

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Investigation of the relationship between communication skills, social competence and emotion regulation skills of preschool children in Turkey

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The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between communication skills, social competence and emotion regulation skills of preschool children. Children attending public primary schools who were 53 to 80 months old from the middle socio-economic class were chosen randomly from Istanbul City center districts for this study. They were 426 children. The average age of the children was 68.91 months. One of the three data collection tools was "Communication Skills Scale for 5 to 6 Years Old Children" with 4 subscales developed by Önder, Dağal and Şallı. The internal consistency of the scale (Communication Skills Scale for 5 to 6 Years Old Children) was .98. The second data collection tool was named SCBE-30, which evaluates symptoms of problems and quantity of social skills of preschool children, consists of 30 items and has three subscales. The internal consistency of the social competence scale was 0.88. "Emotion Regulation Checklist" was the third data collection tool, which was adapted into Turkish by Batum and Yağmurlu to measure children's ability to regulate their emotions and has two subscales. Internal consistency coefficient of the subscales was 0.73 and 0.75. The study was based on descriptive analysis and multiple regression correlation was examined. As a result of the research, it was concluded that there was not a relationship between communication skills' total score and social competence and emotion regulation skills. However, when subscales of each concepts were examined separately, it was found out that social competence and anxiety/withdrawal subscale together explained communication skills of preschool children moderately. And social competence, anxiety/withdrawal, anger/aggression and emotion regulation subscales explained active communication skills of preschool children moderately.

**Key words:** Preschool children, communication skills, social competence, emotion regulation.

## INTRODUCTION

It is known that an important part of personality is developed in the first six years of life which is considered as the early childhood period. Therefore, concepts of

communication skills, emotion regulation and social competence which can be the basis of personality development are important factors to be considered.

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Positive behaviors developed by children in early childhood period will help children to maintain a healthy way of life when they enter social life independently from their parents.

Developing proper communication skills will be the basis for children to be in harmony with their environment, establishing healthy social relationships and regulating their reactions emotionally.

As a social being an individual uses communication in every phase of his life. Even a newborn baby points out a physical need to his mother with his cry. In this way he lays the foundations of communication and produces the communication skills which will produce the form of connection with society, by the reactions received from others.

Dewey (1916) stated that social life is identified with communication (cited in Sigman, 2013). Human beings have an outstanding hardware which is skill of communication to live with other people as well as to gain rules, values and information formed by his predecessors (Önder, 2004:11).

We are trying to understand, learn or teach today like we did yesterday. We want to share, impress and change today as we did before. The main determinant of the success of these efforts is the level of communication skills that is owned. Every topic from husband and wife relationship to parent-child, teacher-student, chief-officer, employer-employee, government-society and international relations is based on the subtleties of communication. However, failures on communication are rising every day despite all these developments in the field of communication. The most effective way to reduce these negativities may be increasing communication skills (Demiray, 2008:3). At this point "What conditions related to personality can affect communication skills?" should be the question to be focused on. Concepts of social competence and emotion regulation which are considered as the factors effect personality emerge as other concepts to be considered. A baby's social relationship starts with his cry. With time, laughing and talking are added to crying. In this way a baby's way of communicating enriches. A baby who starts to react to stimulants from parents and other people from the environment learns by imitating in this process (Gülşay-Ogelman and Çiftçi-Topaloğlu, 2014:242). These first reactions are indeed the first signs of form of communication with the environment. After these basic skills, emotion regulation skills and social competence will be improved and changed by the reactions he receives.

Concept of social competence includes cognitive, emotional and social behaviors which are required to provide children's successful social adaptations (Ladd, 2005, cited in Vu, 2015). Because social competence is also related with internal responses, it is expected that competence of individual's being in positive thoughts of

himself and others and positive social behaviors are also supported. Whereas it is possible that negative thoughts affect children's self-esteem negatively and might cause social problems (Rudolph et al., 1995).

It is required for an individual to have some qualifications and skills to adapt to and live in harmony with the environment. Social competences and skills are basic self-perspectives and skills which can be improved by education to live in harmony together and which should be improved by the individual (Bacanlı, 2012; cited in Sariçam et al., 2013).

These skills of children will be shaped observing the behaviors of other people in educational and social environments throughout life and they will start to show appropriate responses to situations, events and other people. With the effort of being in a social environment, a child will learn to manage his emotions while trying to adapt to the environment by evaluating other individuals' responses. Skill of managing emotions will be used as emotion regulation.

