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# The Early Experiences Project

Dr. Wendy Hoglund and the PEERS Lab Team

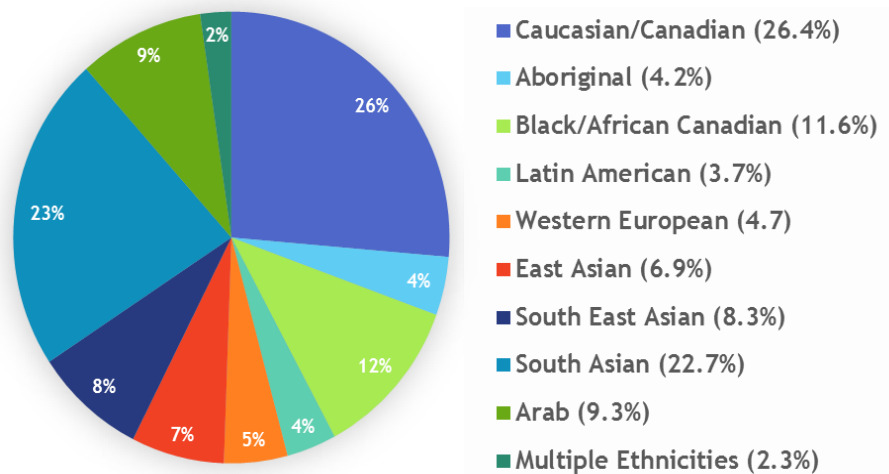
## What is this study about?

The Early Experiences Project is studying how young children’s experiences in the classroom and at home support their social and emotional skills and behaviors from preschool to kindergarten.

## Who is involved in this study?

There are 435 preschool children and their families participating in this study. We invited families of children from two different preschool programs to participate. Parents reported that 34% of children were born outside of Canada. Parents also reported that children were from a range of ethnic groups (see Figure 1). About 80% of parents also said that a language other than English was spoken more than half the time in their home.

**Figure 1. Children's Ethnicity**



# THE EARLY EXPERIENCES PROJECT



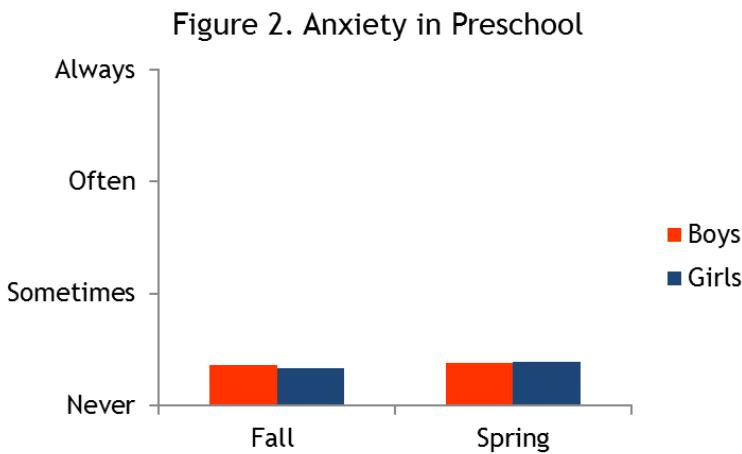
We are studying young children’s social and emotional skills and behaviors. We assess these skills and behaviors in different ways, like doing different activities with children (such as playing games like “Simon Says”), asking teachers and parents questions on surveys, and observing children in their classrooms.

In this issue we present some of our findings on children’s skills and behaviors in the fall and spring of preschool. These skills and behaviors include social-emotional problems (anxiety and aggression), school readiness (sense of belonging, academic and social skills), self-regulation (behavioral, attentional, and emotional), and peer relationships (peer victimization and likability).

## Social-Emotional Problems

Social-emotional problems include children’s feelings of sadness and anxiety and also aggressive and disruptive behaviours. It is typical for young children to feel anxious when starting a new school<sup>1</sup> and to show aggressive behaviours as they learn to interact with other children.<sup>2</sup> In this newsletter we focus on anxiety and aggressive behaviours.

