Early Social Skills as a Function of Gender:
An Observational Study of Children Between 3-8 Years in Andhra Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT
Children's Social skills were observed through video filming of their interactions in school and apartment play grounds and summer camps. In all 72 video clippings of 10 minutes duration each were analyzed using Observer Behaviour Software XT 7.0., by developing a wide range of coding scheme for conversations, body language, gender related behaviours, and for acceptance, rejection, and resistance strategies and unsociable actions. Data in frequencies and duration was analyzed using two way ANOVA.

Author Keywords
Early social Skills, gender differences, conversation, body language, pro social behaviours, unsocial behaviours, acceptance –rejection strategies, resistance strategies.

INTRODUCTION
Social experiences with peers constitute an important developmental context for children. In these contexts, children acquire a wide range of behaviours, skills, attitudes and experiences that influence their adaptations during the life span. One of the major tasks of the early childhood years is to learn positive and socially acceptable ways of interacting with others. As much of this learning occurs within the context of the peer group, positive peer interactions make a substantial contribution to children's socioemotional and cognitive development beyond the influences of family, school and neighbourhood.

Relationships with peers have significant importance in the lives of even very young children by allowing them to experiment with roles and relationships and develop social cognitive and behavioural skills (Asher, 1990; Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993).

Children's interactions with one another do endure over a

long period of time and are vital for normal social development. With increasing age, play partners become better able to agree with each other about the roles, rules and themes of their pretence. They are also better able to maintain their play interactions by adding new dimensions to their expressed ideas.

'... the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, not school grades, and not classroom behaviour but, rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously "at risk" (Hartup, 1997).

Observation of Early Social Skills Is Important:
- Studying children's behaviour in naturalistic settings helps understand their control over their own peer culture, coping capabilities when there is very little adult help.

- Interaction with peers can create internal individual disequilibrium implying that cognitive conflict helps in the development of social understanding and learning. Piaget noted that, 'one may conceive of co-operation as constituting the ideal form of equilibrium towards which society tends when compulsory conformity comes to break down'.

- Verba (1994) concedes that the child needs to be an active participant in a situation where social interaction takes place. She emphasised the value of peers' social interactions on cognitive competence as the children are at relatively equal status and competency in comparison to those of adults.

- Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) observe, "In the light of the increasing evidence for the influence of peer group on the behaviour and psychological development of children... it is questionable whether any society... can afford to leave largely to chance the directions of this influence and realization of its high potential for fostering constructive development both for the child and his/her society".

Early social skills need studying to assist children in improving their social skills such as communication, interpersonal interaction and social analysis abilities to fit with the set patterns of their culture.

Naturalistic Observation social interactions among children has been a rare area of study in the Indian context. This study was undertaken to examine naturally occurring social interactions among children 3-8 years in their school settings and informal groups in apartment building parks.

Objectives:
To observe and analyze social interactions of children in the age group of 3- 8 years in their natural/ informal settings for gender differences.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Though children grow in similar kind of ecological systems, and are almost exposed to similar kind of experiences; differences in parenting styles, stereotypic gender conceptions held by family and society give rise to gender differences in social interactions with peers. Individual temperament as well as biological pruning may also be the reason for gender differences that are evident in the ways the two sexes interact with their peers. Early in childhood children show preference for same sex peer's company. Although girls tend to initiate same sex play more than boys at age 3, this gender difference is reversed and even heightened by age 5 (Pitcher & Schultz, 1983). Children's preference for same-sex play mates is a universal aspect of growing up (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). This relies on similarity based account of identification. Children see themselves as similar to other children, or because girls (or boys) see themselves as similar to other girls (or boys), they identify with, and are influenced by, these similar others or those who share category membership.

Several studies have indicated that girls spend more time in small group social activities, in cooperative and turn-taking games, engage in more person fantasy and are more sensitive to the requirements of collaboration. Boys, on the other hand, prefer to engage in larger group physically active games and rough and tumble play (Walker, Sue 2004, Dorsch & Keane, 1994; Fabes, 1994; Fagot,1985; Jones & Glenn, 1991; Lewis & Phillipsen, 1998; Maccoby, 1988; Mollor, Hymel & Rubin, 1992).

Gender segregation is most likely to occur when children are not with adults but with others of a similar age. Gender segregation involves not only the preference of same-sex playmates but also the avoidance of playmates of the other sex. Serbin, Powlishta and Gulko (1993) found that there was increase in preference for same-sex peers among kindergarten children and children in the early school years.

The nature of relationships also differs between the sexes. Whereas girls' friendships are characterized by emotional and physical closeness, the friendships of boys are founded on shared activities and interests (Maccoby,1988).

Boys and girls not only differ in their conflict resolution skills, but also differ in their use of antisocial trajectories with peers. As boys are usually found to use aggressive strategies more often than girls, they may be expected to stand high on antisocial behaviour. The influence of friends and poor peer relations play a crucial but different role in the development of antisocial behaviour among boys and girls.

Culture has its own role to play in the gender typed behaviours. As Putallaz et al. (1995) suggest socialisation and cultural processes may act to discourage overt conflict behaviour by girls while encouraging the use of affiliative conflict strategies designed to minimise disruption. Similarly, overt conflict involving aggression may be not only acceptable for boys but positively valued as a means of establishing their social position if it is used as means for standing up for oneself.

Do these various findings hold true in the Indian context too, or do cultural differences bring out differences in early social interactions among children? This study tried to explore the issue.

