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ABSTRACT

During the 1960s and 1970s an enormous amount of research was conducted to better understand children's social and intellectual development, and hundreds of educational programs for children and parents were initiated in hopes of improving conditions surrounding many of America's young children. By the middle 1970s, however, it became apparent that competence in the young child held different meanings for different professionals. Although attempts to arrive at a single definition have been only partially successful, references to competency in young children have become widespread in recent psychological and educational literature. Thus, it is the purpose of this paper to discuss the nature and development of competent behavior in young children as it appears in the literature and to suggest some approaches to the measurement and evaluation of competence in children. The first section of the paper stresses the importance of competent development in young children prior to formal schooling, the second deals with the question, What is a competent young child? and the third discusses the research on parenting and peer relations, focusing on the importance of these two factors in fostering the development of competence in young children. Finally, the fourth section suggests ways teachers can evaluate competence in young children. (MP)

Parents, Teachers, and Competent Children*

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Introduction

The 1960's and 1970's was a period of unusually significant change in our priorities for children. During this period, an enormous amount of research was conducted to better understand children's social and intellectual development, and hundreds of educational programs for children and parents were initiated in hopes to improve upon the conditions surrounding many of America's young children.

In the midst of this renewed interest in the capabilities, needs, and welfare of young children, many researchers and educational practitioners became dissatisfied with the use of IQ as the principal measure of children's developmental progress. Disenchantment with IQ stemmed from a number of factors, the most obvious of which was the realization that successful development in young children entailed much more than could be measured with a single IQ test. Based on this realization, there emerged in the early 1970's a new concept used to distinguish children developing successfully, i.e., those getting off to a superb start in their early years, from those developing less successfully. This concept was referred to as "social competence" or "instrumental competence." References to competent and less competent children began to appear in large-scale investigations of parents' child-rearing practices (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; White, 1972), as well as, in reports of the development and evaluation of goals for children's educational programming (e.g., Anderson & Messick, 1974).

By the middle 1970's, however, it became apparent that competence in the young child held different meanings for different professionals. Although attempts to arrive at a single definition have been only partially successful (e.g., Anderson & Messick, 1974; Ziegler & Trickett, 1979), references to competency distinctions among young children have become widespread in recent psychological and educational literature.

Thus, we thought it timely, and we hope helpful, to share with you some information and discussion about the nature and development of competent behavior in young children. Our presentation is organized around four important questions that those of us who educate young children might, and should have about the early development of competent children:

1) Why is competence development important for young children prior to formal schooling?

2) The meaning of competence: What is a competent young child?

3) Fostering the development of competence in young children: What can be learned from research on parenting and peer relations?

4) How can teachers evaluate competence in young children?

I. Why is Competence Development Important for Young Children Prior to Formal Schooling?

Our interest in the early development of competence in children is only indirectly related to their later successes or failures as adults. Our major concern is with children's successes as children--the reason, because success leads to adaptation to one's world, and adaptation not only leads to happy feelings and smiling faces, it also instills in children a confidence about themselves and their abilities which allows them to enter into novel learning situations without fear of failure. In other words, a competent child is one who is likely to experience more opportunities for learning than a less

competent child, and it is for this reason that we think that the early development of competence is so important.

If a child's ability to meet the demands of his environment came naturally, we wouldn't be so concerned about the concept of competence. But it doesn't. We are not implying that adaptation to one's environment needs to be a painful process; simply, that adaptation is not an automatic outcome of growing older, as we know so well from studies of children growing up in deprived environments.

Jerome Bruner (1964), a noted author and highly-skilled child-watcher, has had some very interesting and reasonable insights into the young child's need to adapt to Western cultures. Bruner points out that while only a few take major roles in improving a culture's technology, the rest of society must live up to the demands of these changes. Although our children may not choose, as adults, to work with computers, oscilloscopes, laser apparatus, or various other forms of technical equipment, many of the functions and types of thinking they will perform as adults, and as older children studying and otherwise preparing for eligibility in the work force, are influenced greatly by these technological advancements. So that, when Bruner says that a child's intellect grows from the outside, as well as from the inside, he means that the types of thinking and reasoning a child will learn to do, and the types of achievements a child will be encouraged to take on, are predetermined to a great degree by the level of a society's technology.

Bruner goes on to say that when a society's technology becomes very complex--when there are so many things to be known and to be accomplished--we, as parents and teachers, have less time to show our children how to perform their future roles and functions in society. Unlike what happens in so-called

primative cultures, time does not permit us to provide "on-the-job training" for our children. We have to tell them about how the world works. And what we don't have time to tell them, we have to encourage them to read and to ask good questions about the world. Implicit in this view is the point that we have to encourage our children to take more self-responsbility for the learning of our society's ways than is necessary for children growing up in societies having less sophisticated technologies.