Emotion regulation is an important component of successful emotional and social functionality (Farmer and Kashdan, 2012). Individuals feel happy when praised and feel upset when criticized. Additionally, when emotions expressed, social conditions are determinant rather than the real emotions occurred in the current situation. So, emotional expression is considered to be more social than the emotional experience. People express their emotions in line with social demands and they often hide their negative emotions and exaggerate their positive emotions according to social demands (Onat and Otrar, 2010). Emotion regulation skill is highly affected by social environment. Children learn that it is possible to regulate emotions when they see others manage their emotions successfully (Camps et al., 1989; cited in Demirkapı, 2013). Children who observe and experience the emotions of loved ones are out of control may have problems about regulating their own emotions (Reider and Cicchetti 1989 cited in Demirkapı, 2013).

Emotions do not force us to behave in an appropriate way; they increase the possibility of behaving appropriately. This gives opportunity to regulate our emotions. We can run away when we are scared, treat harshly when we are angry and smile when we are happy but do not always we act in these ways. It is important how we regulate our emotions; our well-being and our emotions are related (Gross, 2002).

Situation selection of emotion regulation includes situation modification, attentional deployment and cognitive changes. In situation selection, individual gets closer to some people and situations according to potential impacts on himself and avoid others. In situation modification, individual regulates the environment he is in, to change the situation's emotional effects. In attentional deployment, individual focuses or removes his attention from a situation to establish the effect on his

**Table 1.** Demographic data of sample groups of children and parents.

<b>Sample groups</b>		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender of children</b>	Boy	219	51.4
	Girl	207	48.6
<b>Age groups of children</b>	4.5-5.5	232	54.5
	5.5-6.5	194	45.5
<b>Education level of mother</b>	Primary School	166	39.0
	Secondary School	87	20.4
	High School	125	29.3
	Undergraduate	46	10.8
<b>Education level of father</b>	Primary School	115	27.0
	Secondary School	114	26.8
	High School	135	31.7
	Undergraduate	62	14.6

emotions. In cognitive change, individual evaluates the situation he is in and his capacity to direct the situation in order to change his emotions (Gross, 1998). Emotions are sometimes destructive and sometimes helpful. The difficulty here is to limit the destructive sides of emotions and to find the ways to use the helpful sides (John and Gross, 2004).

Preschool children are in a process of being competent socially and emotionally. Regulating, expressing and being aware of emotions and solving social problems are some sides of social and emotional competence. These skills are the tools for child's learning because it leads a child to study in the social environment of the classroom. In preschool period great importance is given to pre-literacy skills so socio-emotional skills are expected to be the basis for pre-literacy skills (Curby et al., 2015).

In childhood period any defect or deficiency in emotion regulation may cause behavioral problems and aggression (Eisenberg and Fabes, 1992; cited in Çelik and Kocabıyık, 2014). In a study conducted by Eisenberg et al. (1994) among children of 4 to 6 age groups, it was stated that individuals with low level of emotion regulation skills show high level of aggressive reactions and there is a relationship between problematic emotion regulation skills and aggression. Similarly, in a research done by O'neil et al. (1997) among preschool, first and second grade students, it was found out that there is a relationship between being socially accepted and academic achievement. When related literature is examined, it can be said that being socially accepted firstly requires establishing proper communication, social competence and emotion regulation skills at the same time. So it can be judged that as well as communication skills, social competence and emotion regulation skills are highly important in child's social, emotional and academic life.

From this point of view, the primary aim of this research is to identify the relationship between the concepts of social competence, emotion regulation skills and communication skills which are stated to be effective on development of other skills in preschool period and seen to be emphasized strongly.

## **METHODS**

### **Research method**

The research which was designed to investigate the relationship between communication skills, emotion regulation skills and social competence of preschool children was conducted using descriptive research method.

### **Sample**

This research was conducted among middle socio-economic level children of 53 to 80 months old attending public primary schools. They were chosen randomly in İstanbul City Center. 426 children participated in this research. The average age of the children was 68.91. Demographic data of sample groups of children and their parents are presented in Table 1.

### **Data collection tools**

#### **Communication skills scale for 5 to 6 years old children**

One of the data collection tools used in the research was "communication skills scale for 5 to 6 years old children" which was developed by Önder et al. (2015). The internal consistency of the scale (Cronbach alpha) was 0.98. Scale consists of four subscales called "Active Communication", "Considering Others in Communication", "Following Rules in Communication" and "Reacting Positively to Others in Communication". Cronbach alpha value of "Active Communication" subscale was 0.98, "Considering Others in Communication" subscale was 0.97, "Following Rules in

Communication” subscale was 0.97, “Reacting Positively to Others in Communication” subscale was 0.87. Children’s communication skills were evaluated by 5 point Likert type scale (1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=frequently, 5=always).

