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# The Early Experiences Project

Dr. Wendy Hoglund and the PEERS Lab Team

The Early Experiences Project studied how young children's experiences in the classroom and at home support their social and emotional skills and behaviours in preschool and kindergarten. We assessed these skills and behaviours by doing various activities with children (playing games like "Simon Says"), asking teachers and parents questions, and observing children in their classrooms.

In total, 435 preschool children and their parents participated in this project. The children were in 43 preschool classes.

Overall, the sample of children was ethnically diverse; about 67% of children had an ethnic family heritage, including Aboriginal, South Asian, Arab, and Black/African Canadian.

Many families were newcomers to Canada; 71% of parents and 49.5% of children were born outside of Canada.

The Early Experiences Project collected data with children 4 times over 2 school years, from the fall of preschool to spring of kindergarten:

### Project Year 1

- ◆ Fall Preschool (Wave 1)
- ◆ Spring Preschool (Wave 2)

### Project Year 2

- ◆ Fall Kindergarten (Wave 3)
- ◆ Spring Kindergarten (Wave 4)

# The Early Experiences Project

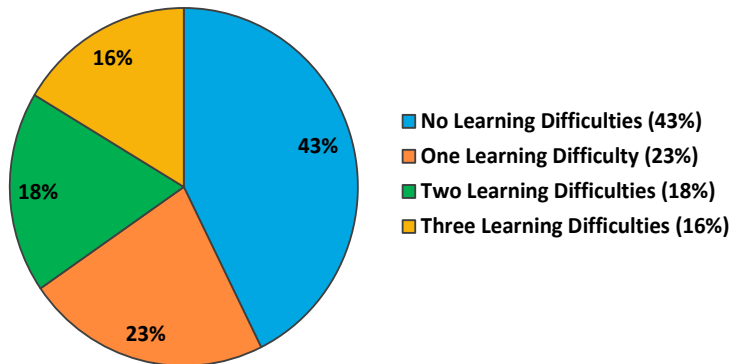


In this issue, we share some of our findings on children’s experiences in preschool and kindergarten. These include:

- ◆ **learning difficulties** — cognitive, physical, and speech delays;
- ◆ **social-emotional problems** — symptoms of depression and anxiety, and aggressive behaviours;
- ◆ **school readiness** — academic skills, social skills, and sense of belonging to their cultural group;
- ◆ **self-regulation** — behavioural, attentional, and emotional regulation, and task orientation;
- ◆ **peer relationships** — peer interactions, prosocial behaviours, peer likability, and victimization.

## Learning Difficulties & Support Services

Figure 1. Learning Difficulties



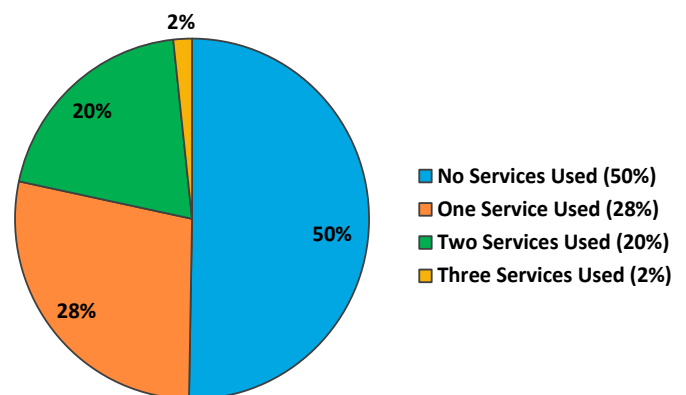
### Learning Difficulties

Children with learning difficulties often need special attention in school to support their learning<sup>1</sup>. In this study, teachers described children’s learning difficulties, such as cognitive, physical, or speech delays. About half of the children in this study had one or more learning difficulties (see Figure 1). When children can express their needs with words or gestures, initiate interactions with others, or play well with other children, it can help support their social and emotional development<sup>1</sup>.