If you agree with this line of reasoning, you might also agree that one of our most important committments to the young child is to encourage her/him to become an active, self-motivated and goal-oriented participant in the learning process--a child who enjoys learning and enters into learning situations at his own direction. For young children, we think this "operative" or "instrumental" quality of some children's behavior, be it social or intellectual in nature, may be more important than any other insofar as successful learning and school achievement is concerned. Let's see how this theoretical view of the nature of competence stands with other views that have come from the research.

II. The Meaning of Competence: What Is A Competent Young Child?

A most comprehensive research study of children's achievement-competence is the Harvard Preschool Project (1972) conducted by Professor Burton White, formally of Harvard's School of Education. Because the project had an interesting beginning, and because it has produced some very rich information about what competence is in young children, and how competence is associated with certain characteristics of children's home environments, we want to begin discussing the nature of competence by describing White's project to you.

Some may be familiar with the project through their reading of White's Experience and Environment (1973) and The First Three Years of Life (1975).

In 1965, the Office of Economic Opportunity, Head Start Division, began to fund compensatory programs to prepare children from underprivileged backgrounds for early school experiences. As we hear the story, White expressed concern that unlike his colleagues requesting program funds, he failed to fully understand what kinds of children such programs were being designed to turn out. What is a child who is prepared for schooling? What is a truly competent child? The story goes on to say that White also requested federal funds in 1965, but in his case, chose to study the nature of competence in young children and the antecedents of competent behavior in the home environments of young children.

What intrigued White was the fact that many teachers of young children seemed to be able to distinguish competent from less competent children in their classrooms, but were often unable to state the criteria they used to make those distinctions. Hence, White's first task was to determine the criteria they used. He proceeded to screen 400 3-year-olds, 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds, using teacher recommendations, observations and tests of mental, motor and sensory capabilities. After observing those children each week for a period of 8 months, 41 children emerged. Twenty-one children were deemed superbly competent and 20 were deemed minimally talented. These groups were compared and a list of 21 dimensions or aspects of competence was drawn up which later served as the standard for children's competence. (This list is shown in Table 1.)

As we go through the list, we see only six competence-behaviors that have to do with what the young child can do. Some of these involve linguistic

competence, e.g., grammatical capacity, vocabulary, articulation, and the ability to deal with abstractions. Most competencies have to do with what the competent young child will do or does do spontaneously, rather than what s/he can do. For example, s/he excells at getting and maintaining attention from adults. S/He uses adults effectively as resources. S/He assumes leadership with peers, competes with peers, takes pride in his/her own accomplishments, makes it a point to note discrepancies among the objects and events s/he encounters, and uses resources effectively to try out new things. Moreover, s/he makes plans and carries out multi-step activities and attempts to make interesting associations among the objects and events s/he encounters in the environment. In other words, the children that teachers designate as "sharp" or "bright" children, ones who are going to "get ahead" in this world, do appear to have some specific capabilities such as linguistic competence that less competent children do not possess. But, what strikes us most about the differences is the operative, self-regulatory, and self-motivated characteristics of the competent children. They use people and resources to better understand and experiment with their environments, and they appear to do much of this on their own initiative and at their own direction.

There is one other major childrearing project of the late 1960's and 1970's that tells us something about the nature of achievement-related competence in young children. This is the Parental Authority Project conducted by Dr. Diana Baumrind at the University of California at Berkeley. Baumrind (1971) uses the term "instrumental competence" to describe those behaviors or dispositions of preschoolers and young school-age children that contribute to successful social and achievement behavior, primarily those that can be seen at school. Instrumental competence has two basic dimensions: (1) responsible behavior versus socially disruptive behavior, and (2) active behavior

versus passive behavior. Examples of socially responsible behavior are as follows: the child shares possessions with others, doesn't disrupt the work or play of others and doesn't disobey or undermine the rules of the school. The activity dimension is represented by a child who is independent, self-motivated, goal-oriented, likely to go after what s/he wants forceably, be a leader, and who feels free to question the teacher. In our view, these examples possess the same underlying theme that White's characteristics of competence have--independence, deliberateness, self-motivation, and competitive behavior.

For sure, these projects do not identify all of the characteristics that are likely to be associated with competence in young children. We now want to summarize several other, more recent, attempts to deal with the meaning of competence which have relied on other areas of developmental research and theory to describe achievement competence. One of several prominent efforts in this area was undertaken in 1973 by a committee of experts commissioned by the Office of Child Development seeking to identify the characteristics of socially and instrumentally competent children for use as evaluation criteria in early education and intervention programs. A total of 29 facets of competence were identified by this committee and reported by Anderson and Messick (1974). If you look at Table 2, you will see that only eight of these characteristics can be termed basic ability dimensions. The remaining majority have to do with acquired knowledge, attitudes, and skill characteristics, as well as with operative dispostions, all of which we as teachers can influence in our classroom interactions with the children.

