

## Turkish preschool children's representations of friendship: Story completion method adaptation study

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**Abstract:** In the preschool period, children's friendships considered a crucial developmental task. Hence, it is critical to evaluate children's mental representations of friendships during this period. This study aims to evaluate the validity and reliability of the story completion protocol designed to evaluate preschool children's mental representations of their friendships in school settings for Turkish children. The Preschool Friendship Story Completion Task consists of six stories, one of which is warming. The stories were translated into Turkish by researchers and Turkish-English language experts, and expert opinion was taken for Turkish-English compatibility. Two pilot studies were conducted to evaluate children's participation in the task and following the instructions. Seventy children attending pre-school education institutions participated in the study. Children are asked to complete the unfinished stories presented through a scene and figures. The coders evaluated the video-recorded children's narratives using a detailed rating system. In addition, teachers evaluated the social skills and problem behaviors of children. The results affirmed that the friendship dimensions were conceptually related to each other and the inter-coder reliability was high. Furthermore, our findings indicate that the story completion method on the basis of the narratives of children is a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate way to assess children's friendships.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In preschool education institutions, children take part in the peer group with which they interact daily for a long time. The interactions that occur in this group create opportunities for children to form close friendships over time. Friendship acts as an emotional and cognitive resource for children to learn about themselves and others, and the mutual regulation and intimacy required by close relationships are models for future relationships (Dunn, 2004; Hartup, 1992; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). Nonetheless, studies on preschool friendships have generally focused on the presence or absence of friendship (Kingery & Erdley, 2007; Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003) and its quality (Park & Waters, 1989; Sebanc, 2003; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). Few studies have considered children's perceptions of their friendships (San Juan, 2006; Vu, 2015). Due to

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the lack of this research, much remains to be understood about how young children make sense of friendships and how this affects their development.

Furman (1996) asserted that it is necessary to investigate how children perceive these relationships in friendship relationships. Because perceptions indicate how children interpret and affect their behaviors of friends and how this affects the functioning and quality of the relationship. This study, it was examined whether an assessment tool on the basis of the story completion method is reproducible for Turkish children to evaluate the quality of friendship in the preschool period. Verifying that the story completion test is valid and reliable in Turkish culture will meet the need for a developmentally appropriate and valid tool that can be used by researchers who aim to evaluate the friendship perceptions of children.

### 1.1. Friendship Quality

Friendship refers to the mutual relationship that individuals establish between themselves, both sides are voluntary and happy to spend time with each other (Bukowski et al., 1996). While parents, siblings, teachers, and peers are normal members of the child's social circle, volunteerism is essential in friendship (Laursen, 1996). Bukowski and Hoza (1989) proposed a model in which they define three different aspects or determinants of friendship: Existence of friendship (whether they participate in a mutual friendship), the number of friendships (the prevalence of the friendship network), and the nature of the friendship (the support that friendship provides for the child, the characteristics of friendship or conflict). The existence and stability of friends in early childhood have been frequently addressed by researchers. Studies have verified that friendless children are more anxious, less accepted by their peers (Parker & Seal, 1996), experience more victimization, and exhibit less prosocial behavior than children with friends (Wojslawowicz et al., 2006). Ladd (1990) validated that kindergarten children who have many friends have better academic performance. Proulx and Poulin (2013) pointed out that children who can maintain a long-term relationship with the same friend at school exhibit more social behavior, are more accepted by their peers, and are less shy than those who change friends during the school year. The results of previous studies are valuable in showing that the presence and stability of friends are a crucial for the development of children, but the quality of this friendship is as essential as the children's making friends (Hartup, 1996). Because friendship is also a potential source of negative impact on children's development.

Berndt (1996) elucidated that the quality of friendship is defined by positive characteristics such as companionship and sincerity and negative characteristics such as conflict and dominance. It can be said that friendship is qualified when positive characteristics are more dominant than negative characteristics. Negative experiences such as conflict and interactions that hurt emotions or can be embarrassing also play a significant role in these relationships. Negative friendships can teach harmful skills and lead to unnecessary or potentially damaging information and provide false models for subsequent relationships (Engle et al., 2011; Sebanc, 2003). For instance, studies with older children and adolescents highlighted that friendships are a risk factor for antisocial behavior and substance use, sometimes depending on the characteristics and interactions of friends (Dishion et al., 1995). In studies conducted with preschool children, it was determined that negative friendship quality was associated with externalizing behavioral problems and overt aggression (Engle et al., 2011; Sebanc, 2003). Besides, high-quality friendships are associated with positive social behavior. For this reason, it is important to consider the qualities that define the friendship of children in terms of preventing many developmental problems.

Considering the limited peer interaction or cognitive and language development in the early stages of development, it is not easy to define friendship for this period (Bukowski et al., 1996; Howes, 1996). Due to the illiteracy of preschool children and some developmental limitations, researchers used more observational methods to determine the quality of friendship in this pe-

riod. One of them is Dyadic Relationships Q-set developed by Park and Waters (1989). Researchers observed pairs of friends in a laboratory setting and encoded children's games with the Q-set coding procedure. Similarly, Youngblade and Belsky (1992) developed the Dyadic Coding System to evaluate the friendship quality of preschool children. These two observational methods provide essential information about the characteristics of preschool friendships, but there are some limitations in their use. First of all, observing children's play is mostly artificial and requires intensive labor. Interactions between friends videotaped in a lab may not be compared to interactions between friends in preschool classrooms. Second, the positive and negative traits obtained from observations of children cannot easily be compared with data derived from the perceptions of older children (Sebanc, 2003). Furthermore, these studies provide an incomplete picture of the friendships of preschool children, as they focus only on observable features of friendship and have difficulty in capturing psychological aspects.

