

Original Paper

Social Skills in Preschool Children From Their Parents' Points of View



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Social skills are acceptable behaviors that enable people to interact effectively with others and avoid socially unacceptable responses. These skills are fundamentally linked with all aspects of children's lives and affect their compatibility.

Objective: To determine the social skills of preschool children in Rasht City based on their parents' points of views.

Materials and Methods: This was a cross-sectional, analytical study. The sample included 546 6-year-old children in the preschool centers of Rasht, Iran, who were selected using a multistage cluster sampling method. The study data were gathered using children' and parents' demographic questionnaire and the Social Skills Rating System-Parents (SSRS-P). The obtained data were analyzed using descriptive (means and standard deviation) and inferential (Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test) statistics.

Results: According to the mothers' viewpoints, the majority of children had moderate social skills with respect to cooperation (72.1%), assertion (65.8%), self-control (67.4%), and overall social skill (67.6%). In addition, significant correlations were found between the overall social skill and father's age ($P=0.021$), mother's education ($P=0.001$), father's education ($P=0.005$), mother's job ($P=0.023$), father's job ($P=0.011$), child's gender ($P=0.022$), attending the kindergarten ($P=0.011$), and parents' financial status ($P=0.001$).

Conclusion: Considering that the parents rated the social skills of their children as moderate, we suggest that social skills training be provided for children in preschool centers, so that their social skills could be improved before they start going to school and prevent the negative outcomes of social skills deficiency.

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Introduction

Children are the biggest national asset of the society [1], therefore their physical, mental, and social health should be addressed [2]. In this regard, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF have introduced the issue of life skills approach for many years. These skills are grouped into three categories, including social, cognitive, and emotional-coping skills [3]. Social skills are a complex set of skills and acceptable behaviors that enable individuals to effectively interact with others and avoid socially unacceptable responses. Social skills are necessary for adaptation to different social situations, promote healthy relationships [4, 5], and influence adaptation [6].

People build their lives through social skills [7], because social life requires social skills, self-confidence, mental preparedness, and social adjustment [8]. According to a report by WHO, people can hardly follow a satisfactory life without having social skills [9]. Cooperation, assertion, and self-control are three aspects of social skills [10]. Cooperation is defined as a mutual social activity in which people or groups work cooperatively in a more or less organized way to realize a common objective [11]. Social skills enable the individual to express their feelings and values about a situation freely, directly, and by respecting others' feelings and values [12]. Self-control is the ability to appropriately express emotions [11], and show behaviors like waiting your turn or getting along with others [10]. Social skills can improve children's effective functioning and significantly affect their adaptation, academic achievement, quality of life, and potential for living and learning [6, 13, 14]. Another advantage of social skills is the improved ability to deal with unreasonable behaviors of other people [15].

A previous study show that only 4% of 5-12 years old, 10% of 10-12 years old, and 17% of 12-14 years old children had learned the necessary social skills. This study concludes that people who have lower social skills are more prone to high-risk behaviors, including drug or alcohol abuse and risky sexual behavior. In addition, they have lower emotional adjustment, are often rejected by their peers [16], and show lack of compromise in interpersonal relationships, behavioral problems [3], and repeated aggressive behaviors [17].

Early childhood (preschool period) is a critical period for emotional and social development [18]. In this regard, Garmaroudi and Vahdani Niya showed that Iranian children lacked adequate social skills [19]. But, it is

worthwhile to note that culture and environment have a deep impact on children's social skills that are not the same in different cultures [20, 21].

Given the importance of cultural and social factors in children's social skills, and the influence of family, school, and society on these skills [6, 21], it is necessary to study children's social skills in different environments and cultures. In addition to the aforementioned factors, other elements such as family and social environments (e.g. kindergarten) are very important in the socialization of children and development of their social skills. Parents and teachers are the most important sources of information about children's social and emotional behavior [22]. In particular, mothers are the best source of information because they are more involved with their children and are more aware of children's moral characteristics [23]. Finally, considering the long-term effect of social skills on children's future, and that children's social skills may be threatened during the preschool period, the present study was conducted to study preschool children's social skills from parents' viewpoints.

Materials and Methods

This study used cross-sectional, analytical design. The statistical population included all 6 years old children studied in the preschool centers of Rasht, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education or Welfare Organization, in 2015. The sample size was determined as 525, based on similar previous studies, the standard deviation of total social skills in preschool children [15], and the design effect for cluster sampling on sample size (Design effect=1.5). The inclusion criteria were as follows: aged 6 years old, residing in Rasht, no physical or mental abnormalities, studying in preschool centers under the supervision of Rasht Ministry of Education (regions 1 and 2) and Welfare Organization, presence of both parents (mother and father), and parents' enough literacy to answer the study questions.