In a subsequent effort to define children's competence, Ziegler and Trickett (1979) proposed a similar list of characteristics. Like Anderson and Messick's list, many of the characteristics proposed by Ziegler and Trickett exemplify what we have termed operative or self-initiated behavior

dispositions and knowledge-attitude-acquired skill dimensions, with less emphasis on basic abilities. The characteristics cited by Ziegler and Trickett are also listed by category in Table 2, as are several characteristics of competence which have been mentioned by Greenspan (in press) in a very recent article.

Let's take a look at Tables 1 and 2 now and compare what White has said about competence with the views expressed in these more recent articles. Each of the authors refers to some basic ability factors that seem to be associated with the development of competence. White stresses the ability to deal with abstractions such as language, numbers, and letters, whereas the latter authors in Table 2 emphasize some of the dimensions included in standardized tests of intelligence. What is important to recognize from both of these tables is how many of the dimensions go beyond specific skills and labels associated with the classic notion of IQ. We have already mentioned the operative dispostions that White thought were important for optimal growth and development, but we can see that other experts in this area also stress operative dimensions, as well as, knowledge, attitudes, and acquired skills. Although these experts tend to stress more in the way of basic abilities or IQ-related characteristics than does White, they also point out many dimensions of competence that we can have some impact on when teaching young children. For example, by looking at both Tables 1 and 2 we see that most authors have stressed operative behaviors such as curiosity and information-seeking, as well as skill at perspective-taking. Other frequently cited characteristics include positive self-image, a disposition toward achievement, and the tendency to employ prosocial behaviors. Connolly and Bruner (1974), in their Introduction to the book The Growth of Competence, emphasize the importance of "general" skills, as opposed to "specific" skills, and list such general skills and spontaneous tendencies as the tendency to combine information, to

go beyond the information given, to draw inferences about things yet to be encountered, and to associate and look for ways to associate information. Consistent with the point that we have tried to make about the meaning of competence, Connelly and Bruner refer to these general skills as "operative intelligence--knowing how, rather than knowing that" (p. 3).

In closing, we want to mention a major criticism of attempts to propose a single definition of the meaning of competence. And that is, that competence is a value-laden concept likely to differ markedly from culture to culture, as well as for different cultural sub-groups of U.S. children. Along these lines, Ogbu (1981) argues that white, middle-class competencies and childrearing practices, such as those identified by White (1972) and Baumrind (1971), should not be the standard upon which all others are measured. Yet, insofar as U.S. children are concerned, Ogbu also states that "...researchers have not yet reached the point of clearly delineating the unique competencies of minority groups and how such competencies are acquired." Although we very much agree with Ogbu's point, and although the "operative" or instrumental theme that we have proposed also reflects a value judgement, we view this theme to be a more general criterion of childhood competence than the "specific skill" approaches typically proposed, and one that would appear central to many more narrowly defined definitions of competence, whether they be considered culture-free or culture-bound.

III. Fostering the Development of Competence in Young Children: What can be Learned from Research on Parenting and Peer Relations?

Two areas of research from which teachers may learn more about the development of child competence are those on child-rearing and peer relations. Understanding how parents and peers contribute to the development of child

competence may benefit teachers in several ways. First, many of the principles, practices, and socializing experiences described in this literature may have direct application to classroom teaching. Secondly, this information may assist teachers in their roles as parent educators, allowing them to serve as information resources on child socialization. Thirdly, teachers are also responsible for organizing human resources in school (e.g., adults and children), and in doing so, may wish to engineer social environments and educate staff in ways that build on the child's competence.

Best Guesses About Most Effective Child-Rearing Practices

The first area we want to address concerns the manner in which parents might enhance the development of competence in their children. This was the other major issue that White (1972) investigated. Once he knew what competence was, he sought to determine what mothers did to produce competent children. With the reasoning that effective child-rearing is undertaken consistently within a family, and that competent children are likely to have younger siblings who will become competent themselves, White sought to find competent 4- and 5-year-olds who had siblings younger than 1 year old. The final sample consisted of 12 families considered likely to raise a competent young child and 22 families expected to raise children from infancy with minimal competence, i.e., with regard to the criteria White established initially.

More than a year of observations were made on the mothers and infant-toddlers in these families. Based on these observations, White drew the following conclusions in the final report of the Harvard Preschool Project (1973):

> Our A mothers (of competent children) talk a great deal to their children, and usually at a level the child can handle. They make them feel as though whatever they are doing is usually interesting. They provide access to many objects and diverse situations. They lead the child to believe that he can expect help and encouragement most, but not all the time. They demonstrate and explain things to the child, but mostly on the child's instigation rather than their own.