## **1.2. Using Storytelling to Understand Relationships of Children**

Internal working models in attachment theory are defined as mental representations developed by individuals about the world, including the self, and people who are important to them (Bowlby, 1969/2012; Delius et al., 2008; Shaver et al., 1996). Researchers use the narrative method as a way to understand the internal working models or mental representations that children develop in their relationships with their parents. Storytelling and asking the child to complete the story are familiar to children, attracting much more attention than traditional methods such as interviews and questionnaires. Researchers using this method state that, during story completion, children are under the influence of mental representations developed by their family relationships and experiences, and thus story completion gives us information about children's perceptions (Bretherton et al., 1990; Oppenheim et al., 1997; Rydell et al., 2005). Studies highlighted that the story completion task is an appropriate way to assess children's mental representation in their relationships (Bretherton et al., 1990; Muller et al., 2014; Oppenheim et al., 1997; Page & Bretherton, 2001; Warren et al., 1996). Nonetheless, studies aimed at determining the mental representations of children about relationships have generally been limited to the parent-child relationship.

The importance and consistent nature of friendship, albeit differently from relationships with parents, shape children's mental representations (Howes, 1996). On the basis of this assumption, the Preschool Friendship Story Completion Task (PFSCT), developed by San Juan (2006), is a narrative procedure designed to evaluate the mental representations of preschool children about their close friendships. This test is an innovative approach on the basis of the past friendship research that examines children's relationship processes to evaluate preschool friendship quality (San Juan, 2006). Sebanc (2003) asserted that evaluations based on only observational methods in the preschool period focus on behaviors such as cooperation, play style, conflict, and conflict resolution. These behaviors are crucial for the functioning of friendships, but they fall short in evaluating the processes such as sincerity and love that distinguish friendship from a simple game partnership (Howes, 1996). PFSCT is on the basis of a model that includes both processes and provides children with a concrete context to express their thoughts and feelings about friendship (San Juan, 2006). This provides the mental representation of young children to be evaluated more effectively than surveys or interviews (Emde et al., 2003).

In Turkey, there are many studies on the perception of primary-school-age children and adolescents friendship (Akın et al., 2014; Demir, 2006; Ercan, 2015; Öztürk, 2009; Öztürk & Kutlu, 2017). In the preschool period, especially peer relations were discussed by researchers (Gülay, 2008; Gülay & Erten, 2011; Özmen, 2013; Ulutaş, 2016; Yoleri, 2015), but no research on children's friendships was available during this period. It is thought that one of the reasons for the lack of studies on friendship and children's perceptions in the early period is the lack of an appropriate assessment tool. This study mainly aimed to examine the validity and reliability of

PFSCCT, which is a developmentally appropriate measurement tool for young children and based on their perception, for Turkish children. A methodology on the basis of the storytelling of PFSCCT provides an opportunity to evaluate both the play dimension of the friendship relations and the emotional qualities of the relationship in the mental models of preschool children. In this respect, PFSCCT offers researchers a friendship quality model similar to those used to examine the friendship relationships of school-age and adolescents (San Juan, 2006). Thus, it is thought that it will provide an opportunity for researchers to better understand the developmental effects of friendship experiences of young children.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of children in the classes of four teachers who volunteered to participate in the study from two kindergartens in Osmaniye city center ( $N = 70$ ; 31 girls, 39 boys;  $M_{\text{months}} = 67.45$ ,  $SD = 2.80$ ). In the process of determining the children, a consent letter was first sent to the parents explaining the purpose of the research. 66% of the parents gave consent for their children to participate in the study. Parents also completed the form containing information about their child and themselves. 60% of mothers and 48.6% of fathers have high school or less, 14.3% of mothers and 5.7% of fathers have associate degree, 25.7% of mothers and 45.7% of fathers have undergraduate or graduate degrees. Monthly incomes of families range from 1400–10,000 TL ( $M = 4081.45$ ,  $SD = 2051.06$ ).

All teachers participating in the study are women and have undergraduate degrees ( $M_{\text{age}} = 31.75$ ,  $SD = 4.03$ ). The number of children in class ranges from 21 to 32 ( $M = 26.25$ ,  $SD = 4.50$ ).

### 2.2. Instruments

#### 2.2.1. Friendships of preschool children

Preschool Friendship Story Completion Task (PFSCCT) consists of stories that aim to describe the interactions between two close friends in the preschool period (San Juan, 2006). Developed on the basis of the story completion method created to examine mental representations in attachment relationships, PFSCCT determines children's mental representations and perceptions in friendship. During the application of the test, two friends and a peer figure, a wagon, two bicycles, small blocks, toy animals, and different colors of fabrics or felt are used to represent different environments.