### Support Services

Some children benefit from services that target their needs. In this study, teachers described the services children received, such as with a speech language pathologist, occupational therapist, or psychologist. Half of the children in this study received at least one service; most of these children saw a speech language pathologist to help with their language development (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Supportive Services

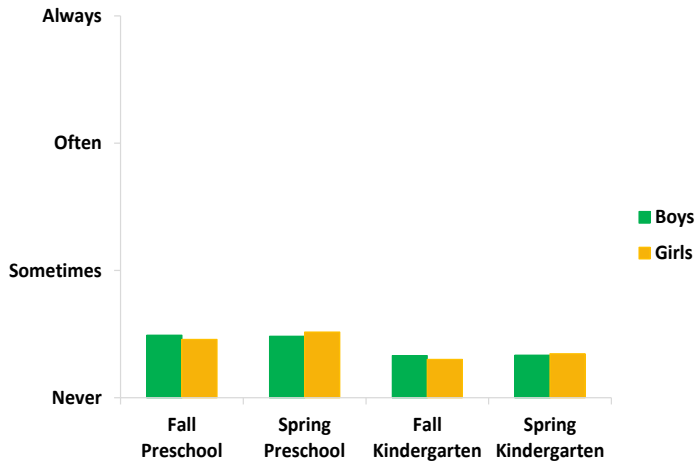


# Social-Emotional Problems

**Social-emotional problems** include children’s symptoms of depression and anxiety and also aggressive and disruptive behaviours. It is normal for young children to feel anxious when starting at a new school<sup>2</sup> and to show some aggressive behaviours as they learn to interact with other children<sup>3</sup>. If these feelings or behaviors are more than what is typical of most children or last for a long time, children might need support from a professional to help them manage.



Figure 3. Anxiety Symptoms



## Depressive Symptoms

*Depression* can include feelings of sadness and unhappiness<sup>4</sup>. These feelings can affect a child’s school-work, playtime, and relationships<sup>4</sup>. In this study, teachers rated how often children showed symptoms of depression, such as “is sad” and “cries easily”. Depression symptoms were low in fall and spring of preschool and kindergarten. Boys showed more depressive symptoms than girls (see Figure 4).

## Anxiety Symptoms

*Anxiety* includes worries or fears about events, such as the first day in a new school or being separated from parents<sup>5</sup>. In this study, teachers rated how often children showed symptoms of anxiety, such as “worries” and “is fearful”. Anxiety symptoms were low in fall and spring of preschool and kindergarten for both girls and boys (see Figure 3).

Figure 4. Depressive Symptoms

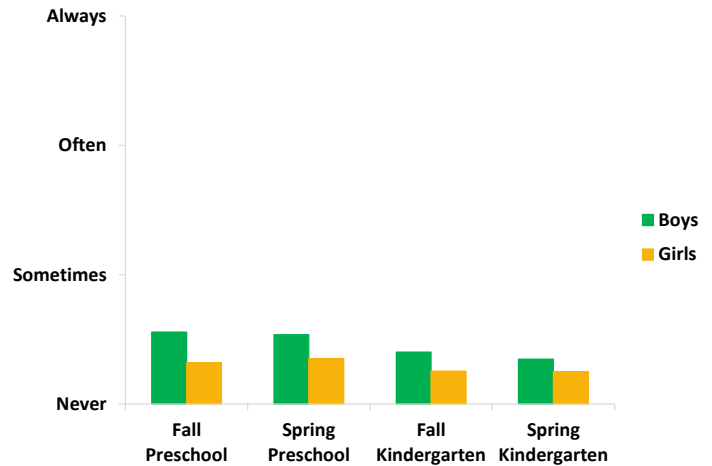
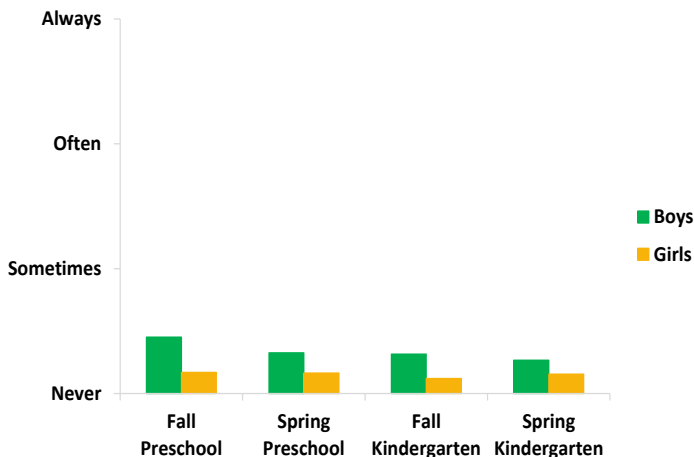