### **Social competence and behavior evaluation 30**

The scale which was named as “The Social Competence and Behavior Scale - SCBE-30” was developed to evaluate the social skills by LaFreniere ve Dumas in 1996 and it was adapted to Turkish by Çorapçı et al. (2010). This scale evaluates quantity of preschool children’s symptoms of problems and social skills include three subscales each of which consists of 10 items. Social Competence (SC) subscale measures positive characteristics like children’s cooperation and problem solving efforts towards conflicts when they are with their peers. Anger/Aggression (AA) subscale evaluates symptoms of external problems like aggressive and incompatible behavior in peer relations and opposing adults. Anxiety/withdrawal (AW) subscale evaluates symptoms of internal problems like children’s timidity in groups and emotions like sadness and depression. Symptoms of children’s emotional and behavioral problems and social skills are evaluated with 6 point likert type scale (1=never, 2 or 3=sometimes, 4 or 5=frequently, 6=always). Cronbach Alpha internal consistency of SC, AA and AW subscales was 0.88, 0.87 and 0.84 respectively (Çorapçı et al., 2010).

### **Emotion regulation checklist**

The scale was developed to measure children’s emotion regulation skills by Shields and Cichetti (1997) and was adapted to Turkish by Batum and Yağmurlu (2007). Four point Likert type scale (1=never/rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=frequently, 4=almost/always) has two subscales; Liability/negativity and emotion regulation. Internal consistency coefficient of the subscales was 0.73 and 0.75, respectively (Batun and Yağmurlu, 2007).

### **Data collection process**

Permissions to get information from teachers through interviews about children were taken from the parents of the children. In addition, permission from Turkish Ministry of Education was taken to get information from teachers. Permissions were taken to use the scales before starting the research. Then scales were distributed to schools chosen by random sampling method. Data on children’s communication skills, social competence and emotion regulation skills were taken via evaluating teachers’ comments about children with the help of the scales. Knowing the students for at least two months was taken as a basis. The teacher candidates who were registered in the research project class supported the process of the collection of the data research by giving the scales to the teachers which were selected by the researcher.

### **Data analysis**

SPSS 15 statistical packet program was used for analysis of the data obtained during the research. Stepwise Regression Model was used to test the relationship between communication skills, social competence and emotion regulation skills of children. Stepwise selection alternates between forward and backward, bringing in and removing variables that meet the criteria for entry or removal, until a stable set of variables is attained (Flom and Cassell, 2007). Level of

significance was 0.05 in data analysis.

While the regression analysis was applied, the assumptions below were taken into account during and before the analysis and considered to be achieved:

1. A linear relationship between dependent and independent variables was identified.
2. It was observed that there was not a multiple correlation between independent variables (Pearson correlation coefficient between the independent variables was found smaller than 0,70)
3. It was found that the error terms were distributed normally (normality).
4. It was found that the variance of error terms was constant.
5. It was identified that there was not a relationship between error terms and was it found that the assumptions of multiple regression occurred (Sipahi et al., 2006).

## **FINDINGS**

Here, the relationship between the dependent variable; communication skills and the independent variables; social competence and emotion regulation skills were investigated. Also, communication skills subscales were examined with every independent variable subscale. In the multiple regression comparisons made, regression analysis was preferred and all dependent variables that affect communication skill dependent variable were included in the analysis. According to the stepwise model, first, the relationship between communication skills and social competence was examined. Later, communication skills and emotion regulation skills were evaluated. In the last stage, the relationship between communication skills; “Active Communication”, “Considering Others in Communication”, “Following Rules in Communication” and “Reacting Positively to Others” subscales and social competence, emotion regulation skills were explained together. In every step insignificant variables were excluded from the analysis and attention was paid to ultimate variable which affects the communication skills.

As shown in Table 2, it was found out that social competence and anxiety/withdrawal subscales of social competence moderately explained preschool children’s communication skills ( $R=0.654$ ;  $R^2=0.428$   $F=149.788$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). So it can be said that communication skills of preschool children aged five to six and social competence and introversion of these children has a moderate relationship.