In the explanations about the stories and the following parts of the study, “child” represents the participant child, “FC” represents the figure representing the child participating, “BF” represents the figure representing the best friend and “P” represents the peer figure in the stories. PFSCCT consists of a warming-up story and 5 stories, each presenting a different type of situation to the children. In the warm-up story (birthday party), FC and BF will go to celebrate P's birthday. The warming history is used to help children get used to the procedures and is not included in the assessment. The three story stems include conflict situations between close friends. The first story stem (Who Gets to Ride?), begins with the peer coming and wanting to get on the wagon while one friend pulling the other by wagon in the playground. The friend got on the carriage gets angry and states that only he/she was going to be pulled. The second story stem (Zoo Animals or Blocks) is based on a common conflict in classrooms. In this story, friends have to decide what to play. However, while FC wants to play with blocks, BF wants to play with toy animals. In the third story stem (Sandbox Betrayal), friends are playing in the sandbox. While they play in the sandbox, the peer comes and offers to ride a bike to one of the friends. The friend goes on a bike ride with the peer, and the other is left alone in the sandbox. The fourth story stem (Can't Build the Tower) was created specifically to evaluate the helping

behavior of children. FC tries to build a big tower with blocks in the classroom, but building this tower is very difficult. The fifth story stem (Friend Moving Away) uses the loss of a friend so that children can express their feelings of intimacy and affection. FC and BF play games at home. BF says they will move to a very distant place (see Interviewer Protocol and “Who Gets to Ride?” story in [Appendix](#)).

PFSCT includes two different rating systems, friendship, and peer relations, to evaluate the processes that occur in children's responses to story stems. Friendship processes include Companionship, Exclusivity, Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Relationship Asymmetry, Helping Behavior, and Intimacy/Affection. The second rating, which focuses on peer interactions in children's narratives, includes Positive Peer Interaction, and Negative Peer Interaction. Furthermore, the narrative coherence of the children's responses to the story stems was rated. Narrative coherence refers to the degree to which the child is presenting a smooth storyline and whether or not she/he is addressing the dilemma in the story.

**2.2.1.1. Adaptation Process.** PFSCT was first translated into Turkish by researchers and two English experts. The appropriateness of the translations was compared and the translated scale was sent to three academicians (Ph.D. degree) who are experts in preschool education and have knowledge of English for evaluation of how well the translated stories correspond to the original content. The revised translation of the scale in line with the recommendations of the experts was sent to different three academics (Ph.D. degree) who are also experts in preschool education for evaluation in terms of understandability and suitability for purpose. The stories, which were rearranged in line with the recommendations, became ready for the validity and reliability study of the Turkish form of the test.

Two pilot applications have been carried out to evaluate whether the stories in PFSCT are understood by children and whether they can participate in the game and follow the instructions. 12 children participated in the first pilot. In this practice, it was observed that the children participated in the stories, able to continue the stories following the general theme and follow the instructions. However, the fact that the warming story took place in P's house and the "Friend Moving Away" story in FC's house confused the children. Participant children are asked to identify their close friends, while the closest friend in the class is asked. Some children do not have the opportunity to meet their closest classmates at home. For example, participant children used expressions such as "We cannot go to her/his house. My mother will not allow" or "but how will FC and BF go to his house?" in the warming story. Similarly, FC and BF play a game in FC's house in the "Friend Moving Away" story. Participating children used expressions such as “BF doesn't come to us anyway. I'll play with another friend, too” or “his/her home is far away. "he/she cannot come to us". There upon, the researchers rearranged the stories to be in the classroom. The warming story has been changed to celebrate P's birthday in the classroom. In the story "Friend Moving Away", FC and BF play games in the classroom. Meanwhile, FC told BF, "You know, my mom told me we were going to move. I will not come to this school anymore, I will go to another school." After the stories were organized, a second pilot study was conducted with seven children. It was determined that the children were able to maintain all the stories following the given theme.

**2.2.1.2. Rating System for Scoring PFSCT Narrative of Children.** The children's responses to the stories were recorded with a camera and evaluated for the themes of friendship, peer relations, and narrative coherence (Companionship, Exclusivity, Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Relationship Asymmetry, Helping Behavior, Intimacy/Affection, Positive Peer Interaction, Negative Peer Interaction and Narrative Coherence). Some stories to PFSCT were created to evaluate specific friendship processes, but all stories were evaluated for all friendship processes. For instance, although Intimacy/Affection are scored for all stories, this friendship process is quite evident in the "Friend Moving Away" story. Sub-dimensions for each story stem



were scored separately with a system including 4 ratings. For instance, the helping behavior dimension is encoded as 0 = no evidence of helping behavior, 1 = low helping behavior, 2 = moderate helping behavior, and 3 = high helping behavior. There is a detailed procedure for rating each sub-dimension.

The conflict and conflict resolution sub-dimension is scored in two different conflict and conflict resolution situations. First, the continuation and resolution of the conflict given in the story stem are scored. Secondly, unlike the conflict given in the story stem, when there is a new conflict situation between children, this conflict is scored separately as the created conflict and its resolution. A score of "0" (not appropriate at all, no conflict created) was given if there was no conflict between the children other than the conflict specified in the story stem. In the absence of the created conflict, the solution of the created conflict also received "0" points. However, this score was rewritten as "4" during the analysis, as this situation would be interpreted as the conflict that was created was not resolved.