They prohibit certain activities, and they do so consistently and firmly. They are secure enough to say "no" to the child from time to time without seeming to fear that their child will not love them. They are imaginative, so that they make interesting associations and suggestions to the child when opportunities present themselves. They very skillfully and naturally strengthen the child's intrinsic motivation to learn. They also give him a sense of task orientation, a notion that is desirable to do things well and completely. They make the child feel secure.

These mothers have a special talent which may or may not be teachable. That talent is a capacity (and a willingness) to take their child's perspective. Egocentricity is incompatible with such an ability and people vary in that regard. It is interesting to note that several decades ago Jean Piaget wrote about the normal egocentric attitude of preschool children and their resultant inability to take the perspective of another. He also remarked that many people never completely outgrow such an orientation. We believe that effective mothers have successfully mastered the ability to take the perspective of another, to listen well and therefore to understand with what their young children are concerned. We believe they act this way as a matter of course and almost coincidentally it enables them to be excellent child-rearers. After all, if they respond to a child's approach in a relevant way, the language and teaching that result can capitalize on the child's maximum attention and motivation. If, on the other hand, they are overly concerned with their own needs and views, they simply cannot be as effective.

Our most effective mothers do not devote the bulk of their day to rearing their young children. Most of them are far too busy to do so; several of them in fact, have part-time jobs. What they seem to do, often without knowing exactly why, is to perform excellently the function of designer and consultant. By that I mean they design a physical world, mainly in the home, that is beautifully suited to nurturing the burgeoning curiosity of the one-to three-year-old. It is ful of small, manipulable, visually detailed objects, some of which were originally designed for young children (toys), others normally used for other purposes (plastic refrigerator containers, bottle caps, baby food jars and covers, shoes, magazines, television and radio knobs, etc.). It contains things to climb, such as chairs, benches, sofas and stairs. It has available materials to nurture more mature motor interests, such as tricycles, scooters, and structures with which to practice elementary gymnastics. It includes a rich variety of interesting things to look at, such as televis on, people and the aforementioned types of physical objects.

In addition to being largely responsible for the type of environment the child has, this mother sets up guides for her child's behavior which seem to play a very important role in these processes. She is generally permissive and indulgent. The child is encouraged in the vast majority of his explorations. They encourage him to complete tasks successfully. When the child confronts an interesting or difficult situation, he often turns to his mother for help. Although usually working at some chore, she is generally nearby. He then goes to her

and usually, but not always, is responded to by his mother with help or shared enthusiasm plus, occasionally, an interesting, naturally related idea. These ten to thirty second interchanges are usually oriented around the child's interest of the moment rather than toward some need or interest of the mother. At times, under these circumstances, the child will not receive immediate attention. These effective mothers do not always drop what they are doing to attend to his request, but rather, if the time is obviously inconvenient, they say so, thereby probably giving the child a realistic, small taste of things to come.

These mothers very rarely spend five, ten, or twenty minutes teaching their one- or two-year-olds, but they get an enormous amount (in terms of frequency) of teaching in "on the fly," and usually at the child's instigation. Although they do volunteer comments opportunistically, they react mostly to overtures by the child.

These effective mothers seem to be people with high levels of energy. The work of a young mother without household help is, in spite of modern appliances, very time- and energy-consuming. Yet we have families subsisting at a welfare level of income, with as many as eight closely spaced children, that are doing every bit as good a job in child-rearing during the early years as the most advantaged homes. (A Russian-type 'Hero of the People' award ought to go to such remarkable women.)

Baumrind's (1971) conclusions, based on assessments of parents in her project, are not so wide-sweeping, but nevertheless, very consistent in our view. Parents of instrumentally competent children are intellectually stimulating, and to some extent "tension-producing." They are firm in disciplinary matters and demand mature behaviors from their children, high levels of self-control and independent action. In Baumrind's view (1975) firm discipline does not produce conforming or dependent behavior in the child, nor are firm and demanding childrearing behaviors associated with a lack of warmth on the part of the parent. Baumrind states, "The most demanding parents were, in fact the warmest."

The Contribution of Peers to Child Competence

The contribution of peers to the development of children's competence has only recently received serious consideration. For the past several decades, parents have been viewed as the major source of influence on developing

children and this notion has been, in part, responsible for the lack of attention given to peers. As a consequence, the function of peers in children's socialization has been unclear and the subject of much speculation. Literature and the media, for example, have often depicted peers as having a detrimental influence on children's development. Novels like "Lord of the Flies" and movies like "A Clockwork Orange" and "Hollywood Knights," for example, have characterized the peer group as undoing the goals set forth by parents, or working at cross-purposes with societal values. At the same time, however, many popular books on parenting and child-rearing have emphasized the importance of friendships and peer relations in childhood, and casual observation suggests that parents are often concerned when their children do not form friendships or participate in peer activities.

