Systematic and ongoing assessment of children’s skills and progress is at the heart of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood classrooms. Careful assessment enables teachers to know the children with whom they work. Only by understanding children can educators effectively identify the needs and abilities of individuals and plan strategies and learning experiences that respond to those needs (Dodge, Heroman, Charles, & Maiorca, 2004; Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998).

Effective early childhood practice focuses on the needs of the whole child, so child assessment must similarly focus on all domains of development. Social development is one such domain, and encompasses many aspects of children’s behavior. Teachers continually observe children in context to better understand their social competence. This article offers guidelines for conducting appropriate assessment, identifies specific elements of children’s social competence, and suggests strategies for using assessment information to support children’s social skill development.

Social Competence Is Essential

Children’s social abilities and styles vary greatly. This becomes apparent as educators work with groups of young children who individually have had differing experiences. Social development encompasses the skills and behaviors that involve interaction with others, including those in which the child is the initiator of interaction and those in which the child responds to the interactions of others.

Research suggests that children who fail to achieve minimal social competence during the early years of life are at risk for developing socially maladaptive behavior that can affect them significantly over the course of life (McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000). Children who are aggressive and disruptive, unable to sustain close relationships with peers, and who are generally disliked by other children are likely to have difficulty in social situations as adults (Hartup, 1991; McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Because children’s social skills largely determine the extent to which they are able to positively interact with others in a variety of situations, early childhood teachers must support each child’s development of needed skills. Throughout the day, educators can

- observe children in various activities,
- record children’s play preferences,
- document children’s strategies for responding to others, and
- note their attempts to initiate interaction.

All aspects of development are interrelated and may influence the child’s behavior. Thus, immaturity in one developmental domain, such as language, may adversely affect socialization skills.

Furthermore, children vary greatly in the rate at which they develop social competence, and various factors may make a major difference in their social development. The nature of children’s attachments to their...
primary caregivers; the modeling, guidance, and support of family members and teachers; and opportunities to both observe and interact with peers and others all have the potential to influence their evolving social skills and behavior (Katz & McClellan, 1997; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001).

How Can Social Competence Be Effectively Assessed?

An early childhood educator’s powers of observation greatly influence the understanding of children’s behavior. Accurate assessment of social development takes place when authentic methods are used as children naturally move through the day’s routines and activities. Effective assessment employs a variety of methods, including

- brief anecdotal accounts of children’s behavior,
- rating scales using objective lists of behaviors, and
- video accounts of social interactions and children’s participation in classroom activities.

In addition, informal discussions with family members at the beginning or end of each day as well as conversations during formal parent-teacher conferences can yield helpful insight and a wider view of a child’s social behavior.

The use of varied methods and multiple sources of information in diverse learning contexts provides the richness necessary to understand the unique qualities of individual children’s social behavior. Such details and breadth of knowledge about children are critical to the formation of a developmental profile, which then can be used to identify and address the child’s specific needs (Jones, 2004).

Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal records provide a versatile and simple means for recording significant aspects of development during the course of the day. A convenient system can be designed so teachers can record key information about each child. Figure 1 is an example of a form on which brief notes have been recorded about a child in various areas of the classroom.

These forms can then be organized in a portfolio, and notes can be periodically analyzed and summarized. Patterns of behavior, social strengths, and areas of concern, as well as changes in behavior over}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arrival/Departure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During arrival, enters the room quietly, places her coat in her cubby, and quietly walks to the book area and selects a book. No words are spoken to any of the other children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outdoor Play/ Large Motor Room</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stands next to teacher assistant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meals</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Says to Mara, sitting next to her, “You want some more milk?” as she offers the pitcher of milk to Mara.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block Area</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds a tower by herself, while two others build nearby. No attention to the play of her peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dramatic Play</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observes as Mara and Tina dress the dolls. Makes no attempt to interact with the two children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sensory Table</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses the measuring cups with the sand in isolation. No other children are at the table.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Circle Time</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sits on the assistant’s lap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Art</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During free choice, selects the assistant’s table. Quietly begins molding the clay. Looks toward peers as they use the clay, but speaks no words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table Activities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chooses a puzzle and takes it to the table. Sits next to Mara, looking over at the puzzle she was doing, but does not speak to her.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1. Sample anecdotal record.**
time, can be identified. Summaries can be shared with the child’s family and staff and used to plan ways to support the child’s social skill development.