### **2.2.2. Social skills and problem behaviors**

Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales (PKBS-2) was developed to evaluate the social skills and problem behaviors of children aged 3-6 (Merrell, 2003; adapted in Turkish by Özbey, 2009). The scale based on teacher perceptions consists of two independent scales: Social Skills and Problem Behavior. The Social Skills Scale consists of social cooperation (11 items), social independence and social acceptance (8 items), and social interaction (4 items). The Cronbach Alpha values of the Social Skills Scale sub-dimensions and total score were determined as .92, .88, .88, and .94, respectively (Özbey, 2009). The Problem Behavior scale consists of four sub-dimensions: externalizing problems (16 items), internalizing problems (5 items), antisocial (3 items), and egocentric (3 items). The Cronbach Alpha values of the sub-dimensions and total score of the scale are .95, .87, .81, .72 and .96, respectively (Özbey, 2009). The reliability of PKBS-2 sub-dimensions used in the current study was found to be .89 for social cooperation, .83 for social independence and social acceptance, .95 for social interaction, .96 for externalizing problems, and .81 for internalizing problems.

### **2.2.3. Language skills**

Test of Early Language Development-Third Edition (TELD-3) was used to evaluate children's language skills (Hresko et al., 1999; adapted in Turkish by Güven & Topbaş, 2014). TEDİL consists of parallel forms, A and B. Each form includes two subtests, receptive and expressive. There are a total of 76 items in each form. This test requires skills such as showing the spoken word in picture booklets, understanding spoken instructions and answering questions verbally. Reliability measures for receptive and expressive language subtests revealed that test-retest reliability was .96-.93; inter-rater reliability was .99-.99; and internal consistency coefficient was .94-.92, respectively. The verbal language scores of children were used for analysis.

## **2.3. Working with Children**

Individual interviews were conducted with the children participating in the study by the first researcher at the children's school. The researcher spent at least three hours in the children's classrooms to develop relationships with the children before starting the interviews. During this time, the researcher introduced herself, participated in the activities of the children, and played games with them. Later, children whose parents gave their consent were invited to the interview one by one. The children were informed about the research and their consent was obtained to participate. Besides, they were informed that their answers would be confidential and that they could stop answering whenever they wanted. All children agreed to participate. Explained to the children that the camera will record stories and the reasons for this. None of the children objected to the camera, and the vast majority ignored it.

Participant children's close friends in class were determined using a two-stage sociometric nomination procedure. Initially, children were shown photos of their classmates and asked to choose their three friends with whom they played the most. Children are encouraged to then reconsider these three choices to choose their best friend.

During the application of PFSCT, three child figures were presented to the children first and they were asked to decide which one would be in the stories. The child then chose a figure for BF (the figures are presented according to the gender of the child and the gender of the child chosen as a close friend). The remaining child figure was said to be one of the children in the class and his name was Mert (if the child is a boy) or Ayşe (if the child is a girl). Before starting the individual interviews, it was made sure that there was no child with these names in the classroom so that the child did not have direct contact with any peers in the classroom. The reason for this is to prevent situations that may affect children's stories and add another relationship to the stories (names are changed if there are children with the same name in the classroom). After the participant child learned who each figure belongs to and the stage materials, firstly, the story stem of "Birthday Party", which is a warming story, is presented. Then the children completed the story stems of "Who Gets to Ride?", "Zoo Animals or Blocks", "Sandbox Betrayal", "Can't Build the Tower" and "Friend Moving Away" respectively. After each story stem is presented to the child, it is said "show me and tell me what happens next". To evaluate the children's language skills, the test was administered 2-3 days after the stories were completed.

#### **2.4. Analytic Strategy**

All of the PFSCT data recorded by video were coded by the first researcher. To evaluate the reliability, two independent coder encoded 30 videos (42% of the sample) randomly selected. Before the reliability study, two coders discussed the scoring system on the stories of 5 children who were not included in the analysis to evaluate the PFSCT correctly. The inter-coder agreement was determined by the intra-class correlations (ICC) coefficient. Before starting the analysis, a series of preliminary analyzes were made. In these analyzes, means, standard deviations, and correlations were calculated for PFSCT sub-dimensions and TELD-3. Correlations between social skills, problem behaviors, and PFSCT were evaluated to examine the convergent and discriminating validity of PFSCT.

### **3. RESULT**

#### **3.1. Descriptive Analyses**

As stated before, each story in PFSCT was scored for different sub-dimensions. Then, the scores obtained from the stories for each sub-dimension were collected and the total score for that sub-dimension was obtained. As seen in [Table 1](#), average scores are relatively low. Besides, it is observed that the highest scores obtained in most of the sub-dimensions are also low. The reason for this is that each story in PFSCT is planned to reveal different friendship processes.

The exclusivity sub-dimension refers to the interactions in children's narratives where friends prefer to play together and P is somewhat excluded. The reason this dimension has a low average is due to the fact that although most of the children prefer their close friend, they do not exclude the peer aggressively. "Who Gets to Ride?" and the "Sandbox Betrayal" story stems specifically offer conditions that encourage peer exclusion. Nonetheless, 7.1% of the children in the story of "Who Gets to Ride?" and 14.2% of the children in the "Sandbox Betrayal" story exclude peers aggressively, respectively, 58% and 50% of the children included their peers in their games.