Researchers have become interested in children's peer relations largely as the result of recent social and economic changes in our society. The increasing numbers of parents in the work force and the decreasing emphasis on the mothering role for women have resulted in less daytime contact between parents and their children and increased association with peers in child care settings outside the home (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Hoffman, 1977). As a consequence, the peer group has become much more a part of the young child's life than even a decade ago, and will undoubtedly become an even greater source of companionship, emotional support, information, and guidance in the future.

What, then, do we know about the role of peers in the socialization process and, more specifically, how does experience with peers contribute to children's social and achievement competence? For present purposes, we will consider two important types of research evidence which reflect directly upon this question. The first body of evidence comes from research on social isolation in childhood and suggests that children's early social experiences with peers are essential resources for achieving later life adjustment and social competence. Although most children develop friendships and become

increasingly involved in peer activities with age, some remain without friends and fail to participate in the peer culture. Unfortunately, the consequences of peer isolation appear to be severe. Prior research indicates that children who are isolated from peers during childhood are more likely to become high-school dropouts, juvenile delinquents, and suffer mental health problems as adults (Asher, Oden & Gottman, 1977). Apparently, children who are deprived of friendships and peer relations miss out on valuable learning experiences and these deficits, in turn, result in substantially latered development.

If we accept these studies as evidence of the fact that experience with peers is an essential part of the development of children's social competence, then several additional questions arise. What is it about interaction and relationships with agemates that promotes the development of social competence? What kinds of competence do peers foster? At the present time, researchers' ideas about why children engage in peer activity and what they learn in the process far outstrip the evidence needed to support their views. As a result, we must address these questions both on theoretical grounds and in terms of research findings. Two major approaches to understanding the process and outomces of peer relations will be considered: a social-learning view first, and then a cognitive-developmental perspective.

Advocates of social learning theory, such as Albert Bandura and Walter Mischel, emphasize what peers do that influence other children. Two forms of peer influence have received the most attention in research stemming from this theory: peer modeling and reinforcement. Numerous studies have shown that peers' responses have a powerful impact on children's behavior. The main principle that can be abstracted from these studies is that positive reactions or rewards from peers tend to strengthen and maintain children's behavior, whereas no reaction or unpleasant responses from peers have the opposite effect. For example, recent studies (Patterson, Littman & Bricker, 1967; Perry & Perry, 1976), suggest that peers' reactions play a major role

in determining whether preschoolers will adopt aggressive strategies as a means of influencing others. Their findings reveal that children who are rewarded for aggressive strategies by a victim's submission, withdrawal, crying, or surrendering of materials will tend to repeat such attacks during subsequent peer interactions. On the other hand, victims who responded to attacks with resistance or counterattack, tended to decrease children's use of aggression with peers. Current evidence (see Hartup, 1970; 1978) also links peer reinforcement with the acquisition of other social behaviors (e.g., language and speech patterns, sharing and cooperation, play preferences), as well as with the development of social attitudes (e.g., liking and peer acceptance) and reward-based social concepts (e.g., reciprocity, parity, equity). Given the prevalence of social reinforcement in children's peer interactions, it is easy to see why this principle has received widespread attention from researchers and has become a well accepted explanation for how young children learn social behavior during childhood.

A host of other studies in this area have shown that peers also exert a powerful influence as models for children's behavior. Children who observe peer behavior appear to learn from it in several ways. First, there is evidence to suggest that young children learn novel forms of behavior (i.e., behaviors they have not performed before) from peer models. Several studies have shown that preschoolers can acquire new forms of language, motoric skills, and play behaviors simply by watching live or filmed peers perform them (e.g., O'Connor, 1969, 1972). Second, it appears that peer models also serve to facilitate children's existing behavior, that is, increase or decrease the likelihood that they will engage in behaviors they already know how to perform (Keller & Carlson, 1974). Recent studies have shown, for example, that children exhibit higher levels of sharing behavior after observing a generous peer. Similar investigations reveal that other forms of social behavior, including helping, aggression, self-reward, overcoming fears, and the tendency

to obey or violate rules, are learned or enhanced in the same manner (see Hartup & Lougee, 1975). Apparently, children also learn cognitive skills by watching competent peers. Several investigators have shown that children who witness competent peers perform problem-solving tasks will later employ strategies which are more efficient and accurate, or more like those displayed by the model (e.g., Debus, 1970; Ridberg, et al., 1971). Like social reinforcement, opportunities for observing peer behavior are abundant in peer groups, and current evidence suggests that children learn a variety of cognitive, social and motoric skills from both types of experience. It is important to note, however, that most of the competencies children learn from peer reinforcement or models can be classified within the category we have labeled knowledge-attitudes-acquired skills.