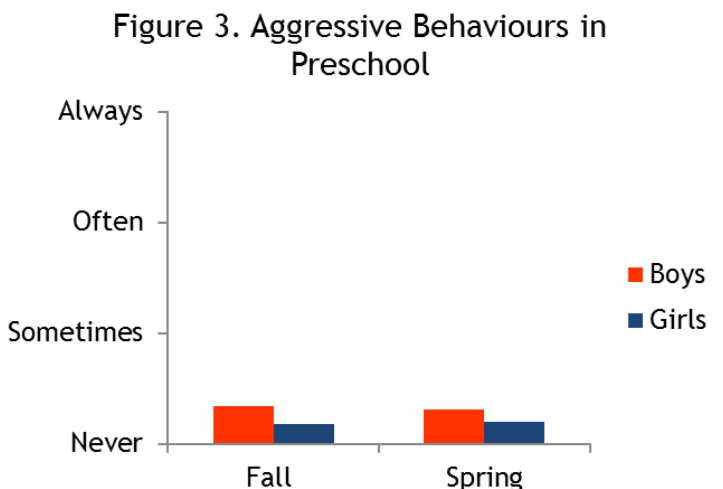
### Anxiety



Anxiety is a normal experience for many children. Anxiety includes worries or fears about real events (such as the first day in a new school) or imagined events (such as being separated from parents).<sup>3</sup> When these feelings are more than what is typical for a child, occur for a long time, and stop children from doing things they like to do, children may need some extra support from adults. In this study, teachers rated how often children showed symptoms of anxiety (such as “worries” and “is fearful”). As expected, anxiety was low in fall and spring of preschool for both girls and boys (see Figure 2).

### Aggressive Behaviours

Aggressive behaviours include hitting, pushing, and shoving other children. These behaviours can be common in preschool but usually decrease as children grow older and learn how to use their words and control their behaviours.<sup>2</sup> In this study, teachers rated how often children showed aggressive behaviours (such as “hits other children”). As expected, aggressive behaviours were low in the fall and spring of preschool. Boys showed more aggressive behaviours than girls (see Figure 3).



# School Readiness

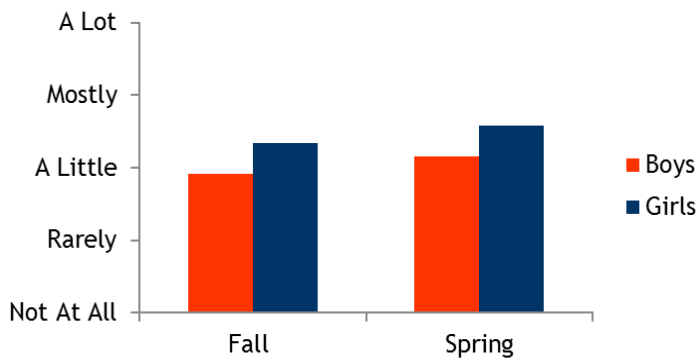
School readiness is about how prepared a child is to start school. School readiness often refers to five broad areas of young children’s development: social competence (such as shares, takes turns), emotional competence (such as can express and label emotions), language and cognitive skills (such as can follow directions, recognize shapes), general knowledge and communication skills (such as can use words or gestures to express needs), and physical well-being (such as can hold a crayon, climb stairs).<sup>4</sup> In this newsletter, we focus on three aspects of school readiness: children’s sense of belonging to their cultural group, academic skills, and social skills.



## Sense of Belonging to Cultural Group

Sense of belonging refers to children’s knowledge and feelings about being part of a cultural or ethnic group, including their family and community. Children start to become aware of their culture and ethnicity in early childhood.<sup>5</sup> Feeling like they are important to their family and community is related to children’s well-being. In this study, parents rated how much their child showed a sense of belonging to their cultural or ethnic group (such as “can name our ethnic group” and “knows and shares stories about our family”). On average, sense of belonging was moderate (see Figure 4). This is typical as children’s sense of belonging is just developing.