Rating Scales
A rating scale, as illustrated in Figure 2, lists behaviors and skills that are indicators of development. These lists of behaviors must be carefully constructed so that various individuals can reliably assess the child’s abilities. Research regarding expected behavior for children of different ages should serve as a primary source when constructing a valid and reliable assessment instrument, such as those recommended here. Rating scales are a simple means of assessing significant aspects of development, and can be used at different times, thus enabling teachers to assess changes in behavior over time.

Video Recordings
Video accounts of children’s interactions with others can offer information that may be difficult to capture with other assessment strategies. Video footage enables educators to document events in their entirety. Conversations, actions, facial expressions, and the unfolding of an interaction can be captured in detail. Video recordings obtained during diverse scenarios and at various points in time can be examined and compared.

Each of these strategies for documenting elements of children’s social behavior complements the others, thus making it possible to obtain a detailed and comprehensive view of a child’s social competence within the classroom. The information gathered can then be organized and summarized, and an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Behaviors Rating Scale</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child _________________________ Date __________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. cooperates in classroom routines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. replaces materials after use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. takes care of personal belongings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. respects property of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. works/plays with limited supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. follows directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. carries out classroom jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments:

Reliable, Valid Rating Scales
- The Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales (Merrell, 2003)
- Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (LeBuffe & Naglieri, 1999)
Assessing Peer Social Competence

Social competence is a broad topic. For each child, teachers might ask, “What specific social competence concerns need attention and in which contexts can they be best observed?” By deciding on the focus of assessment, teachers can select the most appropriate assessment methods and tools. Figure 3 highlights examples of a few skills and possible settings in which they can be assessed.

Appropriate assessment is essential for a teacher to understand the child’s development and then devise a plan to respond appropriately. First, ask this question, “Based upon my knowledge of this child’s development, what conclusions can be drawn about this child’s social competence?”

Then, teachers can determine how these conclusions can be used for the benefit of the child. Jones (2004) suggests information should be used in four primary ways:
- To inform and guide families in their efforts to support their children’s learning.
- To plan curriculum that addresses the needs of each child.
- To plan for and modify learning environments, classroom routines, as well as daily schedules.
- To consider ways to modify teacher-child interactions and to use coaching strategies to support children’s learning.

Each child’s well-being depends on the understanding and commitment of both families and educators to support the child’s needs. Information about aspects of the child’s social skills and behavior can be shared among family members and early childhood professionals. All adults can contribute ideas to support the child. A plan is then developed and implemented in the child’s home as well as school settings.

Several examples—of the process of observing and analyzing aspects of children’s social development, as well as thoughtful use of the information gained to support children’s developmental progress—are described here.

Figure 3. Aspects of social competence to observe in the classroom.

During play and activity times, the following abilities and behaviors may be assessed:
- Strategies for entering play
- Sharing materials
- Taking turns
- Resolving peer conflicts
- Communication with peers
  - expressing ideas
  - listening to others
  - asserting one’s rights
- Negotiating and compromising
- Accepting responsibilities
  - abiding by classroom rules
  - participating in clean up

During large group/circle times, the following abilities and behaviors may be assessed:
- Participating in discussions or activities
- Listening to others
- Exhibiting self-control

During arrival or departure, the following abilities and behaviors may be observed:
- Following expected routines
- Demonstrating appropriate independence

During meal times, the following abilities and behaviors may be observed:
- Participation in conversations
- Mannerly behavior
- Demonstrating appropriate independence

During transitions, the following abilities and behaviors could be observed:
- Following direction
- Demonstrating appropriate self-control
Play and Independent Activities

Young children in high-quality settings spend much of their time in learning through play. The play environment provides a rich source of opportunities for children to practice life skills and to exhibit behaviors that illustrate their social competence. During play, caregivers observe a child’s strategies for:

- entering play
- sharing materials
- taking turns
- resolving conflicts with peers
- communicating with others
- negotiating and compromising
- accepting responsibilities.

Social relationships are evidenced in different ways. Consider the following incident in the dramatic play area.