**Table 1.** Descriptive information for PFSCT and TELD-3.

Variable	Min-Max (possible max)	Mean (SD)	Median
<i>Friendship Feature</i>			
Companionship	2.00-15.00 (15.00)	6.77 (3.14)	6.0
Exclusivity	.00-11.00 (12.00)	3.50 (2.47)	3.50
Sustained Conflict	.00-6.00 (9.00)	1.63 (1.56)	1.00
Resolution of Stem Conflict	.00-9.00 (9.00)	5.20 (1.99)	6.00
Created Conflict	.00-6.00 (15.00)	0.37 (0.95)	0.00
Resolution of Created Conflict	.00-3.00 (15.00)	0.35 (0.74)	0.00
Relationship Asymmetry	.00-3.00 (15.00)	0.32 (0.73)	0.00
Helping Behavior	.00-9.00 (15.00)	1.64 (1.62)	2.00
Intimacy & Affection	.00-8.00 (15.00)	2.50 (1.91)	2.00
<i>Peer Interaction</i>			
Positive Peer Interaction	.00-12.00 (12.00)	4.01 (2.70)	4.00
Negative Peer Interaction	.00-10.00	1.20 (1.77)	1.00
Narrative Coherence	6.00-15.00 (15.00)	12.60 (2.73)	13.00
Language skills	80.0-132.0	102.3 (12.59)	103.50

Sustained conflict, the first of the conflict situations, is a continuation of three story stems (Who Gets to Ride?, Zoo Animals or Blocks, Sandbox Betrayal). When this sub-dimension was examined, it was determined that 72.9% of the children did not continue the conflict or decided what to do at the end even if they told a low-level conflict. The second conflict situation depicts a new conflict between friends that has nothing to do with story stems. Only 20% of the children told about the new conflicts that occurred between friends.

When the resolution of the root conflict, which is the first of the conflict resolution situations, was examined, 85% of the children responded to the conflict in the story of "Who Gets to Ride?" with more complex and appropriate solution strategies (rated 2 or 3). Similarly, in the "Zoo Animals or Blocks" story (65%) and the "Sandbox Betrayal" (58%), more than half of the children were able to resolve the conflict at the root of the story. The average of the solution of the created conflict has a relatively low score. This is because only 20% of the children create a new conflict. Furthermore, the conflict resolution score created for children who do not create new conflict is "0". This situation creates a problem for the analysis. For this reason, "4" was taken instead of "0" in further analysis. 64% of the children who created a new conflict were able to solve the problem.

The relatively low average in the relationship asymmetry sub-dimension reflects the equality-based interactions of friends throughout the stories. The coders gave a score of "3" only once, and above the score of "1", only 7 times were rated. Although the helping behavior sub-dimension was scored for all stories, it appeared mostly in the "Can't Build the Tower" story, as expected. 54% of the children told a story where one of the friends helped or offered help. Similarly, the Intimacy/Affection sub-dimension was scored in all five stories, but, as expected, "Friend Moving Away" appeared the most. 10% of the children did not express any Intimacy/Affection among friends.

When the averages of the PFSCT peer interaction processes were examined, 21% of the children got low scores from positive peer interaction (0 or 1 points). Besides, 70% of the children got low scores from negative peer interactions. This situation affirmed that children do not exclude their peers and conflict between peers is low as mentioned before. Finally, when the



narrative consistency, which aims to evaluate whether the child's narratives are in a proper storyline, is examined, it is determined that children generally told consistent stories.

### 3.2. Correlations Analyses

Table 2 shows the correlations between PTT sub-dimensions and language skills of children. Significant relationships were determined between friendship, which is an important dimension of Companionship, and Exclusivity, Helping Behavior, Intimacy/Affection. This situation shows that children represent more private, close, and intimate relationships with their close friends by telling more interactive and more fun games with their close friends. At the same time, the Companionship was found to be correlated to the Resolution of Stem Conflict. In three conflict stories, children who used more complex strategies to resolve conflicts were told more interactive games with their friends.

**Table 2.** Correlations analyses for PFSCT and TELD-3.

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	LS
1.Companionship	<b>.35**</b>	.03	<b>.72**</b>	.18	-.16	.16	<b>.49**</b>	<b>.74**</b>	<b>.58**</b>	.14	<b>.63**</b>	.22
2.Exclusivity	-	.20	<b>.35**</b>	.06	-.19	-.12	.13	<b>.32**</b>	-.21	<b>.61**</b>	.28*	.01
3.Sustained Conflict		-	-.14	<b>.42**</b>	<b>-.24*</b>	.09	.02	.23	-.06	<b>.43**</b>	.09	<b>-.24*</b>
4.Res. of Stem Conf.			-	-.03	.04	.10	.23	<b>.49**</b>	<b>.34**</b>	.12	<b>.58**</b>	<b>.23*</b>
5.Created Conflict				-	-.69	<b>.40**</b>	.05	.17	.11	<b>.29*</b>	.11	-.10
6.Res. of Created Conf.					-	<b>-.26*</b>	-.08	-.17	-.09	<b>.41**</b>	-.04	-.02
7.Rel. Asymmetry						-	-.11	.02	.08	.01	.19	.22
8.Helping Behavior							-	<b>.42**</b>	<b>.41**</b>	.19	<b>.36**</b>	.05
9.Intimacy & Affection								-	<b>.36**</b>	.22	<b>.54**</b>	.13
10.Peer Positive									-	<b>-.26*</b>	<b>.39**</b>	.22
11.Peer Negative										-	.08	-.10
12.Narrative Coherence											-	.19