Figure 4. Sense of Belonging to Cultural Group in Preschool



## Academic Skills

Early academic skills include children’s ability to show age-appropriate reading, writing, and problem solving skills. Teachers rated children’s progress on different academic skills in the spring of preschool (such as “can count to 10” and “can write name”). As expected, most children were beginning to show these skills (see Figure 5). This is typical for young children who are just learning these skills.

Figure 5. Academic Skills in the Spring of Preschool

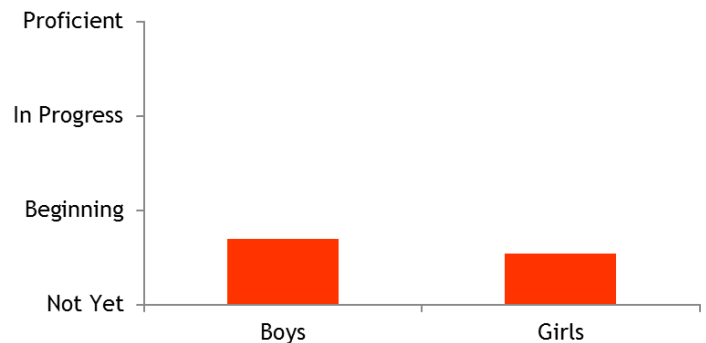
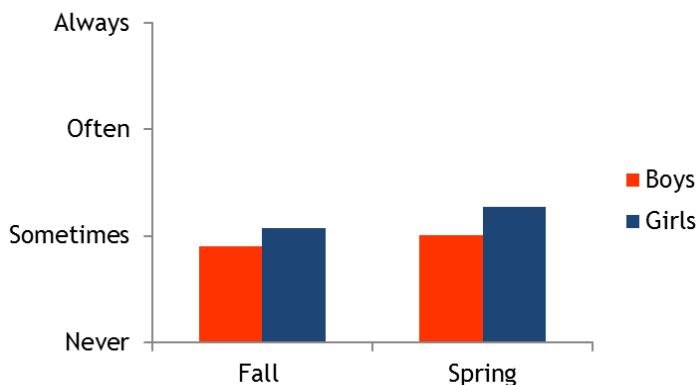


Figure 6. Social Skills in Preschool



## Social Skills

Social skills refer to how well children play, share, help, and take turns with other children. These skills are important for children’s ability to make and keep friends and to adjust in school. Teachers rated how often children showed different social skills (such as “offers to help other children”). On average, children sometimes showed these social skills in the fall and spring of preschool. Girls showed more social skills than boys (see Figure 6). This is typical as children are still developing skills needed for social success, such as impulse control and communication skills.<sup>4</sup>

# Self-Regulation

Self-regulation refers to children’s ability to control their behaviours, attention, and emotions. Young children often need help with their self-regulation from adults, such as reminders to take a deep breath when upset. Self-regulation helps children do better academically, such as in reading, writing, and math activities because they can focus and pay attention<sup>6</sup>. Self-regulation also helps children do better socially, such as making and keeping friends because they can control their behaviours and emotions.<sup>7</sup>



## Behavioural Regulation

Behavioural regulation is children’s ability to stay calm and control impulsive behaviours, such as stopping the impulse to eat a cookie when asked to wait to eat it.<sup>8</sup> In this study, behavioural regulation was assessed by playing a game like “Simon Says”. In this game, children were asked to do the opposite of what was asked of them (such as when they were asked to “touch their head” they were really supposed to “touch their toes”). As expected, behavioral regulation skills were moderate and these skills improved from the fall to spring of preschool (see Figure 7). This finding is typical of young children as they are learning ways to control their behaviours.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 7. Behavioural Regulation in Preschool