As shown in Table 3, it was found out that social competence, anxiety/withdrawal, anger/aggression and emotion regulation subscales of social competence moderately explained preschool children’s active communication ( $R=0.63$ ;  $R^2=0.39$   $F=59.224$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). So it can be claimed that active communication skills of preschool children aged five to six have a moderate relationship with social competences, being angry and withdrawal.

As shown in Table 4, it was found out that social

**Table 2.** Communication skills, social competence and anxiety regression table.

Dependent variable: Communication skills			
Independent variables	Beta	t value	p value
Constant		15.770	0.000
Social competence	0.030	9.922	0.000
Anxiety/withdrawal	-0.018	-5.674	0.000
R=0.654	R <sup>2</sup> =0.428	F=149.788	p value=0.000

**Table 3.** "Active communication" and "social competence, anger, anxiety and emotion regulation" regression table.

Dependent variable: Active communication			
Independent variable	Beta	t value	p value
Constant	36.323	7.959	0.000
Social competence	0.320	4.149	0.000
Anger	0.168	2.488	0.014
Anxiety/withdrawal	-0.426	-6.320	0.000
Emotion regulation	0.484	2.458	0.004
R=0.63	R <sup>2</sup> =0.39	F=59.224	p value=0.000

**Table 4.** "Considering others in communication" and "social competence, anxiety/withdrawal" regression table.

Dependent variable: Considering others in communication			
Independent variable	Beta	t value	p value
Constant	30.407	10.818	0.000
Social competence	0.466	9.317	0.000
Anxiety/withdrawal	-0.187	-4.177	0.000
R=0.615	R <sup>2</sup> =0.378	F=103.071	P value=0.000

competence and anxiety/withdrawal subscales of social competence explained preschool children's "considering others in communication" moderately (R=0.63; R<sup>2</sup>=0.39 F=59.224; p=0.000). However when the table is examined, it can be seen that there was a positive relationship with social competence subscale and a negative relationship with introversion. So it can be asserted that there is a moderate relationship between considering others in communication skills of preschool children aged five to six and social competence and anxiety/introversion.

As shown in Table 5, it was found out that social competence and anxiety/withdrawal subscales of social competence explained preschool children's communication skill of "following rules in communication" moderately (R=0.65; R<sup>2</sup>=0.43 F=144.902; p=0.000). "Following rules in communication" subscale has a positive relationship with social competence and has a negative relationship with withdrawal. So it can be said that there is a moderate relationship between following rules in communication skills of preschool children aged

five to six and social competence, anxiety and withdrawal.

As shown in Table 6, it was found that "liability/negativity" subscale of emotion regulation and social competence and anger/aggression subscales explained "Reacting Positively to Others" skill of preschool children aged five to six in a moderate level (R=0.52; R<sup>2</sup>=0.27 F=47.023; p=0.000). "Reacting Positively to Others" had a positive relationship with social competence and "Negativity" whereas it had a negative relationship with "Anger". So it can be claimed that there is a moderate relationship between "Reacting Positively to Others" skill of preschool children aged 5 to 6 and "Negativity" subscale of emotion regulation skills and social competence subscale.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the multiple regression analysis was done in the research it was concluded that children's total scores of

**Table 5.** “Following rules in communication” and “social competence, anxiety/withdrawal” regression table.

<b>Dependent variable: Following rules in communication</b>			
<b>Independent variables</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>p value</b>
Constant	41.158	14.338	0.000
Social competence	0.564	11.398	0.000
Anxiety/withdrawal	-0.183	-3.634	0.000
R=0.65	R <sup>2</sup> =0.43	F=144.902	p value=0.000

**Table 6.** “Reacting positively to others” and “negativity, social competence and anger/aggression” regression table.

<b>Dependent variable: Reacting positively to others</b>			
<b>Independent variables</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>p value</b>
Constant	3.131	4.497	0.000
Negativity	0.43	2.258	0.025
Social competence	0.87	9.229	0.000
Anger	-0.35	-2.629	0.009
R=0.520	R <sup>2</sup> =0.270	F=47.023	p value=0.000

social competence and emotion regulation skills are not related to children’s total scores of communication skills. However when the analysis was repeated with subscales it was found out that social competency and anxiety/withdrawal together moderately explained preschool children’s communication skills. Social competence, anxiety/withdrawal, anger/aggression and emotion regulation subscales explained “Active Communication” skills moderately; social competence and “anxiety/withdrawal” explained children’s “Considering Others in Communication” skill in a moderate level; social competence and “anxiety/withdrawal” explained children’s “Following Rules in Communication” skill in a moderate level; “Liability/Negativity” subscale of emotion regulation, social competence and anger/aggression explained “Reacting Positively to Others” skill in a moderate level.