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; LS = Language skills

Significant correlations have been found between Exclusivity and Resolution of Stem Conflict, Intimacy/Affection. Since Exclusivity in friendship is related to excluding peers, this indicates that children stimulate finding solutions to the conflict at the root of the story by excluding the peer in prosocial or aggressive ways. As the peer exclusion scores of the children increase, the scores of Intimacy/Affection towards friends also increase. Similarly, the relationships between Helping Behavior and Intimacy/Affection were found to be significant. This situation reveals that generally friends who have strong emotional bonds also support each other by helping each other. As stated earlier, children generally did not represent highly asymmetry in their relationships with close friends. Similarly, a few children's stories have portrayed a new conflict creation situation. Nonetheless, the correlation between Relationship Asymmetry and Created Conflict is significant.

Significant positive correlations were determined between the positive peer interaction sub-dimension and Companionship, Resolution of Stem Conflict, Helping Behavior, Intimacy/Affection sub-dimensions. On the other hand, positive correlations were found between negative peer interaction and Exclusivity, Sustained Conflict and Created Conflict, and negative relationships were found with the Resolution of Created Conflict. This affirmed that children who foster close, sincere and supportive relationships with their close friends exhibit more positive

peer interactions. The correlation between Exclusivity and Negative Peer Interaction is as expected, as the sub-dimension of being special in friendship is scored for excluding peer.

In addition to these findings, story consistency also confirmed positive correlations with some sub-dimensions of friendship and positive peer interaction. While negative correlations were determined between children's language skills and Sustained Conflict, the correlations between the Resolution of Stem Conflict were positively significant.

### 3.3. Coding Reliability

ICC was calculated for each sub-dimension of PF SCT in order to evaluate inter-coder reliability. The ICC is .83 for Companionship, .81 for Exclusivity, .89 for Sustained Conflict, .94 for Resolution of Stem Conflict, .81 for Created Conflict, .77 for Resolution of Created Conflict, .79 for Relationship Asymmetry, .79 for Helping Behavior, .79 for Intimacy/Affection, .89 for Positive Peer Interaction, .91 for Negative Peer Interaction, and .90 for Narrative Coherence.

### 3.4. Concurrent Validity

To address the concurrent validity of PF SCT, correlations between sub-dimensions of PF SCT and sub-dimensions of PKBS-2 social skills and problem behavior scales were examined (Table 3). Positive correlations were found between Companionship, Resolution of Stem Conflict, Intimacy/Affection, and Positive Peer Interaction in narratives of children, and Social Interaction based on perceptions of teachers. Furthermore, teachers reported fewer Internalizing Problems for children who represented more Positive Peer Interaction in their stories. Similarly, more Negative Peer Interaction representations of children are associated with less Social Cooperation perceived by teachers.

**Table 3.** Correlations analyses for PF SCT and PKBS-2.

Variable	Social Skills			Problem Behavior	
	SC	SISA	SI	EP	IP
Companionship	-.04	.06	<b>.39**</b>	-.02	-.11
Exclusivity	-.18	.00	.10	.03	-.10
Sustained Conflict	-.11	.19	.15	.03	-.16
Resolution of Stem Conflict	-.07	-.02	<b>.32**</b>	-.02	-.15
Created Conflict	.01	.15	.11	-.08	-.11
Resolution of Created Conflict	-.06	-.08	-.07	.13	.09
Relationship Asymmetry	.07	.01	.10	-.02	.00
Helping Behavior	-.09	-.01	.16	.03	-.10
Intimacy & Affection	-.08	.21	<b>.34**</b>	.00	-.08
Positive Peer Interaction	.19	.10	<b>.35**</b>	-.16	<b>-.28*</b>
Negative Peer Interaction	<b>-.30**</b>	-.06	-.13	.18	.09

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; SC: Social Cooperation; SISA: Social Independence and Social Acceptance; SI: Social Interaction; EP: Externalizing Problems; IP: Internalizing Problems

## 4. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Building and maintaining friendships is a crucial developmental task for preschoolers. However, researchers emphasized that the quality of friendship is as important as the presence of a friend (Hartup, 1996). This study was designed to evaluate the validity and reliability of the story completion protocol, which was designed to evaluate preschool children's perceptions of their friendships in school environments for Turkish children. The PF SCT is on the basis of the story completion studies designed to assess children's mental representations in previous attachment studies. It is defined as a developmentally appropriate tool to assess the specific and close friendships of children.

A detailed coding guide and rating scale are available to assess whether children complete the videotaped stories reliably. The codes created to assess children's representations in friendships are on the basis of the past friendship research (e.g. Berndt, 2004; Ladd et al., 1996; Sullivan, 1953). Independent coders use this coding guide to rate friendship traits. In the current study, it was determined that the coding guideline was suitable for reliably assessing friendship characteristics, and the inter-coder reliability was found to be high.