Figure 5. Aggressive Behaviours



## Aggressive Behaviours

*Aggressive behaviours* can include hitting and teasing other children and getting angry easily. Children typically show fewer aggressive behaviours as they grow older and learn to control their behavioural responses<sup>3</sup>. In this study, teachers rated how often children showed aggression, such as “hits other children”. Aggressive behaviours were low in the fall and spring of preschool and kindergarten. Boys showed more aggressive behaviours than girls (see Figure 5). This finding is typical in early childhood<sup>8</sup>.

# Tips for Supporting Children's Social-Emotional Development

## When children are feeling worried:<sup>7</sup>

- ◆ **Model self-talk.** Help children learn to work through their worries by practicing self-talk (e.g., "The first day of school is easy and I will see my friends again!").
- ◆ **Breathing techniques.** Encourage children to take deep breaths when they feel worried to help them calm down (e.g., belly breathing, "elevator" breathing)
- ◆ **Role play.** Discuss events that make children feel anxious and practice ways to help them deal with these events (e.g., practice how to ask a new child to play).



## When children are feeling sad:<sup>6</sup>

- ◆ **Share feelings.** Do something to help children express their feelings, like draw a picture, write a letter, or create a feelings journal.
- ◆ **Focus on the positive.** Celebrate children's skills and abilities. Treat children's mistakes as a learning experience. Praise them for asking for help when needed.
- ◆ **Goal-setting.** Support children's development by helping them set useful and reachable goals (e.g., following classroom rules, brushing their teeth without being asked).

## When children are being aggressive:<sup>8</sup>

- ◆ **Identify negative feelings.** Help children identify when they have negative feelings like anger. Talk about why they might be feeling that way. Let them know that it is okay to be angry but it matters what they do with that anger and how they behave to others.



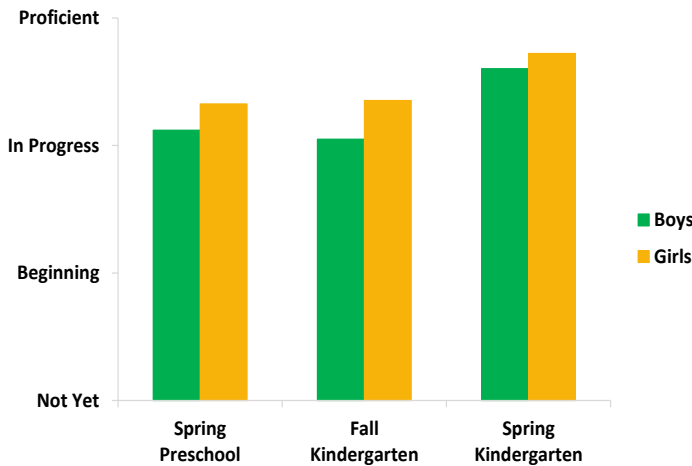
- ◆ **Teach problem solving strategies.** Help children learn how to deal with negative feelings. Help children learn strategies like taking a deep breath and counting to 10 to help them cool down. When they have a conflict with another child help them to listen to the other child without talking.
- ◆ **Praise good behaviour.** Praise children's positive behaviours, like telling them you really liked it when they helped you or another child. Reward them with a hug or other simple activities, like going to the park or playground.