In this instance, when evaluated in terms of total points there is not a relationship between children’s being socially competent and regulating their emotions with communication skills. However, a positive relationship between children’s social competence and communication skills and a negative relationship between being withdrawn and communication skills were detected. Because individuals with high communication skills have contact more with the environment they are in, it is an expected outcome that they have higher level of social competence. This research put forth that there is a relationship between 5 and 6 years old children’s communication skills and social competence. Although this research does not cover language skills it can be said that the detected relationship between social

competence, emotion regulation skills and language skills in Monopoli and Kingston’s research (2012) done with second grade students also supports this research, as communication skills cannot exist without language skills (Önder, 2004).

The longitudinal study conducted among 5 years old children with low socio-economic level by Izard et al. (2001) stated that children’ verbal skills are affected by being aware of their own emotions. They also claimed in their research that ability to understand their own emotions makes their social communications easier. It can be said that this argument of Izard et al. (2001) explains the relationship between active communication and emotion regulation. Awareness of one’s own emotions is only one part of giving emotional reactions. However, individual differences in individual’s emotional awareness are related to their using of emotion regulation skills (Eastabrook and Flynn, 2014). Awareness provides accepting unwanted emotions and increases the capacity of tolerance for negative emotions (Çatak and Ögel, 2010).

At this point it can be thought that individuals who are aware of their own emotions can use their emotion regulation skills better than the others. For this reason, they can understand others better and communicate in a more reasonable way. Thus, in Kuyucu and Tepeli (2013) research conducted among 60 to 72 months old children, it was shown that children’s emotional and behavioral reactions shown to peers differ according to their emotion comprehension skills. In Garner and Waajid (2012), research it was stated that knowing the emotion indicates cognitive and social skills.

Also it was pointed out by Martinez et al. (2011) that inner talk which has an important role in language development suggested by Vygotsky and quiet thinking (Yeşilyaprak and Uçar, 2012) have important regulating roles in communication. Besides inner talk being effective in establishing a dialog with others, it has a special place on emotion regulation skills. With the help of inner talk children control their sadness and anger better (Day and Smith, 2013). Inner talk which is one of the important points of communication has a significant role in controlling emotions. So from this point of view, in both this study and other studies it was emphasized that emotion regulation skills have an important role in children's active communication.

In their research held among 43 to 66 months old children, Hazen and Black (1989) stated that consistent expression in communication increases social interaction and at the same time it provides acceptance by peers. In this research, it was found that following the rules in communication skills is related to children's social competence. Accordingly, it can be said that the social interaction of preschool children may have relation with the other dimensions of communication like consistent expressions and "Following the Rules". The finding of Hazel and Black supports the relationship between following rules in communication (forming eye contact in communication, complying with the rules of courtesy, complying with the order of speech etc; Önder et al., 2015) subscale and social competence. Thus, in another research on 6 years old children's peer selection done by Akman et al.,(2011), it was underlined that in terms of social skills, following courtesy rules is significant in peer selection. It can be said that this research also supports the relationship between social competence and following rules in communication. Gerther et al. (1994) stated in their research conducted among preschool children that limits of forming mutual communication affect social interaction.

It is stated that showing negative reactions and anger can be problematic in social communication, based on the findings of various researchers like Denham et al. (1990), Rubin and Clark (1983) and Rubin and Daniells-Byrness (1983). It can be argued that the mentioned findings can explain the detected relationship between active communication, reacting positively to others and anger in this research.

When the results are examined in general, after considering together all the skills which affect communication skills, abilities or situations that affect communication skills can be identified individually or separately. Thus, as shown in this research, communication skill is not a unilateral skill. It consists of many sub factors and there are different variables that affect these sub factors. In this instance, discovering factors that affect children's communication skills and establishing programs that can develop these factors

together, as well as researching the effectiveness of these programs and sharing the effective ones and the results in in-service programs; training teacher candidates about the field as well as researching the effectiveness of these trainings can be offered to researchers and implementers.

According to the results of the study it was found that communication skill was related to social competence. Since social competence is considered rather central in preschool children's development the preschool programs should include more activities related to communication skills. In addition to placing more communicational activities in preschool education curriculum, the preschool teachers and children's parents should also be aware of the importance of the communication skills. Preschool teachers and parents may also gain more abilities through courses, seminars to gain more skills in communicating effectively with their children.

## Notes

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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