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ABSTRACT

Since the groundwork for social development is laid during a child's early years, early childhood programs should include regular, periodic, formal and informal assessments of children's progress in the acquisition of social competence. One assessment tool that can be used is the Social Attributes Checklist, which lists attributes of a child's social behavior and preschool experience that can be examined every 3 or 4 months. The assessment should establish whether the attributes are typical of the child's functioning and should, therefore, be conducted over a period of about a month. The checklist involved in the assessment includes 8 individual, 14 social skill, and 2 peer relationship attributes. These attributes are listed in the text. If the child is judged to be doing well on most of the attributes, then it can be assumed that occasional social difficulties will be spontaneously outgrown. If, however, the child is doing poorly on many items, strategies can be implemented to help the child overcome and outgrow social difficulties. (AC)

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## Assessing the Social Development of Young Children

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Early childhood educators have traditionally given high priority to enhancing the young child's social development. During the last two decades a convincing body of evidence has been accumulated to indicate that unless children achieve minimal social competence by about the age of six years, they have a high probability of being at risk throughout life. Hartup suggests that peer relationships contribute a great deal to the both social and cognitive development and to the effectiveness with which we function as adults (1991). He states that

Indeed, the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, not school grades, and not classroom behavior but, rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously "at risk." (underline his. Hartup, 1991, p. 1)

The risks are many: poor mental health, dropping out of school, low achievement, other school difficulties, poor employment history, and so forth (see Katz and McClellan, 1991). Given the life-long consequences of this important aspect of development, it should be counted as the first of four "R's" of education. The traditional three three "R's" for reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic should now begin with the first "r" for relationships.

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Inasmuch as the ground work for ~~of~~ social development is laid during the early years, it is appropriate that all early childhood programs include regular periodic formal and informal assessment of children's progress in the acquisition of social competence. The set of items presented below is based largely on research identifying elements of social competence in young children, and on studies in which the behavior of well-liked children has been compared to that of less well-liked children (see also Katz and McClellan, 1991).

### **Social Attributes Checklist**

The attributes of a child's social behavior and preschool experience to be observed and examined periodically (e.g. every three or four months), are listed below. Consultations with parents and other caregivers help make the information and assessments realistic and therefore more reliable than judgments without such input.

In using the checklist, the emphasis is on establishing whether the attributes are typical of the child's functioning. Indications of typical behavior require sampling the child's functioning over a period of about three or four weeks. Any child can have one or two really bad days, for a variety of reasons; if assessments are to be reasonably reliable, judgments of the overall pattern of functioning over a period of about a month is required.

Healthy social development does not require a child be a "social butterfly." The quality rather than quantity of a child's friendships is the important index to note. Keep in mind also that there is evidence that some children are simply shyer than others, and it may be counter-productive to push such children to socialize too far beyond their comfort level (see Katz & McClellan, 1991). Furthermore, unless the shyness is severe enough to prevent a child from enjoying most of the "good things of life" for young children, like

birthday parties, picnics, family outings, etc., it is reasonably safe to assume that, when handled sensitively, the shyness will be spontaneously outgrown.

Many of the attributes listed below indicate adequate social growth if they usually characterize the child. This qualifier is included to ensure that occasional fluctuations do not lead to over-interpretation of children's temporary difficulties. On the basis of frequent direct contact with the child, of observation in a variety of situations, and of information obtained from parents and other caregivers, a staff member can check each child as follows:

### **I. Individual attributes**

The child:

1. Is usually in a positive mood.
2. Is not excessively dependent on the teacher, assistant or other adults.
3. Usually comes to the program/setting willingly.
4. Usually copes with rebuffs and reverses adequately
5. Shows the capacity to empathize
6. Has positive relationships with 1 or 2 peers; shows capacity to really care about them, miss them if absent, etc.
7. Sometimes displays the capacity for humor.
8. Does not seem to be acutely lonely.

### **II. Social Skill Attributes**

The child usually:

1. Approaches others positively.
2. Expresses wishes, preferences clearly; gives reasons for actions/ positions.
3. Asserts own rights, needs appropriately.

4. Is not easily intimidated by bullies.
5. Expresses frustrations/anger effectively & without harming others or property.
6. Gains access to ongoing groups at play and work.
7. Enters on-going discussion on the subject; makes relevant contributions to ongoing activities.
8. Takes turns fairly easily.
9. Shows interest in others; coordinates pretend play with others; exchanges information with and requests information from others appropriately.
10. Negotiates and compromises with others appropriately.
11. Does not draw inappropriate attention to self.
12. Regularly gains accepts to ongoing groups at play and work.
13. Interacts non-verbally with other children with smiles, waves, nods, etc.
14. Accepts peers and adults of races/ethnic groups other than his/her own.

### III. Peer relationship Attributes

The child is:

1. Usually accepted versus neglected or rejected by other children.
2. Sometimes invited by other children to join them in play/friendship/work.

If a child is judged to be doing well on most of the attributes and characteristics listed above, then it is reasonable to assume that occasional social difficulties will be spontaneously outgrown. Occasional rather than frequent occurrences of difficulties on many of the items suggests that teachers observe and monitor interactions among the

children, but let them attempt to solve their own conflicts before intervening.

However, if a child seems to be doing poorly on many of the items on the list, the adults responsible for his or her care can implement some strategies that will help the child to overcome and outgrow their social difficulties (See Katz and McClellan, 1991).

### References

- Hartup, W. W. (1991). Having Friends, Making Friends, and Keeping Friends: Relationships as Educational Contexts. Early Report. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Early Education and Development. University of Minnesota.
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