Cognitive-developmental theory provides an alternative view of the role of peers in children's socialization. Contemporary proponents of this position, such as Robert Selman and William Damon suggest that children are inherently motivated to seek out and master social experiences which are novel or unique (i.e., those that pose a mismatch or discrepancy with prior experience). As "active" participants in their own socialization, children often create or elicit experiences which contribute to their learning and development. Movement toward competence and progress toward higher levels of development occur when the child attempts to incorporate new experiences or information into current levels of thinking and behavior, or when the child adjusts his or her thinking in an attempt to understand unique or contradictory experiences. These theorists maintain, as did Piaget, that the child's thinking, gradually moving toward more complex modes of intellectual activity, ultimately determines how and in what ways (s)he will act upon and respond to the environment.

When viewed from this perspective, peers are best seen as resources for children's exploratory behavior--a kind of natural laboratory in which children

can test out interpersonal behaviors and at the same time refine and revise their understanding of the social world. In pursuing these experiences, children are thought to be most attracted to peers who are perceived as slightly different from themselves, and thus, will tend to seek out companions who offer opportunities for novel learning experiences. Children's tendencies to prefer playmates who display forms of reasoning and social behavior which are slightly more advanced than their own serve as an example of the "mismatch" principle which presumably motivates social exploration. This way of looking at children and their experience with peers goes well beyond the more static emphasis on acquired skills and knowledge put forth by social learning theory, and focuses more on the dynamic forms of competence-dimensions that we have termed "operative."

The concepts advanced within cognitive developmental theory receive support from numerous studies conducted throughout the 1970's and early 1980's. Evidence for the idea that children seek out novel or unique social experiences comes from research on young children's friendship formation and friendship expectations (Bigalow, 1977, 1981). Recent studies have shown that children prefer friends that are perceived to be slightly different from themselves (Bigalow, 1981). There is also evidence to suggest that children not only prefer more advanced playmates, but also derive greater learning from these relationships (Ferguson, 1964).

There is also a considerable amount of research indicating that, with increasing age and maturity, children's reasoning and concepts about social phenomena become more like those of adults. Few studies, however, have clearly demonstrated that children's experience with peers is responsible for these changes in thinking, or that advances to more adult-like forms of

thinking cause children to display more mature forms of social behavior. Rather, present evidence simply points to a relationship between the quality and quantity of children's peer interactions and their level of social reasoning ability--improvements in one area tend to be associated with improvements in the other (Rubin & Pepler, 1981). A number of investigators (see Bryan, 1975; Rushton, 1976), for example, report a relationship between children's tendencies to engage in several forms of prosocial behavior (e.g., helping, sharing, fair distribution of rewards) and their underlying social reasoning ability (e.g., level of moral reasoning, empathetic ability, understanding of social norms and conventions, degree to which children can take another's perspective).

There is, on the other hand, considerable evidence to suggest that peers provide children with a context for developing operative dispositions. Researchers' descriptions of children's spontaneous use of peers as resources for information (White & Watt, 1974), their tendency to construct rules to govern games and social play (Piaget, 1932), their reliance on persuasive behavior to influence peers in socially acceptable ways (Blumenfeld & Kinghorn, 1976), and their inclination to be selective when choosing friends or responding prosocially to others (Asher & Gottman, 1981), all point to the role that peers play in providing children with a context for developing operative dispositions.

In sum, we can see that parents and peers play an important role in the socialization process and contribute to the development of children's social competence in many ways. The research we have presently reviewed, along with other studies we have not discussed, indicate that both parents and peers are an essential part of the children's socialization, and that the absence of either resource is detrimental to the child's later development.

It is also clear that the specific functions that parents and peers serve in child socialization are both unique and overlapping. Although parents and peers may accomplish some of the same functions by different means, both appear to act as resources for information, shape particular forms of behavior, stimulate curiosity and exploration, and offer children nurturance and emotional security. Unlike peers, however, parents have greater control over the child's environment and can therefore better engineer and regulate the child's access to certain kinds of social and physical resources (i.e., playmates, schools, toys, etc.). Adults are also more likely to operate as policy-makers and rule-givers than peers, and as a part of the child-rearing function, use direct teaching methods as opposed to trial-and-error experiences to promote the child's learning.

Peers, on the other hand, conduct informal learning experiences and provide information which often cannot be obtained from adults. For example, children's experience at resolving conflicts with agemates, an important skill for later marital and working relationships can only be gained through contact with peers. Many of the experiences which contribute to building and maintaining intimate relationships undoubtedly come from the affiliative experiences children encounter in childhood friendships. Agemates may also be a unique resource for information about peer group norms, rituals, and conventions (e.g., the "in" or "cool" language, dress, or gestures to use, the most appropriate way to gain access to play activities), subjects about which parents are rarely well informed.

IV. Assessing Competence in Young Children

Up to this point the discussion has centered on what competence is and what factors should be considered to influence the early development of competence in children. In this last section, some approaches to the

measurement and evaluation of competence in children will be presented. In keeping with our emphasis on the dynamic, operative view of competence, an observational approach to assessment is presented as opposed to one that relies on the use of standardized tests.