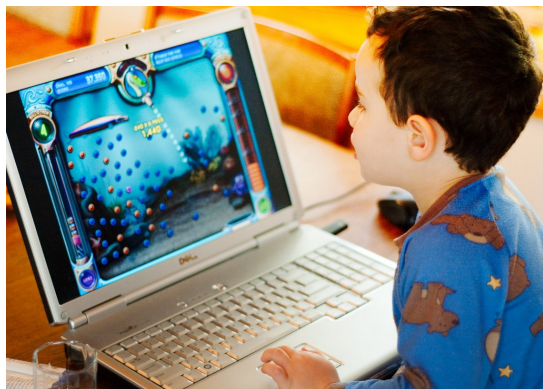
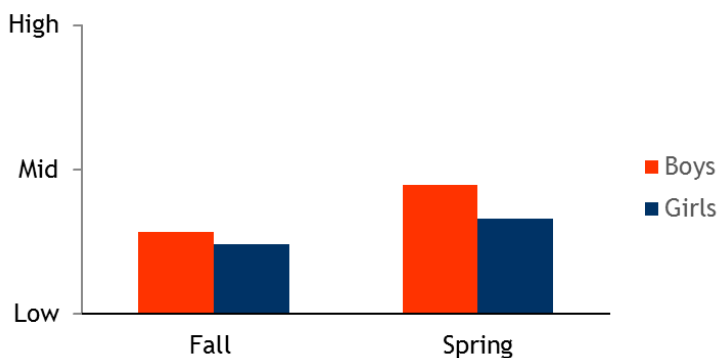
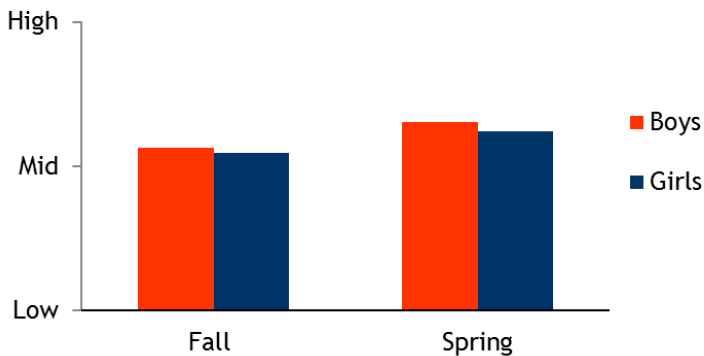


Figure 8. Attentional Regulation in Preschool



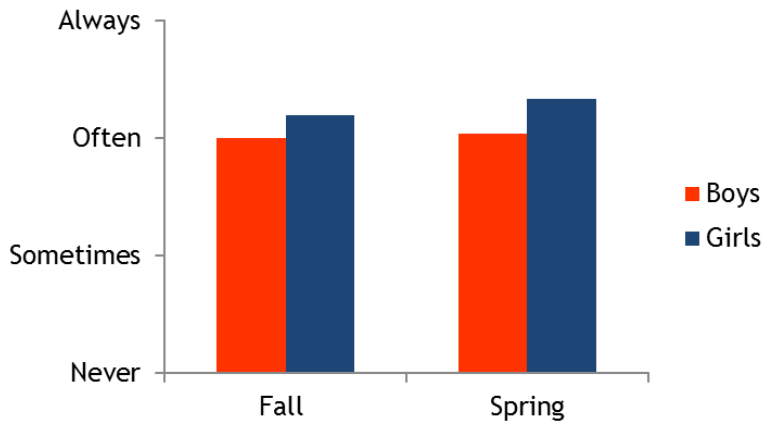
*“Self-regulation helps children in their learning activities and in their interactions with other children and adults.”<sup>6,7</sup>*

## Attentional Regulation

Attentional regulation is children’s ability to focus and shift their attention, such as shifting their attention from a fun activity with a friend to focus on the teacher. In this study, attentional regulation was assessed by playing a card game where children were asked to sort cards by the shape on the card. During the game, the rules changed and children then had to sort the cards by the color of the shape and not just the shape. Children’s ability to remember and follow the changing rules of the game were measured. On average, children showed moderate attentional regulation (see Figure 8). This is typical for young children who are just developing these skills at this age.<sup>8</sup>

## Emotional Regulation

Figure 9. Emotional Regulation in Preschool



*“Emotional regulation skills can help young children develop and maintain positive relationships with peers.”<sup>7</sup>*

Emotional regulation is children's ability to control the intensity of their emotions, such as feelings of disappointment, frustration, or excitement. The ability to control the intensity of emotions, such as calming down when really excited, can be difficult for young children. Children who can label different emotions often show better emotional regulation skills. Children with better emotional regulation skills often have more positive relationships with peers, teachers, and parents.<sup>7</sup>

In this study, teachers rated how often children showed different emotional regulation skills (such as “can say when happy or sad” and “can recover quickly when upset”). On average, children often showed good emotional regulation skills in the fall and spring of preschool. Girls showed better emotional regulation than boys (see Figure 9). This is typical for young girls and boys.