# School Readiness

**School readiness** refers to how prepared a child is to start school. It includes aspects academic skills, social skills, and sense of belonging to a cultural group. During preschool and kindergarten, it is typical for children to just be developing these skills<sup>9</sup>.



Figure 6. Academic Skills



## Academic Skills

*Early academic skills* include children’s abilities 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”. Most children were developing these skills. Girls showed more proficient academic skills than boys (see Figure 6). This is typical in early childhood<sup>21</sup>.

## Social Skills

*Social skills* include how well children play, share, help, and take turns with other children. Teachers rated how often children showed different social skills, such as “offers to help other children”. Children sometimes showed these skills in preschool and kindergarten. Girls showed more social skills than boys (see Figure 7). This finding is typical in early childhood<sup>22</sup>.

Figure 7. Social Skills

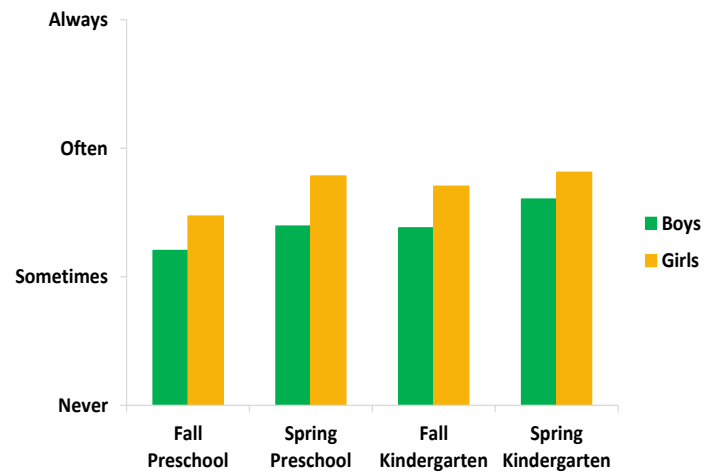
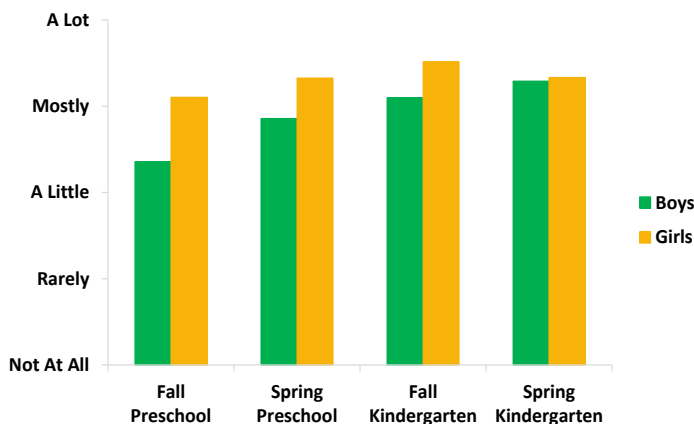


Figure 8. Sense of Belonging to Cultural Group



## Sense of Belonging to Cultural Group

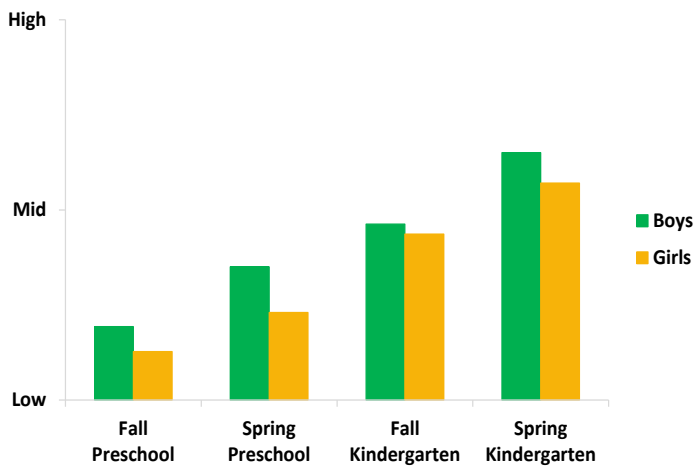
*Sense of belonging* refers to children’s knowledge and feelings about being part of a cultural group. Children begin to develop a sense of belonging to a cultural group in early childhood<sup>10</sup>. In this study, parents rated how much their child showed a sense of belonging to their cultural or ethnic group, such as “can name our ethnic group” and “knows and shares stories about our family”. Children showed a moderate to high sense of cultural belonging (see Figure 8).

