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# Early Interventions to Improve Peer Relations/Social Competence of Low-Income Children

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## Introduction

Social competence is defined as the capacities children possess for developing positive relationships with adults and other children.[1] It is well accepted that children's development in all areas of functioning is influenced by this ability to establish and maintain positive, consistent and primary relationships with adults and peers.[2] Early childhood educators and researchers realize that social competence is a complex, multifaceted area of development and includes skills such as regulating one's emotions, communicating effectively, being able to take the perspective of others, problem-solving and conflict resolution, and developing positive peer relationships.[3]

## Subject

For preschool-aged children, managing effective peer relations represents an important developmental task and a primary indicator of school readiness. Child-initiated play during the

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preschool years provides a dynamic developmental context where this competency is manifest.[4] Studies have highlighted important associations between positive peer play interactions and the development of other competencies indicative of school readiness, such as emergent literacy skills, approaches to learning, and self- regulation.[5,6] For example, through pretend play children develop story-telling and memory abilities that contribute to emergent literacy.[6] Moreover, maintaining effective play interactions with peers requires children to exercise self-control and a host of other important behaviours that can affect learning in school, such as cooperation, attention and persistence.[7,4] Children who develop positive relationships with their peers during the preschool years have a greater likelihood of experiencing positive adjustment in kindergarten, as well as positive social and academic outcomes in the elementary school grades and high school.[8-10]

**Problems**

Conversely, poor peer relations in the early years are associated with detrimental consequences during later developmental periods and adulthood.[11,12] Problems with peers have been linked to lower academic performance, retention, truancy and emotional maladjustment.[13-19] While acceptance from peers helps motivate children to become involved in classroom activities, peer conflict and rejection can suppress children's motivation.[20-22] Low-income children are more likely than their economically advantaged peers to evidence early school difficulties, including behavioural and emotional problems, as well as poor school performance[23,24] and are therefore placed at greater risk for continued difficulties throughout schooling, such as grade retention and school dropout.[25]

**Research Context**

To date, the most widely used and studied approaches to improve social competence in children involve (a) explicit training in social skills; or (b) teaching children a social problem-solving process for devising prosocial solutions to interpersonal conflicts. Overall, evaluations of social skill-training programs have not demonstrated favourable outcomes, particularly when examining generalization to children's play in natural contexts and social acceptance.[26,27] Although social problem-solving training programs can be effective in enhancing children's awareness of alternative solutions to interpersonal conflict and reducing behaviour problems, these programs do not explicitly promote positive peer play behaviour.[28] Thus, widely available interventions do not sufficiently address the developmentally salient expression of social

competency for preschool children's peer play behaviour.

Scant attention is paid to the cultural responsiveness of social competence interventions for low-income youngsters in the research literature.[29] Limited knowledge of the unique interface of culture with children's peer play behaviours is available. Compounding this problem, social competence interventions are primarily developed by experts, who are not members of the early childhood programs or communities in which the intervention is implemented. Thus, the targeted social competencies may not be valued within cultures represented by the children and families.[30] Developing interventions in partnership with stakeholders (e.g., early childhood educators, families), is a promising alternative that provides venues for establishing culturally meaningful and sustainable intervention programs.[31]

In partnership with Head Start, Fantuzzo and colleagues have advanced the application of peer play interventions for low-income preschool children in early childhood education programs.[32] Peer play interventions are embedded in children's natural and routine play opportunities and utilize peers rather than adults as facilitators of children's social-skill acquisition. The Play Buddy intervention involves pairing socially isolated preschoolers (Play Partners) with socially effective preschoolers (Play Buddies) during routine free- play opportunities in the classroom and identifying a family volunteer (Play Supporter) to support the Play Buddy's proactive strategies for engaging the Play Partner. Collectively, the partnership with Head Start staff and families in program development, reliance on the natural contexts for defining and eliciting positive play behaviours, and incorporation of natural helpers in implementing the intervention enrich the relevance of this intervention for children of culturally and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds.

**Key Research Questions**

The primary challenge for early childhood researchers is attaining knowledge of the interface of diverse cultural values and social competencies. To date, Caucasian, middle-class children are most frequently the focus of intervention research and often represent standards for evaluating appropriate social behaviours.[33] Subsequently, assessment and intervention practices cannot be assumed to be meaningful and effective for children of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Rather, they must be empirically examined for specific populations, exploring culturally responsive ways to develop and provide services. Although the Play Buddy intervention has emerged as an effective intervention for bolstering developmentally salient peer play

behaviour among low-income children, the scope for evaluating this program has been on peer play behaviours in the classroom.  Future research should expand the focus to examine the effects of acquisition of prosocial peer play behaviour on children's relationships and behaviour in the family and community settings.[34] Furthermore, longitudinal evaluations are needed to document the long-term benefits of the intervention.

**Recent Research Results**

Traditional approaches for improving social competence have not sufficiently addressed the unique, developmentally salient construct of peer play for preschool children.  Moreover, the particular cultural values inherent in low-income and ethnic minority populations of preschool children have been neglected in the development and evaluation of social competence intervention programs. However, utilizing an innovative approach for developing social competence interventions in partnership with early childhood educators and families, Play Buddy emerges as a promising intervention for low-income preschool children. Randomized field trials have demonstrated the efficacy of this intervention, showing that the improvements in young children's positive peer play interactions generalized to their experiences in the natural classroom environment.[34-35]  These findings underscore the importance of embedding interventions within the natural contexts of young children, utilizing familiar adults and children in the implementation of the intervention program and working in partnership to ensure the developmental and cultural relevance of the intervention focus.

**Conclusions**

The preschool years are crucial for the development of social competencies that will ensure success in school and in later life. Within this developmental period, peer play is a natural and dynamic context for bolstering children's acquisition of important social competencies. Social competence interventions that are interwoven within the meaningful context of play emerge as the most effective means for improving the peer play interactions of children with social competence difficulties. Moreover, developing and implementing interventions in partnership with early childhood educators and children's families enhances their relevance for children representing diverse cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Implications**

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1. Early childhood educators and families should be involved in the development, selection and implementation of social competence interventions.
2. Research should examine the unique interface of culture and children's play behaviour, informing development of culturally appropriate practices.
3. Knowledge about the importance of play for young children and contexts for eliciting and bolstering peer play should be integrated with educational practices in early childhood programs targeting low-income children, such as Head Start.

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