### Tips for Supporting Children's Self-Regulation<sup>9</sup>

In early childhood, self-regulation skills are developing and children should not be expected to display regulation skills beyond their age abilities.<sup>11</sup> However, there are ways to help a child develop behavioural, attentional and emotional regulation skills. Here are some ideas:

#### 1. Behavioural Regulation

- ◆ **Play games that help build impulse control.** Games such as “Stop and Go” or “Freeze” work well.

#### 2. Attention Regulation

- ◆ **Work their memory.** Play games that require children to remember a sequence of colors or numbers.

#### 3. Emotional Regulation

- ◆ **Discuss emotions.** Young children have to do many things that they don't always want to. Letting children know that you recognize how they feel is important (such as saying “I can see that you are really sad.”) This helps children put into words how they are feeling and can help children develop self-control.
- ◆ **Play pretend.** Talk about and act out different scenarios with children that they might find frustrating, such as not getting a toy in a toy store. This can help build their skills in managing their emotions.

#### 4. Overall

- ◆ **Role-model.** Children are always watching and learning from adults. When adults model positive ways to manage their own emotions and behaviours this can help to teach children good self-regulation skills.



# Peer Relationships

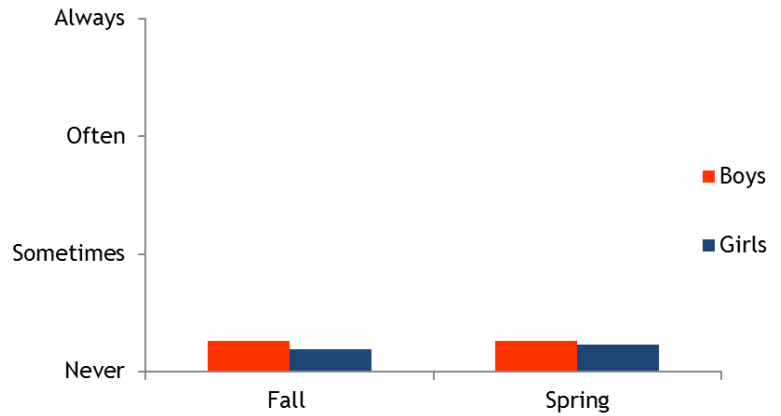
## Peer Victimization

Peer victimization refers to children's experiences of being bullied by peers. These are mean behaviors that are meant to cause a child harm.<sup>10</sup> Peer victimization can take many forms, such as hitting, threats, name-calling, and excluding children from activities or play groups.

Peer victimization is a common experience for many children but it should not be. About 30% of children regularly experience some form of peer victimization.<sup>10</sup> Peer victimization can start as early as preschool. It can happen to a child one time. It can be an ongoing experience.



Figure 10. Peer Victimization in Preschool



In this study, teachers rated how often children had been victimized by peers in different ways (such as “gets hit” or “left out of play groups”). As expected, peer victimization was low in the fall and spring of preschool (see Figure 10).

Adults need to help stop peer victimization. Some warning signs that a child is being victimized and tips on how to support children who are victimized are listed below. It is everybody's responsibility to stand up to bullying and stop it. It is not something that one child can do on her or his own. It takes a community working together.

### Warning Signs of Peer Victimization<sup>10,11</sup>

- ◆ Behaviors suddenly change from what is typical for that child.
- ◆ Complains of headaches or stomachaches.
- ◆ Afraid to go to school or says does not like school anymore.
- ◆ Starts to do poorly in school when she or he used to do well in school.
- ◆ Comes home from school with unexplained bruises or cuts.
- ◆ Often has bad dreams or nightmares.
- ◆ Chooses not to communicate with friends or loved ones.
- ◆ Starts to not want to play with other children or has few friends.