# Self-Regulation

**Self-regulation** refers to children’s ability to control their behaviours, attention, and emotions. Self-regulation can help children do better in school academically and socially, as they are better prepared to focus<sup>11</sup> and control their behaviours and emotions when upset or overly excited<sup>12</sup>. During pre-school and kindergarten, behavioural, attentional, and emotional regulation skills are just beginning to develop<sup>13</sup>.



Figure 9. Behavioural Regulation



## Behavioural Regulation

*Behavioural regulation* is a child’s ability to stay calm and control impulsive behaviours, such as not eating a cookie when asked to wait to eat it<sup>13</sup>. In this study, behavioural regulation was assessed by playing a game similar to “Simon Says”. In this game, children were asked to do the opposite of what was asked of them, such as touching their head when they were asked to touch their toes. Behavioural regulation was low in preschool and increased across kindergarten (see Figure 9).

*“Many of the behaviours and [traits] associated with successful school adjustment are related to self-regulation skills.”<sup>19</sup>*

## Task Orientation

*Task orientation* is a child’s ability to be focused and pay attention during an activity<sup>14</sup>. Children with good task orientation show better school adjustment and academic scores<sup>14</sup>. In this study, children’s task orientation was observed in the classroom by the researchers. The researchers observed children’s sustained attention in classroom activities. On average, children showed moderate levels of task orientation in preschool and kindergarten (see Figure 8).

Figure 10. Task Orientation

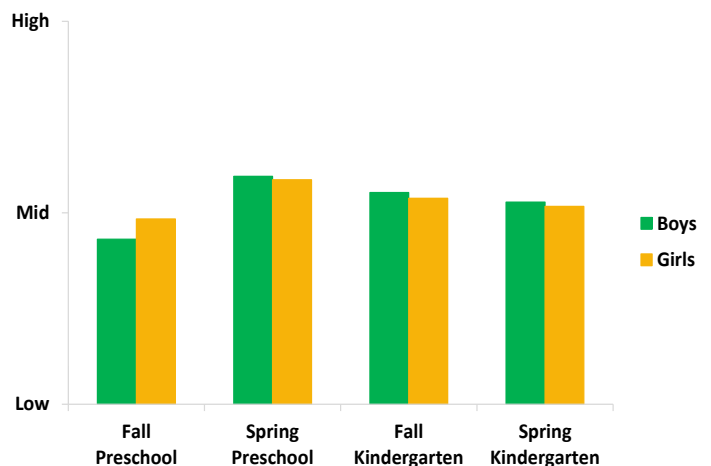
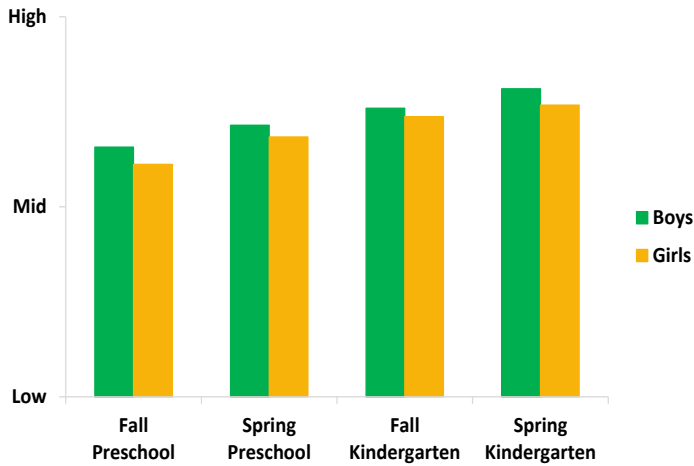