Four-year-olds Natalie, Tanika, and Naomi are in the dramatic play area cooking and pretending to feed the dolls. Sabrina stands at the entrance to the kitchen, looking (longingly) at the trio as they play. She starts putting dishes on the table and says, “Supper’s ready.”

The others ignore her and continue with their play. She repeats, “Supper’s ready.” The girls continue to ignore her.

After a few minutes, Sabrina drifts out of the dramatic play area and begins to play by herself with puzzles.

In this situation, the teacher might focus on Natalie, Tanika, and Naomi’s development of their understanding of social responsibility and how to be a good friend. The observer could identify their skills in perspective taking and their ability to involve and consider the ideas of others.

Elements of Sabrina’s behavior also would be noted. The strategies she uses to enter the play of her peers, communication used during play, and her responses when peers seem unwilling or uninterested in playing with her are elements of social behavior that shed light on aspects of her social competence.

Elements of Sabrina’s behavior also would be noted. The strategies she uses to enter the play of her peers, communication used during play, and her responses when peers seem unwilling or uninterested in playing with her are elements of social behavior that shed light on aspects of her social competence.

Sabrina clearly demonstrates an interest in joining the play of two of her peers in dramatic play, but is unsuccessful. Sabrina may benefit from some adult coaching. While Sabrina developed a role for herself that was congruent with the existing play theme, this strategy alone seemed ineffective.

Therefore, it may also be appropriate for the teacher to help the other children be aware that Sabrina is interested in playing with them. By interacting with the three children, the group may find a way for all the children to play together. The teacher might become a co-player in the dramatic play for a time, guiding the play in ways that follow the children’s play interests. When the children are able to sustain their play independently, the teacher gracefully leaves the play, and

Social development encompasses the skills and behaviors that involve interaction with others, including those in which the child is the initiator of interaction and those in which the child responds to the interactions of others.
observes the children's progress. As needed, further adult coaching can take place with all of the girls involved.

Large Group/Circle Times

At various times throughout the day, children engage in large-group activities. Circle times provide opportunities to assess different types of social skills. In large-group situations, children are expected to listen to others and to participate as a member of the group. The following account provides helpful information about Mia's behavior during a circle time.

Mr. Andreas is reading a book to his 3-year-old group. All of the children except Mia are sitting on their carpet squares listening to the story. Mia rolls around on her carpet square and kicks the children on either side of her. When they do not respond, she says, “Hey! Look at my new shoes.”

Teachers would immediately note Mia’s lack of involvement in the story and disruptive behavior toward the other children. Observations of Mia’s behavior in several more large-group times can reveal information about her typical behavior patterns. While Mia seemed disinterested in this story, during other circle time activities, her behavior may demonstrate greater attention and involvement.

Mia appears to be struggling with listening to a story and as a consequence she disrupts the group time. She may benefit from an adult who sits near her to guide her to observe the book’s illustrations and participate in discussion.

Mr. Andreas also could consider how well the book appeals to Mia’s interests and prior experiences, as well as the other children. Future stories to share are chosen to better match children’s interests.

Another angle to consider is the structure of the circle time. Does it address Mia’s attention span and need for active involvement? For example, Mr. Andreas could use puppets, a flannel board, or other materials to tell the story. Children could enact parts of the story or respond to thought-provoking questions about the characters, plot, or
Arrival/Departure Routines

Arrival and departure times can offer important details about children’s self-help skills and autonomous behaviors, as well as their ability to abide by classroom expectations.

James skips into the child care center, stops long enough at the coat cubbies to take off his coat, throws it on the floor, and runs to play with the blocks. James seems to be really eager to play in the block area! Even though his responsibility was to put away his belongings as he entered the classroom, he failed to do so in this instance. With additional observations, teachers can find out if this is a typical pattern of behavior for James.

Observations of children’s responses to arrival and departure routines enable teachers to plan the support children need to follow classroom expectations. Early in the year, guide
Meals and Snacks

Another context during which children exhibit social competence is when food is served. As is true of arrival and departure routines, meals and snacks also can provide teachers a sense of children’s self-help skills and their ability to carry out expected classroom responsibilities.

The children are seated around the table having breakfast. Sasha finishes her meal and races to the manipulative games area to play with puzzles. He leaves the table without placing his plate in the dish bin and wiping up the milk he spilled.

