



## **Social Emotional Competence – too much or too little**

**Knut K. Gundersen**<sup>1</sup>

*Diakonhjemmet University College, Sandnes, Norway*

When we measure social competence, the scores indicate that a person can become better and better just as in other school subjects such as history or geography. In general, these scores also give an actual picture of the status and/or progress of the person's social competence. However, it might be preferable to portray many of the dimensions of social competence as a continuum where the optimal level could be in the middle rather than at one of the ends. That is to say, social initiatives could take place too often or too seldom, or a person could take others' needs into consideration too little, but also too much, to the detriment of his or her own needs. This implies that the overall purpose in a training social and emotional learning program might at the same time involve training some participants to do less of something and others to do more. The present article reflects on different continua involved in social competence training and suggests that the facilitator needs to analyse the needs of each of the participants in a group and adapt the training program accordingly. The implications for conducting a program, composition of programs and for the training of facilitators are also discussed.

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

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### **Introduction**

The concept of social competence may be divided into social skills, social practice and empathic understanding (Bellack, Mueser, Gingerich, & Agresta, 1997). Social skills in this context involves whether a person possesses different skills and is able to adapt these skills to situation-specific variables. Social skills are presumed to enable social practice, but social practice in this definition also involves the degree to which

<sup>1</sup>

Corresponding author. Email address: knut.gundersen@diakonhjemmet.no

a person wants or is able to meet social demands in a satisfactory way. Factors like shyness, lack of self-efficacy, depression and emotional state will thus have an impact on the performance of the social skills. Likewise, empathic understanding and the willingness to act according to this understanding are also a crucial part of being a socially competent person.

The training of social competence has to address the different shades of the concept. It may thus be a challenge to construct a manual-based program that is not only a step by step recipe on how to teach the students, but that also includes theoretical underpinnings of the program and the concept to be learned. Gundersen (2010) presents an overview of different aspects of the social competence concept and also recommendations on which topics or programs should be addressed to improve social competence. This article discusses some dimensions in the concept and argues that social competence training in a group may require that some children and young people will be trained in *different directions* on specific areas of competence.

A general characteristic of most school subjects is that the students can get better and better in that subject. As their knowledge improves, the students come to know more and more about history, mathematics, geography, and other subjects. The same appears also to apply to social competence – a student may score higher and higher on scales defining social competence, such as the Social Skills Improvement Scale (SSIS) (Gresham & Elliot, 2008) which includes subscales of communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, engagement and self-control. This means that the social competence of the students within these areas starts at a specific level and eventually improves after completing specific training. However, some of the dimensions of social competence may be represented on a continua where the optimal level might be in the middle rather than at one of the ends. It is important to engage in social initiatives, but one can also do this too often – one should consider which behaviours will be best appreciated by others, thus displaying empathy. Consideration for others, however, should also be balanced against the consideration of what will be best for oneself. Training in social competence thus has a twofold aim. On the one hand, it should stimulate students with low scores on internalised behavioural problems, shyness, low self-esteem and lack of assertive behavior to become more assertive; and on the other hand it should also help students with high scores on externalised behaviour to take fewer or alternative initiatives towards others. In this sense social competence training addresses behaviours that may occur too often, too intensely or last too long, as well as behaviours that may occur too seldom, too superficially or too quickly.

This article is an attempt to describe and discuss some of these continua and underline the need for adjusting the content of social competence training towards each student's particular needs. This may lead to the need for more indepth trainer education, and eventually to combine different program components to meet the needs of the individual child or young person. Problem areas for these continua will be described and further implications will be discussed.

### **Emotional adjustment**

Responses from our environment evoke emotions like happiness, sadness or anger and it is inevitable and also necessary that our responses are coloured by the emotions that have been stirred up. However, when

the activating of emotions leads to less control from the cortex, the reaction may lead to behaviour which is out of proportion to the actual triggering response from others. Emotional adjustment may go both ways. Some children may act with furious anger after a minor provocation while others may not show any feelings even after episodes which normally should lead to a greater expression of emotion. Training in emotional regulation normally attempts to reduce emotional overactivation to help the individual gain self control. However, some intervention groups typically also consist of exposing participants with low levels of assertiveness to triggering situations to encourage them to express their emotions more openly in response to others' behaviours. Similarly other emotions like sadness can be expressed in an overexaggerated way. It is understandable that the person is sad, but how or to whom the sadness is addressed may not be appropriate. Too much concern about one's own emotions may disturb the empathic attentiveness to others' emotions which is a crucial part of empathy. Facially expressed emotions can be triggered both involuntarily in response to external triggering stimuli and also by voluntarily manifesting the expression of emotions. According to facial feedback theory, imitation of facial gestures can actually influence the emotional experience (Strack, Marin, & Stepper, 1988). Awareness of how emotions are expressed and also of how the participants actually can regulate body language and facial expressions towards more functional emotions may therefore be a area for development in social competence training programs.