The instruments used to gather data included a children' and parents' demographic questionnaire and the Social Skills Rating System-Parents (SSRS-P). The SSRS-P is a standard, 39-item questionnaire that its items are rated on a 3-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 3 (Most often). The SSRS-P has been normalized in Iran [21]. It has three subscales, including cooperation, assertion, and self-control; total social skills score is obtained by summing up the subscale scores. Among the 39 items, 19 assess cooperation, 16 assess assertion, and 4 assess self-control. Scores from 0 to 38 can be obtained on the cooperating subscale, from 0 to 32 on

the assertion subscale, and from 0 to 8 on the self-control subscale. Total social skills score ranges from 0 to 78. Total scores that are one standard deviation below or above the mean indicate average social skills, total scores that are one standard deviation above the mean indicate high social skills, and total scores that are one standard deviation below the mean indicate low social skills.

The instruments together with the informed consent forms were put inside envelopes to be given to the parents during two months (December and January) of the school year 2015-2016. In the next step, the researcher went to the preschool centers, and after making the necessary arrangements with the principals and teachers, the names of the study children (based on the inclusion criteria) were coded. Then they were given the questionnaires, and asked to take them to their mothers. The instruments were completed by the mothers at home, delivered to the teachers at the appropriate time, and collected by the researcher.

A total of 28 preschool centers were used for sampling, among which 10 centers were under the supervision of Rasht Ministry of Education (region 2), 8 centers were under the supervision of Rasht Ministry of Education (region 1; 4 public and 4 private centers), and 10 centers were under the supervision of Iran Welfare Organization. Overall, 598 questionnaires were distributed in 28 centers, of them, 33 questionnaires were not returned, 12 were not completed, and 7 were incomplete. After elimination of 52 questionnaires, the data from 546 questionnaires were used for analysis. The data were analyzed using descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential (Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test) statistics. All the analyses were performed in SPSS 18.

Results

According to the results, the majority of the children were boys (57.9%), single child (52.2%), first child in the family (65.6%), and had gone to kindergarten (54.4%).

In addition, the majority of fathers (57.3%) were 30-40 years old, had college education (38.7%), and were self-employed (60%). The majority of mothers (57.3%) were 30-40 years old, housewives (74.4%), and had college education (38.2%). The majority of the parents (49.6%) earned \$150-300 a month. Moreover, the majority of the study children were studying in public preschool centers (57.5%), or preschool centers under the supervision of Rasht Ministry of Education (region 2) (33.1%), and in classrooms with 11-20 classmates (42.7%).

From the mothers' viewpoints, the majority of children had moderate skills in terms of cooperation (72.1%), assertion (65.8%), self-control (67.4%), and overall social skill (67.6%) (Table 1). In addition, according to the Mann-Whitney U test, there was a significant relationship between the social skills total score and gender (P=0.022), attending the kindergarten (P=0.011), and mother's job (P=0.023). According to the Kruskal-Wallis test, there was a significant relationship between the social skills total score and father's age (P=0.021), mother's education (P=0.001), father's education (P=0.005), father's job (P=0.011), and parents' financial status (P=0.001) (Table 2).

Discussion

According to the study results, most of the children had moderate skills in terms of cooperation, assertion, and self-control. Consistent with this result, a study by Sheikhzakariae, entitled "Social Skills of Children in the Public Preschool Centers of Tehran", showed that from the mothers' viewpoints, their children had moderate skills in cooperation, assertion, and self-control [15]. Tan and Camras also found similar results [24]. However, in a study by Garmaroudi and Vahdani Niya, the children had low social skills in terms of assertion [19].

According to the study results, most mothers believed that their children's overall social skills were moderate. This finding is in line with those of Sheikhzakariae [15]

Table 1. Children's social skills from the mothers' viewpoints

| Social Skills Domains | Level | | | N (%) |
|-----------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| | Low | Moderate | High | |
| Cooperation | 73(13.4) | 394(72.1) | 79(14.5) | 546(100) |
| Assertion | 99(18.1) | 359(65.8) | 88(16.1) | 546(100) |
| Self-control | 98(17.9) | 368(67.4) | 80(14.7) | 546(100) |
| Overall social skills | 85(15.6) | 369(67.6) | 92(16.8) | 546(100) |