Sasha has failed to complete clean-up responsibilities that are typically expected following a meal. Further observations may be needed to determine his ability to consistently and independently complete his mealtime responsibilities. This information can help teachers offer individualized support to the children who need it. Sasha seems to require adult support to develop his autonomy and responsibility. In addition to facilitating conversation skills during meals, teachers who sit with children can model for them the process of cleaning up spills and removing dishes when finished eating. Make sure the materials needed for clean up are readily available to children, too.

Children who need additional support can be provided verbal guidance. Wise teachers acknowledge children’s responsible behavior and often encourage peers to assist each other.

Transitions Between Activities

Often, teachers identify elements of children’s social competence while moving from one activity to another, as illustrated in the following scenario.

As children are forming a line to walk from the library to the activity room, Celeste elbows her way to the front of the line, almost knocking over two other children.

Celeste appears to exhibit difficulty with self-control. She seems oblivious to the influence of her actions on children near her and is focused only on gaining a position at the front of the group. Transitions often prove difficult for young children. Careful observations of their behavior during such times can be useful to support their developing social competence.

Celeste’s teacher, Mrs. Martin, can use observations of incidents like this to examine practices during transition periods and plan for possible modifications or additional support. For example, designating spaces for children to stand as they wait may be helpful. Reducing wait time and forming small groups rather than lines may facilitate moving from one location to another.

Having an adult nearby who can provide verbal support or who can hold her hand may give children like Celeste the support they need to be responsible. Teaching Celeste to monitor her own behavior may also be beneficial. Encourage her to look at what the other children are doing. Suggest that she ask herself, “Am I doing what the other children are doing?” may help her become more self-controlled with time.

Each of these anecdotes provides a snapshot of the children involved. While a single account is rarely enough to draw firm conclusions about aspects of a child’s social competence, similar observations over time can provide a sense of typical patterns of development, and guide teachers to offer sensitive learning support.

In sum, social competence includes a complex set of behaviors and abilities. Facilitating the emerging competence of young children is an important goal for teachers and families. To support individual children, early childhood educators can conduct regular observational assessments of children in various contexts, gain relevant information in discussions with families, and use that knowledge to support development of each child’s social competence at home and in groups.

References


Sharing Among Us: Parents, Children and Teachers Communicate

Parent Cooperative Preschools International's newest resource book, Sharing Among Us, is intended for parents, teachers and others who work with young children.

Published in 2007, the 98-page book includes chapters on Learning Styles, Communication, Challenges for Children, Nurturing Diversity, Parent Participation Programs, Parent Education, and much more by ten authors who are experts in their fields.

The price, which includes shipping, is $20 for PCPI members and $25 for non-members. It can be ordered from PCPI's international office at the Cooperative Business Center, 1401 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20005.
Put These Ideas Into Practice!
Observing and Supporting Young Children's Social Competence
by Hannah Nissen and Carol Hawkins

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Large group/circle times</th>
<th>Transitions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observe</strong></td>
<td><strong>Observe</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Nature of participation</td>
<td>• Ability to follow direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to listen to others</td>
<td>• Demonstration of self-control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to exhibit self-control</td>
<td><strong>Support competence by</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support competence by</strong></td>
<td>• Limiting or eliminating wait times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seating adults near children</td>
<td>• Designating spaces for children to stand while waiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Integrating visuals and props such as puppets</td>
<td>• Using songs or other strategies to actively involve children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Planning activities that align with children’s interests</td>
<td>• Providing verbal support and positive directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Young children assume more active roles</td>
<td>• Teaching self-monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Limiting time in groups</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrival or departure</th>
<th>Play and activity times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observe</strong></td>
<td><strong>Observe</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to follow routines</td>
<td>• Strategies for entering play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstration of appropriate independence</td>
<td>• Ability to share materials and take turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support competence by</strong></td>
<td>• Means for resolving peer conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creating a predictable routine</td>
<td>• Communication with peers—sharing ideas, listening, and asserting rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Labeling cubbies with names and photos to guide children</td>
<td>• Ability to abide by classroom rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Providing verbal coaching or reminders</td>
<td>• Participation in clean up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.