### **Too much or too little concern for others**

Empathic understanding is a crucial part of social competence (Phillips, 1985). People who display consideration for others become more popular and find it easier to build and keep friendships. Lack of empathy may originate from such factors as reduced understanding of others' feelings or lack of emphasis on learning skills like cooperation, empathetic listening or showing consideration to others in the family or at school. In these cases empathy training as a part of a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program can lead to fewer behavioural problems and increased social competence (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, & Schellinger, 2011; Langeveld, Gundersen, & Svartdal, 2012). The empathic dimension of social competence also suggests that programs that address either moral issues, empathy, or both, could have a beneficial effect (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007) However, will children who actually possess the ability to consider a situation from different perspectives, but nevertheless choose to act without consideration for the needs of the other person, benefit from empathy training? According to some studies (Ogloff, Wong, & Greenwood, 1990; Rice, Harris, & Cormier, 1992) social skills training may lead to children becoming even more calculating when it comes to manipulating or bullying others. Other studies have shown that programs that include perspective training, communication and self-control have a positive effect on bullying (DeRosier, 2004). Langeveld et al. (2012) studied children with high scores on measures of social competence and low scores on measures of behavioural problems, and found that Aggression Replacement Training (ART) which includes training in social skills, moral reasoning and anger control, also leads to decreased behaviour problems (Langeveld et al., 2012). However, Gundersen and Moynahan (2006, p. 166) define a socially competent individual as one who "in specific social situations, will with a high degree of probability, achieve both his/her own and the common goals in ways which safeguard his/her own fundamental rights and those of the interaction partner(s)...". In

this perspective children who are too self-effacing and always put others' needs ahead of their own would need to improve their social competence – but in another direction. When training social competence in a group, it is important also to emphasise this part of the definition. Young people may gain popularity by spending time and effort to help others, but there is a thin line between actually being helpful and being used by others. Training in assertiveness may therefore be very important for children and young people who generally think too much about the needs of others, while the same skill would appear to be too well integrated in the repertoire of those who first and foremost achieve their own needs in abusive interactions with others. A similar perspective involves children who always follow the rules or choose the 'right thing to do' in each situation. We have seen examples of exceptionally high scores on the *How I Think Scale* (Barriga, Gibbs, Potter, & Liau, 2001), but when the same children receive training in moral reasoning, they start to argue in a way that makes the other children roll their eyes in surprise. Technically it is wrong to take an apple that hangs over the fence but at the same time you can easily lose friends if you always point out what is right and wrong. In every situation there are written and unwritten rules.

Social competence involves both knowing these rules as well as possible, but also being able to reflect on the fact that these rules may differ depending on the situation and the people involved, and knowing when one should correct others' actions and when you should not. These perspectives can be addressed in programs like social perception training (Gundersen, Strømngren, & Moynahan, 2014), empathy training (Salmon, 2014) or moral reasoning training (Gibbs, 2004), but trainers need to be careful in helping the participants to find a balance between consideration for themselves and for others. From our own experience of supervision in this area, some trainers are likely to emphasize consideration for others that undermines reasonable consideration for the participant's own need. One example was a trainer, in a moral dilemma discussion, who argued strongly that the main character in the dilemma should go to his friend's birthday party instead of meeting his favourite soccer player. In these cases trainers have to understand both the underpinnings and aims of the program and possess the insight that is necessary to lead a program successfully.

### **Perception of others' intent**

It is well known that antisocial youths and individuals with reactive aggression problems tend to misinterpret other people's signals as hostile in ambiguous situations (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Crick & Dodge, 1996). In programs like social perception training, participants are trained to clarify such situations as well as searching for other interpretations. Moreover, some children and young people may have the opposite bias, that is, either being too sceptical and interpret others too negatively, or being duped because they are too credulous when interpreting social situations. Social competence involves not only being able to reflect on different cues in a social situation and decide whether the interacting partners have a friendly intent or not, but also being able to clarify the situation (e. g. by asking if one is not sure). When training social competence through social perception training, the participants are exposed to different ambiguous situations. In doing so, they can learn different ways of interpreting and clarifying these situations and, as a result, hopefully reduce their tendency to interpret the situations either systematically negatively or positively. Perceptions of hostile

intent might have a connection with being abused physically or psychologically by parents or members of the intimate network, and we know that early abuse is a predictor of aggressive behavior in kindergarten (Dodge, Price, Bachorowski, & Newman, 1990). Programs like Social Perception Training (Gundersen et al., 2014) can be an important supplement to other programs within this area. At the same time trainers need to be aware of the balance between being too suspicious and being too naïve, and when they should lead in each direction. They should also be aware when participants will need individual therapy.