### Tips for Supporting Children who are Victimized<sup>10,11</sup>

- 1. Offer comfort**
  - ◆ Listen calmly and carefully so the child feels comforted and safe.
- 2. Communicate**
  - ◆ Ask the child for details about the event and develop a solution together.
- 3. Remind the child to seek help**
  - ◆ Adults and other children need to step in to help.
- 3. Teach assertive responses**
  - ◆ Help children learn how to walk away, tell the child who is being mean to stop, and seek help.
- 4. Promote healthy relationships**
  - ◆ Help all children learn empathy, honesty, kindness, and respect with others.

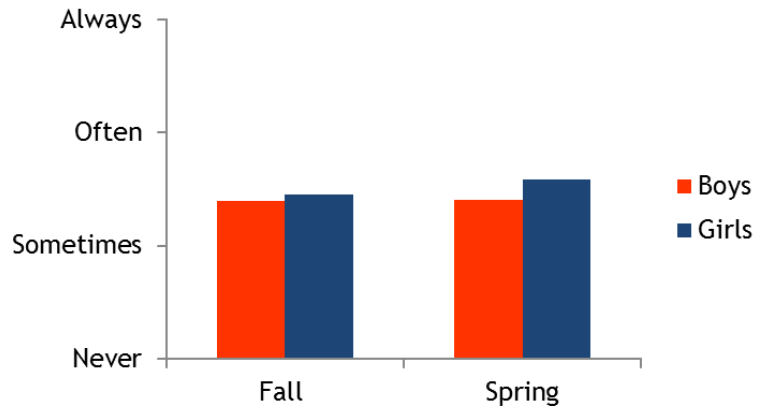
## Peer Likability

Peer likability refers to how much children are accepted and liked by their peers. It also refers to how easily children form positive relationships with peers. Children who are well liked by peers are often seen as really nice, kind, and helpful. It is important for children to develop positive relationships with peers as having friends can promote children's positive development and also protect children from being victimized by peers.<sup>12</sup> Teachers and parents can help to create environments where children develop healthy, meaningful, and positive relationships with peers.<sup>12</sup>

In this study, teachers rated how often children seemed to be well liked by other boys and girls in the classroom. On average, children seemed to be well liked by peers in their classroom in the fall and spring of preschool (see Figure 11). This finding is typical of young children. Young children are often very accepting of all children and often report that they like all children in their class.



Figure 11. Peer Likability in Preschool



*“It is important for children to develop positive relationships with peers. These relationships can help prevent peer victimization.”<sup>12</sup>*

## Resources

### Online Resources

**PREVNet** is network of researchers and organizations working together to promote children's healthy relationships and stop bullying. There are several bullying prevention resources on their website.

**Visit:** [www.prevnet.ca](http://www.prevnet.ca)

**Alberta Education** has information about promoting children's early learning and education, early childhood development, and bullying prevention.

**Visit:** [www.education.alberta.ca](http://www.education.alberta.ca)

### Early Learning Programs

**ABC Head Start** is a comprehensive early learning, family support and community connection program for families with low-incomes. ABC Head Start offers a half-day preschool program for children aged 3.5 to 5.5 years.

**Visit:** [www.abcheadstart.org](http://www.abcheadstart.org)

**100 Voices** is an early learning program offered by Edmonton Catholic Schools . 100 Voices offers a half-day preschool program for children aged 3 to 4 years.

**Visit:** [www.ecsd.net](http://www.ecsd.net)

## THANK YOU

Data from the Early Experiences Project will be used to help undergraduate and graduate students learn about young children's social and emotional development. This information will also help schools learn more about how their programs best support children. We are grateful to all the children, parents, teachers, and school staff for their participation and commitment to this project. We also thank our numerous student volunteers who gave their time and energy to help with this study.

### PEERS Lab

Our research focuses on social and emotional development in childhood and adolescence. We are most interested in how relationships with peers, parents, and teachers contribute to resiliency among vulnerable children.

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