METHODS
The city of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India was selected for the study as there were a number of schools with cosmopolitan environments wherein children from various backgrounds, cultures, and wide socioeconomic groups could be observed interacting with each other.

Sampling Procedure
Purposive sampling technique was used to gather data in order to video film social interactions of 3-8 year olds. The video recordings were taken in the following settings from five different schools, two apartment play grounds and two summer camps.

School settings: Outdoor play, Indoor play: block play, pretend play and snack time.

Around 85 video clippings were shot, but only 72 clippings were selected for the study in order to

• Systematically distribute the samples in various play settings according to objectives of the study.

• Select children interacting normally without being self conscious about being videotaped.

Coding Schemes Developed and Used
• Coding scheme for **conversations – both sociable and unsociable conversations, content**

• Coding scheme for **body language – social, unsocial, physical proximity, facial expressions**

• Coding scheme for **gender related behaviours – sex appropriate, neutral and cross gender behaviours**

• Coding scheme for **acceptance, rejection, and resistance strategies and unsociable actions.**

Coding Scheme for Conversations

Type of Conversations
a. **Social conversations** - Initiation, Following, Direction, directing peers, Pleasantries, Supporting Encouragement
b. **Unsociable conversations -** Quiet, Interruption, Arguments, Gossiping, Teasing, Domination

Content of Conversations
a. **Social content-**Social speech, Common interest topics, Fantasy, Words of gratitude, Daily events, Secrets, Requests, Compliments, Approvals
b. **Unsociable content-**About self, Abusive words, Words of rejection, Disapprovals

Coding Scheme for Body Language

Type of Activity
a. Social activity Active, into groups
b. **Unsociable activity** Lethargic, Outside group, Dispirited
c. **Physical proximity-** Holding hands, Hugging, Patting etc
d. **Facial expressions- Social facial expressions** Pleasant/happy, smiling Excited, Surprised, Laugh
e. **Unsociable facial expressions–**Sad, angry, threatening etc

Coding Scheme for Gender Related Behaviours - Sex appropriate behaviour Encouraging sex appropriate behaviour, Condemning sex in appropriate behaviour, Cross gender roles, Encouraging cross gender behaviour

Coding Scheme for Acceptance, Rejection and Resistance Strategies and Unsociable Actions
a. **Acceptance and co-operation strategies -** Showing interest/gaining entry into play, Imitating play – trying to behave similarly as that of peers, Striving for attention, Teasing in a friendly manner Recognition of leader – selecting a leader with common opinion, Competing with leader, Using friendship to bargain or negotiate, Team work – working or playing together in a group towards a common goal, Sharing, Explaining rules of play
b. **Rejection strategies -** Group rejection- preventing entry, Indirect rejection, Denying friendship, Claims of ownership
c. **Resistance strategies** -Physical resistance, yelling resistance, Disputes over toy or roles, Threatening, Disturbing others play

The coding also included 19 modifiers – modifiers were persons, objects or behaviours that formed the reason for exhibiting the particular behaviour with the peers during their interactions. E.g.: children expressed anger because of other's rejection. Here, "anger" is behaviour whereas "others rejection" is the modifier of the behaviour "angry".

Figure 1. Data visualization window.

Observation
The video tapes were loaded into the computer and observations made with The Observer XT 7.0, which gives data on frequency and duration of behaviour occurrences. The data was analyzed using two-way ANOVA to find out differences in gender differences in different settings.

RESULTS

Some of the Results Emerged as Follows
- Sex appropriate behaviours increased with age whereas, gender neutral behaviours decreased with age during pretend play.
- The social behaviours of girls were very high in frequency and duration as compared to that of boys during pretend play.
- Children of both genders used social conversations, social body language and acceptance strategies for almost same duration during block play.
- The major contents of conversation among boys were pleasantries and self talk whereas girls used pleasantries and discussions on daily events.
- Physical proximity towards peers was high among boys of 3 – 5 years which was over taken by girls during 5 – 8 years.
- Social skills refined with age; with boys using humorous body language and girls using touch as support.
- Boys used humour to gain attention, as an important acceptance strategy whereas sharing and playing together as a team formed an important acceptance strategy among girls.
- Overall unsociable behaviours, such as self centered speech were present more frequently and for longer

duration among boys as compared to girls. Girls used dominations and arguments.

- Boys used aggressive body language more frequently whereas girls used rejections more often

- Girls were found to be more flexible in the use of gender related behaviours whereas boys were more sex stereotypic.

- Girls usually picked up adult roles and pretended daily events more whereas boys picked up fantasized roles such as super hero.

- Both boys and girls used acceptance strategies more frequently with same gender peers in all the play settings.

- Both boys and girls remained out of the group when rejected by opposite gender peers whereas they expressed anger and rejection towards same gender peers.

- Boys were more provocative towards opposite gender peers during all the play settings.

- In general children used indirect rejection strategies more frequently with same gender peers and physical resistance and unsociable actions frequently with opposite gender peers.

CONCLUSION

The present observational study serves as an important basic research in the area of peer interactions, which brings out the general trends in social and unsociable behaviours of children, during their interactions with peers in natural play settings. The study focuses on the social skills of young children who are trying to expand their horizon of social network.

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Proceedings of Measuring Behavior 2010 (Eindhoven, The Netherlands, August 24-27, 2010)
Eds. A.J. Spink, F. Grieco, O.E. Krips, L.W.S. Loijens, L.P.J.J. Noldus, and P.H. Zimmerman

238