### **Social Initiatives**

The purpose of social competence training is not to make everyone equal. On the contrary, an important aim is to contribute to increased tolerance for differences in behaviour. In addition, most people approve of interacting with people that behave differently – some are good storytellers, some are good listeners, some are creative and take many social initiatives, while some prefer stability and home life to socialising. In this perspective, there is not one ideal way of acting in a socially competent manner; all behaviours must be seen in light of different social contexts and interaction with different partners. However, when some children systematically talk too much, interrupt or take initiatives to a degree that their peers do not appreciate, the consequence might be that they lose important friendships. Likewise, if somebody is always quiet or never wants to join others in different activities, the result could have the same effect. Within a context of training empathy or social perception, the intervention might be to reflect on when people talk too much or too little. In this way, we can teach the participants to recognise the small signs in the interacting partner's face which reflect how their behaviour is being received. An important aspect here is being able to adapt behaviour to different situations and persons. Every situation has its own unwritten rules, and every person has a specific role which includes such factors as history, degree of friendship or position. It is therefore important that generalisation training not only deals with generating the trained skills outside the sessions, but also for participants to reflect on whether these skills should be acted out differently depending on the interaction partner. A complement may have very different value depending on whether one gives it to one's girlfriend, boss or a friend, or if it is given in privacy or in public. What makes good competence is not the ability to generate a specific skill, but the ability to perceive when, where and how to perform a variety of skills as demanded in a range of social encounters. Regulating one's own behaviour to become more competent will thus for some people involve taking fewer social initiatives and for others engaging in more such activities.

In general, when children or adults break social norms of good behavior, they normally experience a negative environmental reaction. However, unusual behaviour in itself does not need to be necessarily negative. A person can exhibit a behavior that is relatively far from average, but is still considered to be valuable for the environment; exactly because he or she is different (Gundersen & Moynahan, 2006). It is therefore detrimental if social competence training leads to that participant losing characteristics that might differ from some of the common norms, but which are at the same time experienced as positive in the environment. On the other hand, shy children with too few initiatives or children who have a tendency to put themselves at the centre of social interactions all the time, would benefit by adjusting their behaviour.

## **General adaptation to others` behaviour**

As pointed out, social skills need to be adapted to the situation at hand and the culture in which the social interaction takes place, as well as to the partners' responses in such situations. Matching these requirements requires breaking the interaction down into smaller segments, thereby teaching the mastery of a number of subresponses, or micro skills. A simple interaction such as shaking hands is thus evaluated not only according to whether the expected steps were actually carried out, but also according to factors such as intensity (strength of handshake and of voice, vocal pitch, and distance between the parties), duration (duration of handshake and of eye contact), and frequency (how often handshaking takes place). All of these dimensions can be understood on the basis of a continuum from too little/too weak to too much/too strong . Some children systematically talk too loud, stare too intensely into the other person's eyes or intrude into another person`s intimate zones, while others display shy behaviour in the opposite direction. Observers of role plays should therefore always evaluate specific micro skills of importance that fit in the specific situation. One area of special interest regarding social competence is awareness of personal space (Hall, 1966), and the ability to adapt one's behaviour to another person in this regard. Hall divided personal space into four zones, specifying the actual distance between persons: the intimate zone (15-45 cm), the personal zone (46 cm-1.22 m), the social zone (1.22m-3.6m) and the public zone (more than 3.6 m). However, these measures are not absolute since they are also moderated by various factors such as eye contact, meeting sideways instead of front to front, gender, cultural differences and personal preference. However, invading personal space may be considered as odd or impolite, and it is thus important to reflect on this in training. Some children talk about personal things in public zones, some talk too loud in the intimate zone, some are too silent in the public zone, and some go systematically too close or too far away. Another related aspect of major importance is the ability to adapt one`s own behaviour to the signals of one`s interpersonal partners (matching). Normally, when meeting a sad person, our body language and tone of voice are influenced in the same direction. Matching movement and voice in this way is an unconscious process which does not normally need to be included in the program, but sometimes when children fail to have a normal interaction with others, possibly leading them to being bullied or losing friends, social competence training is a good opportunity to raise this issue. The concept of micro skills is a natural part of social skills training (e.g. McGinnis, 2012), while personal zones are integrated into both empathy training (Salmon, 2014) and social perception training (Gundersen et al., 2014).