Figure 11. Attentional Regulation



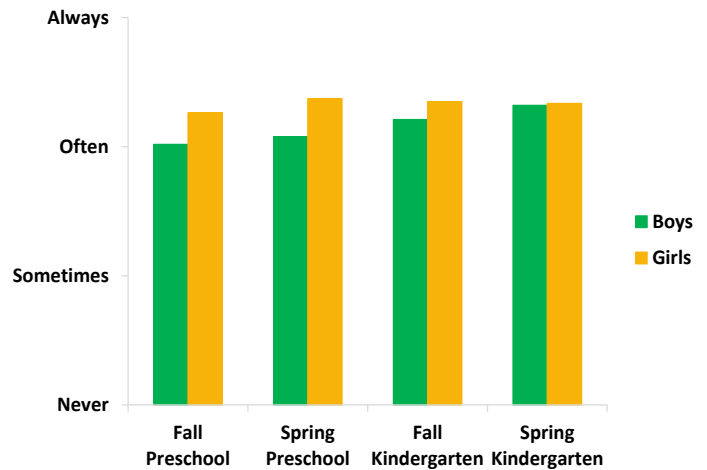
## Emotional Regulation

*Emotional regulation* is children’s ability to control their emotions, such as feeling overly disappointed, frustrated, or excited. In this study, teachers rated how often children showed emotional regulation skills, such as “can recover quickly when upset”. Children often showed good emotional regulation skills in preschool and kindergarten. Girls showed better emotional regulation than boys (see Figure 12). This finding is typical in early childhood<sup>19</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 or colour on the card. Children’s ability to remember and follow the changing rules of the game were assessed. Children showed moderate attentional regulation in fall preschool and kindergarten (see Figure 11).

Figure 12. Emotional Regulation



## Tips for Supporting Children’s Self-Regulation

- **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 children learn good self-regulation strategies.
- **Physical activity.** Physical activity can help children to let off steam and . relieve tension or frustration.
- **Use self-talk.** Encourage children to work through problems by talking out loud to themselves. This can help them work through a problem using their words.
- **Mindfulness.** Encourage children to relax and refocus. Mindfulness activities such as deep breathing, counting to 10, or drawing can help children to unwind.
- **Play games.** Several games can help with children develop their self-regulation skills, such as memory games, Simon Says, Hide and Seek, and Stop and Go.

# Peer Relationships



**Peer relationships** are about how children interact and play with other children of about the same age. Positive peer relationships include when children support and are kind to each other, play nicely, communicate in positive ways, and are well liked in the peer group. Negative peer relationships can include when children are bullied, rejected or treated negatively by other children. Peer relationships are important for children’s social and emotional development and their experiences in school<sup>24</sup>.

## Peer Interactions

*Peer interactions* are important for children’s social and emotional development<sup>15, 24</sup>. These interactions can be positive (e.g., helping a peer) or negative (e.g., ignoring a peer). In this study, researchers from the PEERS Lab observed how often children interacted positively with peers, talked with peers, and lead activities with peers. Children showed some interactions with peers in preschool and kindergarten (see Figure 13). This is typical as children begin to spend time and interact with their peers in a classroom setting and often classroom activities are led by teachers.

