2006). Such specific techniques

as *instruction, modelling, role-playing, feedback, cooperation, and reinforcement* of positive interactions may be used in these programs.

Teachers, as well as peers can model strategies such as managing anger so that students with difficulties can see what these strategies look like in context. Effective modelling specifies what should be taught, involves a variety of student models, and targets students with developmental and cognitive delay.

In role-playing exercises, group members have the opportunity to offer feedback to one another about their performance in simulated situations. Role-playing, positive reinforcement, corrective feedback, avoidance of negative comments, and repeat steps are some of the factors that need to be considered.

Cooperative learning is a very good strategy for encouraging positive peer interactions and the generalization of social skills as well as promoting academic achievement. Students in cooperative learning groups can learn responsibility.

The advantage of SST is that it focuses on teaching skills that can be learned rather than emphasizing the internal or biological determinants of social competence.

Nowadays there are only a few social skills development programmes available to teachers in Hungary (Tóth & Kasik, 2010; Zsolnai, 2012). One of the main reasons for this is that Hungarian public education mainly concentrates on cognitive skills and abilities at the expense of the development of social and emotional skills and abilities (Zsolnai, 2013). In spite of this, a few Hungarian projects have demonstrated the success of intentional and planned development programmes (Gádor, 2008; Konta & Zsolnai, 2002; Sütőné, 2005).

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