## **Reactive and proactive aggression**

Reactive and proactive aggression differ from the other perspectives discussed in this paper, in that neither of them are part of a socially competent behaviour, but rather the opposite. However, when analysing behavioural problems in a training group, it is vital to evaluate whether each of the participants has reactive aggression, proactive aggression or both. Reactive aggression can be defined as aggression resulting from anger activation after experienced provocations or frustrations. Proactive aggression can be defined as intended actions with the intent of reaching specific goals. The two concepts are distinguished according to

whether there has been a provocation leading to the aggression or not. In some definitions, proactive aggression can have a dual meaning, either instrumental (with the aim of attaining an object or privileges) or bullying (personally directed with the aim to humiliate or control) (Brown, Atkins, Osborne, & Milnamow, 1996; Camodeca & Goossens, 2008).

The overlap between the two concepts is rather high with a correlation between .60 and .80 (Dodge et al., 1987; Poulin & Boivin, 2000; Hubbard et al., 2002). In a study with aggressive children, Dodge and colleagues (1997) found that 53% exhibited both reactive and proactive aggression, 32% only reactive aggression and 15% only proactive aggression. It is important to be aware that the two concepts have different emotional, cognitive and behavioural triggers, and that the characteristics of those who exhibit these two forms of aggression differ significantly. Most of the anger control approaches included in SEL programs address reactive aggression. Proactive aggression may be addressed by empathy training, moral reasoning training or through a bullying program (see e.g. Olweus, 1994). The impact of traditional SEL programs on proactive aggression however, has been studied less than in that on reactive aggression. More effort should therefore be directed towards finding out how a SEL program could integrate elements that also reduce proactive aggression.

Self control training seems to be crucially important for several reasons. Langeveld et al (2012) found that improved self control mediated the effect of ART on changes in behavioral problems. This is also consistent with the work of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) that theorized that the single most important factor behind crime is lack of self-control. Even if Gottfredsson and Hirschi's work has been criticized (Wickstrøm & Triber, 2007), the connection between self-control and crime has been confirmed (Pratt & Cullen, 2008). For children and young people with behavioral difficulties, approaches like anger control training should be included in the training. To address proactive aggression this approach should be supplemented with empathy training, character education or moral reasoning training. As Goldstein (2004) suggested, anger may be provoked by the wrong interpretation of a social situation and social perception training should therefore be included in programs addressing deviant behavior.

## **Conclusion**

SEL programs differ considerably in relation to whether they are universal or directed at a specific group of participants, and whether they consist of specific elements like social skills training or are multimodal programs with different components. They also differ considerably in duration. Furthermore we find differences in the qualification requirements for facilitators and the required implementation standards. In this landscape it is impossible to claim that SEL programs in general are effective. In order to be able to do so, we need to ask at least five questions:

What are the needs of the participants? Do the elements of the program address these needs? Is the facilitator qualified to conduct the different aspects of the program with regard to both pedagogy and theory? Is the program adequately adapted to include strategies for additional generalisation training? Does the effectiveness study actually measure improvements in the addressed needs of the specific child?

If these questions are answered in the affirmative, the right SEL programs is likely to have a significant effect. However, this will also imply that facilitators analyse the specific needs of each child and finding the right balance for the individual child. Some of the continua described in the paper, for example disregarding others` needs, systematic wrong intepretations of other`s intent, or failure to display a balanced emotional state may be very important factors in social and emotional competence and should be addressed in social competence programs. The advantages of manual-based programs are obvious. The facilitator will know exactly how to carry out the program, step by step and in the right pedagogical form as instructed by the author. However, programs are not usually intended to deal with every possible aspect of social emotional competence or the entire range of needs of each individual child in the group. It is therefore important that the facilitators are able to adapt the program to become useful for all participants in the group, whether they need more or less of a certain type of behaviour. The needs of the children may indicate that standard combinations of programs like ART (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998; Glick & Gibbs, 2011), even if it has been found to be effective for the majority of children (Barnoski & Aos, 2004; Gundersen & Svartdal, 2010; Langeveld et al., 2012) should be tried out with modifications or with new components for specific groups in order to make them even more effective. However, this has to be done in accordance with the theoretical framework of the programs to preserve program integrity. The facilitator must be suitably qualified in the different aspects of the program to be able to adapt the program without diverging from its leading principles. Facilitating a SEL program is a challenging task, involving both theoretical understanding and pedagogical skills. Enabling or facilitating behavioral changes requires qualifications in both psychology and pedagogy, and should not be carried out by just following a manual, but intensive face to face training by qualified trainers.

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