Traditionally, the assessment of children with regard to specific characteristics has been the domain of psychometricians who usually employ various standardized tests to identify a particular child's level of development. However, in light of the cautions that have been put forward in the earlier parts of this paper there is good reason to regard the use of standdardized tests to measure competence as inadequate. The two major drawbacks of using standardized tests are: (1) a standardized test score provides information that is static nature, and (2) a standardized test cannot be sensitive to culture-specific achievement or competence. With regard to the first drawback, the term "static" is used to indicate that the information gained from such a test is restricted to one particular point in time. It does not allow the person who has to interpret the test to see how a child was developing up to the time of testing, or what particular processes or strategies the child uses to arrive at a score. And in most cases such a test does not identify those areas in which a particular child may be weak. In addition, the standardized test cannot evoke in the child the personal involvement that comes with real-life events.

The second drawback refers to the fact that most tests have been standardized on what the test developer views as an appropriate sample, yet as has been shown, competence is such a value-laden characteristic that the competencies that one person views as essential may not be the same

as the competencies valued by another. Due to the influences of different social, economic, and geographical factors on what is perceived as competent behavior, the standardized test may be totally inapplicable in that it will not measure the achievement competency characteristics that are viewed as important under various types of environmental conditions. For these reasons, and since it is the instrumental or operative processes that the child employs that we believe to be most fundamental in determining whether a particular child is competent or not, we view most standardized tests to be inappropriate for use by teachers in measuring the young child's competence. In addition, factors such as cost of the test, costs for scoring the test, interrupting the program to administer the test, and obtaining accurate interpretation of the test results further diminish the usefulness of these tests.

An alternative to the standardized test is direct observation. Observation overcomes many of the problems associated with the standardized test while being easy to interpret and easily modified to match a particular situation. Specifically, observation has three main advantages over the use of standardized tests. First, because observational records are maintained over a period of time, each child's progress can be documented as to his or her improvement in specific areas with regard to the use of varying skills and strategies for particular goals, and with regard to the child's methods of displaying competence. The second advantage is that an observational approach is more flexible, and therefore practical, in that a child does not have to be removed from the program to take a test. This provides several benefits. First, since children react differently to test-taking, observation overcomes the problem of whether a particular child's performance is a result of his or her true abilities or a reaction to the testing situation. Second,

observation does not require the cost of engaging an individual to give the test, and interpret the test results, nor does it require removing a teacher from the room. Perhaps the most important benefit is that since observation is conducted in the natural environment of the child, it is a more reliable and valid measure of the child's competence. When an observation is obtained from a situation in which the child is naturally called upon to demonstrate competence not only does the resultant observation represent the child's true abilities but, certain situational determinants of the child's behavior are also recorded providing the teacher with valuable "situation-ability" information that might otherwise go unnoticed. The third advantage is that observation allows for individual differences to be recognized. These individual differences can be observed not only across children, but also in the way the program interacts with individual children. With observation, changes in the entire program or the program for an individual child can be monitored for effectiveness. Additional benefits that can be obtained from using an observational approach for assessing competence are that it can be done inexpensively, and it may provide the teacher-observer with a new perspective on the situation since the observer will have an opportunity to view the situation without being directly involved.

The following guidelines are presented for using the observational methods we have mentioned. The first is to be as specific as possible in recording an observation. Describe the behaviors or actions that are occurring, not what you <u>think</u> is happening. For example, if a child presents a toy to another child who is crying, describe this situation exactly as it occurred, rather than by describing the first child as being caring or altruistic. This latter type of record is really an inference not a description. The purpose of observation is to build a catalogue of descriptions upon which to

base inferences. This way one can gain an appreciation for the settings and the behaviors that occur in these settings. Another important guideline is to make sure you have observed the whole event. All too often a cry or other such signal is the first sign that a teacher receives to indicate that something is awry, but without observing what preceded the signal leaves the teacher at a loss to fully cope with the situation. It is important then to observe the entire event. This type of observation is known as the "ABC" approach. The "A" refers to the ANTECEDENT actions, those behaviors that lead up to the behavior of interest. The "B" refers to the BEHAVIOR that occurs. It is important that a description and not an inference be recorded. Finally, the "C" refers to the CONSEQUENT action. This is the result of the behavior. Remember again to record what has happened and not what you think has happened.

Finally, there are two types of observational systems, each being valuable in situations for which they are designed. The first is known as an open system. In an open system, anecdotal records are kept without any specific guidelines for what behaviors or situations are to be recorded. The second is a closed system in which pre-specified behaviors or situations are clearly delineated and only events that fall into one of the pre-specified categories are recorded. A closed system would be appropriate when the teachers have some specific behaviors upon which they require some observational information. For example, a teacher might be interested in fostering an increase in helping behaviors, so the situations in which children display such behaviors would be specified for observation. Or, a teacher may be interested in reducing the number of inappropriate requests for teacher intervention, so a record of the situations in which such requests occur could indicate appropriate corrective actions on the part of the teacher or classroom set-up.