The findings of the study confirmed that children can reflect the positive (Companionship, Resolution of Conflict, Helping Behavior, Intimacy/Affection) and negative (Exclusivity, Sustained Conflict, Relationship Asymmetry) characteristics in their friendships to their stories. In addition, there were relatively few negative relational representations in the children's narratives. There could be several reasons for this condition. First, each of the PFSCT stories is designed for specific friendship processes. Three story stems contain conflict situations, but there is no story stem prepared specifically for Exclusivity and Relationship Asymmetry. In addition, considering that the positive friendship narratives in the stories highlighted sufficient variability and formation, children may need some additional encouragement in the negative friendship themes that appear in the stories. For example, children can be given a chance to comment with questions such as “why did you feel like this?” or “what makes your friend feel this way?” Second, a meta-analysis by Newcomb and Bagwell (1995) highlights that children's interactions with friends are different from interactions with peers who are not friends. Children have a more positive relationship with their friends than with those who are not. That is, the intensity and frequency of talking, smiling, laughing, sharing, cooperating, and helping with friends are higher. Furthermore, while conflict situations between friends and non-friends are no different, disagreements between friends are more likely to be resolved through negotiation. As a result, conflict resolution strategies used by friends are more likely to lead to fair outcomes that help preserve relationships. Equality in friendships may be more pronounced than in peer relationships (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Moreover, relationships with friends involve less intense competition and domination than relationships with non-friends. Finally, friends tend to be similar in demographic and behavioral characteristics, and children express more mutual affection, intimacy, and loyalty in their friendships (Erdley et al., 2001).

The friendship sub-dimensions scores obtained from the encodings evaluating the logic, details, and relevance of the children's narratives were correlated with each other to determine consistency. As expected, the findings confirmed that positive and negative friendship dimensions are related to each other. In addition, the relations between Exclusivity and Sustained Conflict, Intimacy/Affection are positively significant. Exclusivity emphasized that two friends prefer each other and exclude others. When it comes to friendships, Exclusivity seems to be a positive feature, but in recent years there have been opinions that it is a negative feature. Friends who prefer one another over others are quite likely to experience more conflict, given that they spend more time together. Previous research has validated that when pairs of friends play together, they develop higher levels of play and experience more conflict (Fonzi et al., 1997; Hartup et al., 1988; Simpkins & Parke, 2002). Similarly, it is not surprising that children who portrayed more Exclusivity showed more Intimacy/Affection. These associations in the current study indicate that the Exclusivity feature in friendship needs further investigation.

By coding the answers of the children to the PFSCT stories, two different structures were obtained, namely friendship characteristics and peer relations. The positive and negative peer relationships in the representations of children further provided evidence for consistency. Findings verify that children reflect the quality of their relationship with their friends to others who are not friends. This indicates that high-quality friendships are associated with higher social skills, and positive interactions with friends provide essential opportunities to learn and practice social skills (Engle et al., 2011; Howes et al., 1988; Rose & Asher, 2000). Conversely, the

negative friendship quality is associated with higher levels of problem behavior because they pave the way for learning in aggressive and destructive behaviors among friends (Bagwell & Coie, 2004; Berndt, 2004)

Other studies in the parent-child literature indicate that children's language skills do not play any role in the story completion task because using material allows for describing without speaking (Miljkovitch et al., 2007). Nonetheless, some studies highlighted that children's verbal skills are related to secure attachment (Stievenart, et al., 2011), and their capacity to verbalize themselves is effective in dealing with conflicts in positive ways (Bretherton & Oppenheim, 2003; Von Klitzing et al., 2007). The findings of the present study support previous studies. Children's lower language skills were associated with more conflict representations, and higher language skills were associated with more conflict resolution representations. This finding indicates the importance of supporting children's language skills in preschool friendships. There also arises the necessity of adapting completely non-verbal procedures to assess children's friendships.

Narrative coherence in children's stories is associated with positive friendship qualities and positive peer relationships. Narrative coherence refers to whether children address the dilemma at the root of the story and whether their narrative is in a straight line. Narrative coherence was found to be a predictor of children's social competence in previous studies using the story completion procedure (Von Klitzing et al., 2007). Aggressive content themes in children's story completions are typically not an appropriate response to the story stems and therefore reduce narrative coherence (Oppenheim, 2006). As a result, our findings corroborate that children who can cope with the conflicts in the stories and find a consistent way in their narratives are more comfortable in their interactions with their friends and peers, behave close and sincerely, cooperate, and deal with problems in a constructive way.

Since friendship and social skills are associated in previous studies, we expected a correlation between children's representations and teacher-reported problem behavior and social skills. Teachers' perceptions of children's relationships with peers and perceptions of children's friendships overlap to some extent. This provides moderate support for concurrent validity. At this point, it should be taken into account that teachers generally report peer relations. Friendships of children may differ from their relationships with others. Positive qualities in friendships may not represent positive features of a child's relationship with their peer group (Seban, 2003). Given that early childhood is when friendships are often first formed (Howes, 1983), children may be more likely to approve of a friend on the basis of the activities enjoyed by both individuals. At the same time, children may be more tolerant towards their close friends when they have conflicts with their peers.