Table 2. Family factors related to the children’s social skills

| Variable | Overall Social Skill | N (%) | | | Sig. |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|---------|
| | | Low | Moderate | High | |
| Mother’s age (y) | <30 | 34(19.7) | 107(61.8) | 32(18.5) | 0.795** |
| | 30-40 | 42(13.4) | 221(70.6) | 50(16) | |
| | >40 | 9(15) | 41(68.3) | 10(16.7) | |
| Father’s age (y) | <30 | 14(25) | 38(67.9) | 4(7.1) | 0.021** |
| | 30-40 | 46(14.7) | 215(68.7) | 52(16.6) | |
| | >40 | 25(14.1) | 116(65.5) | 36(20.3) | |
| Mother’s education | Elementary school | 6(28.6) | 12(57.1) | 3(14.3) | 0.001** |
| | Middle school | 18(27.7) | 37(56.9) | 10(15.4) | |
| | High school | 42(16.7) | 176(70.1) | 33(13.1) | |
| | College | 19(9.1) | 143(68.8) | 46(22.1) | |
| Father’s education | Elementary school | 10(25) | 21(52.5) | 9(22.5) | 0.005** |
| | Middle school | 26(25.5) | 63(61.8) | 13(12.7) | |
| | High school | 27(14) | 141(73.2) | 25(13) | |
| | College | 22(10.4) | 144(68.2) | 45(21.3) | |
| Mother’s job | Working | 16(11.4) | 93(66.4) | 31(22.1) | 0.023* |
| | Nonworking | 69(17) | 276(68) | 61(15) | |
| Father’s job | Government job | 19(9) | 152(72.4) | 39(18.6) | 0.011** |
| | Self-employed | 63(19.2) | 213(64.9) | 52(15.9) | |
| | Unemployed | 3(37.5) | 4(50) | 1(12.5) | |
| Child’s gender | Girl | 30(13) | 152(66.1) | 48(20.9) | 0.022* |
| | Boy | 55(17.4) | 217(68.7) | 44(13.9) | |
| Number of children | One child | 52(18.2) | 186(65.3) | 47(16.5) | 0.374** |
| | Two children | 28(12.6) | 155(69.5) | 40(17.9) | |
| | Three children or more | 5(13.2) | 28(73.7) | 5(13.2) | |
| Birth order | First | 61(17) | 236(66) | 61(17) | 0.732** |
| | Second | 21(12.7) | 117(70.5) | 28(16.9) | |
| | Third or more | 3(13.6) | 16(72.7) | 3(13.6) | |
| History of going to kindergarten | Yes | 30(12) | 169(67.9) | 50(20.1) | 0.011* |
| | No | 55(18.5) | 200(67.4) | 42(14.1) | |
| Family’s income (Us dollars) | <150 | 18(26.9) | 37(55.2) | 12(17.9) | 0.001** |
| | 150-300 | 48(17.7) | 189(69.7) | 34(12.5) | |
| | >300 | 19(9.1) | 143(68.8) | 46(22.1) | |

* Mann-Whitney U test; ** Kruskal-Wallis test

and Tan and Camras [24]. However, in contrary to this finding, the children in the study by Garmaroudi and Vahdani Niya showed low social skills [19]. The researcher believes that because children acquire their first experiences in socialization in preschool, they may not be able to experience much in terms of social skills and presence in the society. Therefore, parents of preschool children often believe that their children have not yet achieved the higher levels of social skills. In addition, the results showed that female children who had gone to kindergarten, those whose fathers were 40 years or older, had a government job, and at least elementary school education; and those who had working mothers with college education and high income, had higher social skills compared to other children.

In the study by Sheikhzakariae, girls with working mothers and college education had better social skills, while no significant relationship was found between children's social skills and father's age and job [15]. Shahim [21] also found no significant relationship between preschool children's social skills and father's age and education. Shahi [6] also found a significant and direct relationship between children's social skills and mother's education, but found no significant relationship between children's social skills and father's education. However, Park and Cheah found no significant relationship between Korean preschool children's social skills and mother's education [25]. Kumari and Khadi also found no significant relationship between children's social skills and mother's education, mother's job, father's job, and child's gender [26]. Dadsetan also found no significant relationship between the social skills of preschool children with working and nonworking mothers [27].

Regarding the study finding that girls had better social skills than boys, it can be argued that girls start talking earlier and with a better quality than boys, and this can have a positive impact on their social skills and help them form better social relationships. Another study finding was that working mothers rated their children's social skills higher compared to nonworking mothers. Regarding this finding it can be argued that children of working mothers enter the social world earlier than those with nonworking mothers. In addition, working mothers tend to enroll their children in kindergarten or ask other people to take care of them while they are at work, therefore, these children access to a wider range of social interactions. Moreover, watching the mother's social interactions that are provided through working, may help the child to model social interactions. It can also be argued that children who have gone to kindergarten enter the social world earlier and

can understand the importance of getting along with those who satisfy their needs sooner. Therefore it is expected that they have better social skills than those who have not gone to kindergarten.

Another finding was that mothers with college education rated their children's social skills higher than mothers without these education. Regarding this finding, it can be argued that mothers with higher education are more aware of social interactions and behaviors, therefore, they may be more willing to satisfy the basic needs of their children. These basic needs may include feeling of safety, trust, approval, and love that can influence children's social skills. According to the study results, it is suggested that children be assessed in terms of social skills when entering the preschool, so that their deficiencies in social skills be identified, and necessary trainings on social skills be provided for them. Among the limitations of the present study was the psychological status of the children's mothers who completed the questionnaires that was out of control of the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

The Ethics Committee approval number for conducting the study (IR.GUMS.REC.1394.52) was mentioned on the copies of the questionnaires.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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