Figure 13. Peer Interactions

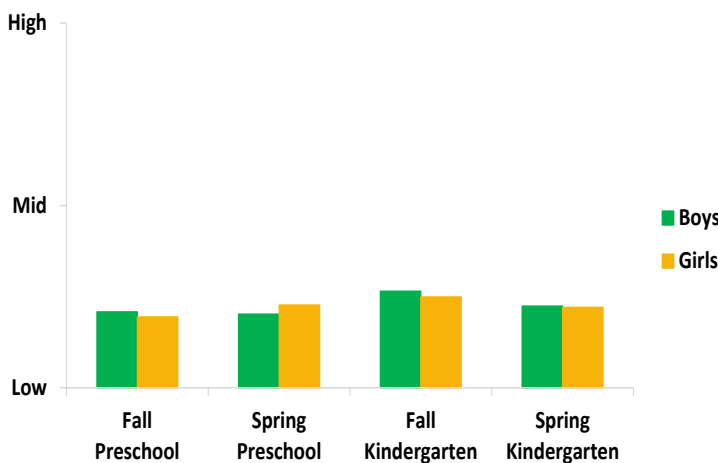
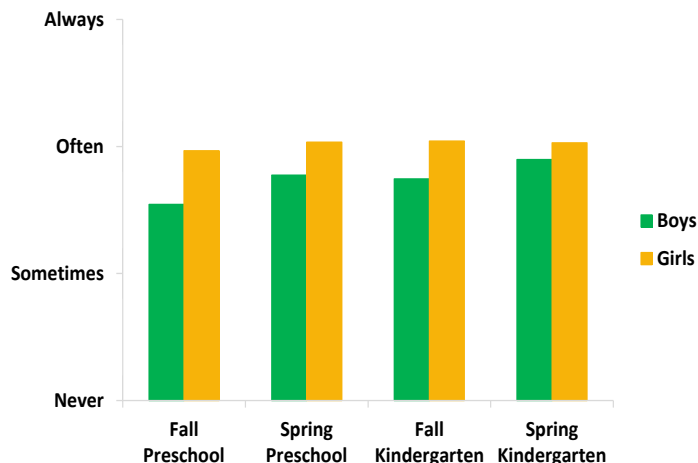


Figure 14. Prosocial Behaviours



## Prosocial Behaviours

*Prosocial behaviours* include when children help other children who need help or do nice things for other children<sup>16</sup>. In this study, teachers rated how often children engaged in prosocial behaviours, such as “is helpful to other children” and “says or does nice things for other children”. Children often showed prosocial behaviours toward classmates in preschool and kindergarten. Girls showed more prosocial behaviours than boys (see Figure 14.). This finding is typical in early childhood<sup>22</sup>.

## Peer Likability

*Peer likability* is how much children are liked by their peers and how easily they form positive relationships with peers. Being liked by peers can help protect children from peer victimization<sup>17</sup>. In this study, teachers rated how much children were liked by classmates. Children were often well liked by classmates in preschool and kindergarten (see Figure 15).

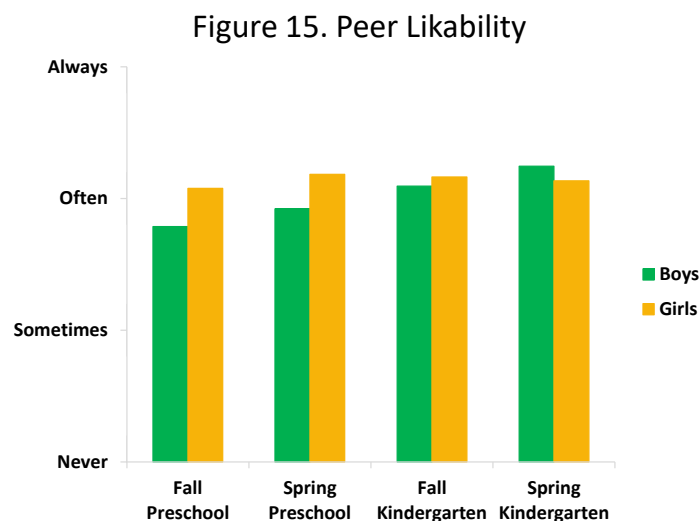
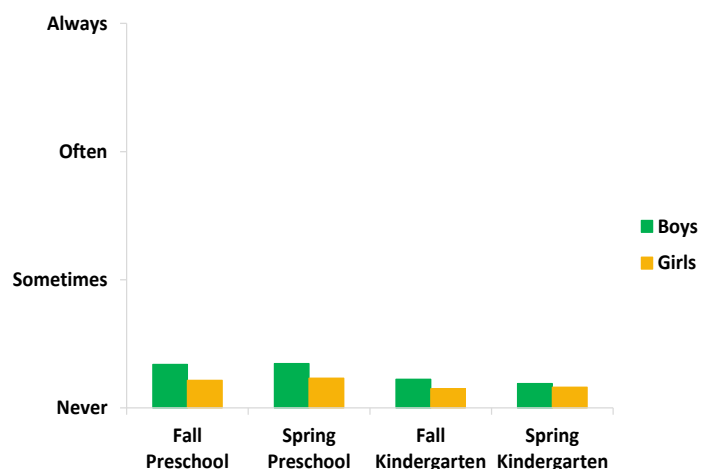