Open systems prove useful when the teacher is interested in acquiring a mass of information about a number of behaviors with the intent of reviewing these observations after a period of time to s[illegible] where particular children have strengths and weaknesses. In addition, a combination of both systems may be employed when there are particular concerns about individual children and general concerns about the class as a whole.

With regard to the actual record-keeping there are a number of approaches that could be considered. One such approach is to keep a notebook in the classroom and encourage all teachers, aides and parents to make a note of noteworthy behaviors. Another approach is to use a form that lists characteristics or behaviors of interest as a guide for observation. One such form is included as an appendix to this paper. Feel free to use the form as a guide to your observations, or to ammend it to better suit your needs.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Childhood Competence

	Operative, Self-Initiated Behaviors	Knowledge-Attitude-Acquired Skills	Basic Abilities
White (1973):	1) to get and maintain the attention of adults in socially acceptable ways 2) to use adults as resources for information gathering 3) to both lead and follow peers 4) to compete with peers 5) to express both affection and hostility to peers 6) to express both affection and hostility to adults 7) to involve oneself in adult role-playing behaviors or to otherwise express the desire to grow up 8) to take (and show) pride in one's accomplishments 9) to note discrepancies, inconsistencies, and irregularities in the environment 10) to anticipate consequences 11) to make interesting associations 12) to plan and carry-out multistep activities 13) to use resources effectively 14) to use expressive language	1) perspective-taking 2) dual-focus attentional ability	1) language grammatical ability 2) vocabulary 3) verbal articulation ability 4) ability to deal with abstractions (i.e., numbers, letters, rules)

Table 2

Characteristics of Childhood Competence

	Operative, Self-Initiated Behaviors	Knowledge-Attitudes-Acquired Skills	Basic Abilities
Anderson and Messick (1974):	1) forms positive relationships 2) moral and prosocial tendencies 3) curiosity and exploratory behavior 4) flexibility in the application of information processing strategies 5) competence motivation 6) uses resources for help and information 7) regulation of antisocial behavior	1) sensitivity & understanding in social relationships 2) role perceiption and appreciation 3) critical thinking skills 4) differentiated self-concept 5) concept of self as initiating and controlling agent 6) realistic appraisal of self 7) differentiation of feelings 8) general knowledge 9) quantitative & relational concepts 10) positive attitudes toward school and learning 11) enjoys humor, play and fantasy 12) personal care habits 13) control of attention	1) categorization skills 2) creative thinking skills 3) fine motor dexterity 4) gross motor skills 5) perceptual motor skills 6) perceptual skills 7) language skills 8) memory skills

Table 2 (continued)

	Operative, Self-Initiated Behaviors	Knowledge-Attitudes-Acquired Skills	Basic Abilities
Ziegler and Trickett (1978):	1) preference for challenging tasks 2) curiosity 3) variation seeking 4) mastery motivation 5) outer directedness 6) imitation in problem-solving 7) weariness of adults 8) attention-seeking behavior	1) general achievement 2) positive responsiveness to social reinforcement 3) internal locus of control 4) expectancy of success 5) positive self-image 6) absence of learned helplessness 7) positive attitude toward school	1) physical health and growth 2) cognitive ability and creativity
Greenspan (1980):	1) reflectivity 2) calmness	1) niceness 2) social activity 3) social sensitivity 4) communication skills 5) perspective taking	

SAMPLE ASSESSMENT FORM

A. Guidelines for individual observations

1. Setting - Where does the event take place?; Who else was involved?; Time of day?; What physical objects were involved?

2. Antecedent Actions - What was happening before the child under observation became involved?; What was the child doing before he or she became involved?; Who initiated the antecedent actions (child, other child, teacher)?; How do the other people involved respond?

3. Behavior - What does the child do, say?; What do the others involved do, say?

4. Consequent Actions - How does the event end?; Who was responsible for it ending?; How does the child react?; How do others involved react?; What was the emotional tone of the interactants?

B. Guidelines for summarizing observations

1. Social - peer relations; adult relations; group behavior; social problem solving; behavior control; recognition of others perspectives
2. Individual - emotion reactions; expression of needs and emotions; exploratory behaviors; problem solving approach; flexibility; self-concept; reflectivity-distractability
3. Phyiscal Skills - gross motor; fine motor; musical movement
4. Cognitive - activity preference; language (intelligibility, vocabulary, comprehension, conversational ability); physical knowledge; spatial relations; temporal relations; classification; number; seriation; causality; social knowledge
5. Special problems or trends in above areas.

6. Evidence of growth in above areas.