Although there are relatively few significant correlations between PFSCT and teacher-reported social skills, the associations found are conceptually significant. Researchers have suggested that positive interactions are evident in early friendships (Park & Waters 1989; Youngblade, Park, & Belsky 1993). Considering that friendship is generally defined as a mutual preference for interaction (Howes 2009), it seems normal to have more harmony between friends, fun games, and more constructive solutions to conflicts. Additionally, positive social interactions can be an indicator of motivation to take more responsibility to maintain the friendship. No significant associations were found between the negative representations of children and teachers' perceptions of problem behavior. Children may represent in greater detail the Exclusivity, maintenance of conflict, or dominance in their friendships. Therefore, it may differ from teacher perceptions. In this regard, teachers and children can provide very valuable perspectives that differ from each other. These results clearly confirm that more research is needed on children's representations of friendship, and specifically on Exclusivity and Asymmetry.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that the story completion method is a valid and reliable way to access preschool children's representations of friendships from the attachment framework. The narratives used to evaluate mental representations of children show the importance of giving children the opportunity to express themselves through different means. In addition, PFSCCT offers the opportunity to evaluate representations of children in a developmentally appropriate and comprehensive way, using both play and language.

The present study has some limitations. First, our study was limited to a small sample. Our findings and conclusions may not be valid in other circumstances for classrooms, teachers, and children with different characteristics. Examining the friendship representations of children at risk, especially those who exhibit high levels of problem behavior and peer conflict, may provide an opportunity to open a window to the perspectives of children. Thus, it can help teachers and parents be more sensitive to children's experiences.

Negative friendship themes were relatively underrepresented in narratives of children. Making adjustments to reveal these themes more consistently is an important direction for future research. In their narratives, many children who had conflicts with their friends did not openly express their feelings. To elicit emotions in the stories, the interviewer can ask additional questions about how they and their friends are feeling. The story stems that present different states for Conflict, Exclusivity, and Asymmetry can be added, and the rating system can be revised. Additionally, using methods such as children's drawings and interviews with narratives can help capture details from children's perspectives (Wolcott et al., 2019). The characteristics of the other friend not evaluated in the current study are also a crucial factor determining the quality of friendship. For instance, a child with behavioral problems may have different behavioral consequences if they have a friend with high social skills. For this reason, it is noteworthy to consider the characteristics of friends together with the quality of friendship. In addition, in the present study, it was not taken into account whether the children mutually preferred each other. Future research may reveal more about the nature of mutual friendship.

Although friendships are crucial context for children's development, children's social-emotional skills and other social relationships are likely to affect their friendships. Moderate harmony between social skills on teacher perceptions and children's friendship narratives points to the importance of children's representations in this regard. Representations can allow teachers to capture emotional details that they missed during observations. With this new perspective, teachers can identify more functional ways to provide the social and emotional support children need.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research study complies with research publishing ethics. The scientific and legal responsibility for manuscripts published in IJATE belongs to the authors. Ethics Committee Number: Çukurova University, 95704281-604.02.02.

### **Authorship Contribution Statement**

**Imray Nur:** Introduction, Review of Literature, Methodology (Data Collection and Analyses), Discussion and Conclusion. **Yasare Aktas Arnas:** Investigation, Resources, Methodology, Supervision



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## APPENDIX

### Interviewer Protocol - Friendship Story Task

Materials used during

Small figures to represent target child, best friend, peer

Piece of felt to represent different settings for each story stems

Green = Playground

Tan = Sandbox

Red = Classroom

Props

Birthday Cake, Zoo Animals, Blocks, Wagon, Bikes

#### Obtaining the child's assent/introducing figures to child

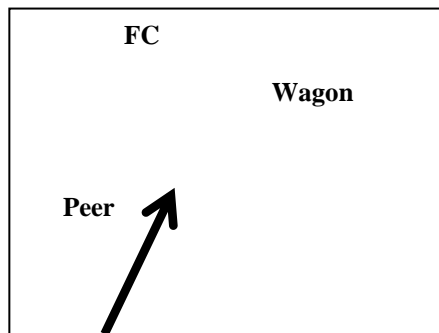
Say to child:

1. "Today, I'd like you to help me make up some stories about your friend, (BF), and you. Would you like to help me make up some stories? (If child assents). Great, so let me show you some things that we're going to use to help us make up our stories. We have some people here who are going to be in our stories. (Stand three child figures). I want you to tell me which one is always going to be you in our stories (allow the child to choose). Great, so in our stories, this one will always be you. Now, which one is going to be BF (allow the child to choose). Great, so in our stories, this one will always be BF). We're also going to have one more kid in our stories. This child will always be Mert/Ayşe in our stories.
2. Now, let's see if you remember who each person is? (Point to each figure and ask) Who is this? (repeat each figure's name as child identifies). So we have, (name each figure)

Great! Now, let's make up our first story. For each story, I'm going to start the story, and then I want you to finish the story for me.

**Who Gets to Ride? - Props used: FC, BF, peer figures, small red wagon, green felt to represent playground**

Figure and prop configuration for Who Gets to Ride?



You are pulling BF in the wagon. Mert/Ayşe walks up to you and asks, "CHILD, can I have a turn being pulled in the wagon by you?" BF gets mad and says to you, "No! You said you were only going to pull me in the wagon!" Show me and tell me what happens next.

**Prompt only once if child does not address how FC handles who gets to be pulled in the wagon: "What do they do about who gets to be pulled in the wagon?"**

After child completes story:

Are you ready to go to the next story? For the next story, you and BF are playing here (piece of felt) at school. We'll leave Mert/Ayşe over here (place Mert/Ayşe figure off to side, visible to child, but not part of main action in story).