Figure 16. Peer Victimization



## Peer Victimization

*Peer victimization* refers to children’s experiences of being bullied by peers. These are mean behaviors that are meant to cause harm<sup>18</sup>. Peer victimization includes hitting, threats, name-calling, and excluding children from activities or play groups. 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”. Peer victimization was low in preschool and kindergarten. Boys were victimized by peers more than girls (see Figure 16). This finding is consistent with other research<sup>18</sup>. It is important for all adults to help children understand what bullying is and to help stop children from being bullied.

### Warning Signs: Peer Victimization<sup>18, 23</sup>

- ◆ Sudden change in behaviours.
- ◆ Complains of headaches or stomach aches.
- ◆ Wants to stay home from school more often.
- ◆ Starts to do poorly in school.
- ◆ Comes home from school with bruises or cuts.
- ◆ Often has bad dreams or nightmares.
- ◆ Stops talking to friends or loved ones.
- ◆ Does not want to see their friends.

### Supporting Children<sup>18, 23</sup>

**Offer comfort.** Listen calmly and carefully so the child feels comforted and safe.

**Communicate.** Ask the child for details about the event and come up with strategies together.

**Encourage children to seek help.** Adults and other children need to step in to help.

**Teach assertive responses,** like how to walk away and tell the child who is being mean to stop.

**Promote healthy relationships.** Help all children learn how to be kind and respectful to each other.

## Student Projects

Several projects have been completed by students in the PEERS Lab. Three graduate students and two honours students and have completed studies using the data collected from the Early Experiences Project. Read more about their work below!



### **Saira John, Doctoral Student**

Saira studied how children's sense of belonging to a cultural group was related to their relationship with peers in preschool. She found that children had a greater sense of belonging to their cultural group showed more positive interactions with peers. Conversely, children who had more conflict with peers had a lower sense of belonging to their cultural group. These findings suggest that supporting a child's feelings of belonging to their cultural group and their positive peer interactions are important in preschool.

### **Kenda Burke, Masters Student**

Kenda studied how children's behavioural self-regulation was related to parent discipline, such as expectations for children's behaviours. She found that behavioural self-regulation in preschool was negatively related to parental discipline and parent frustration with their child. These findings suggest that when children show better behavioural self-regulation parents may feel the need to use less discipline to help their child learn about expectations for their behaviour and may feel less frustrated by their child's behaviours.



### **Brenna Zato, Masters Student**

Brenna studied children's symptoms of depression and anxiety related to their relationships with preschool teachers. Brenna found that children who showed more symptoms of depression and anxiety relied more on teachers for support but also engaged and communicated less with teachers. These findings suggest that children who show more symptoms of depression and anxiety in preschool tend to experience more difficult relationships with their teachers.

## Student Projects

### Nancy Lei, Honours Student

Nancy studied how children's symptoms of depression were related to parent discipline. She found that children showed more symptoms of depression when parents reported they used more discipline. This finding suggests that when parents use more discipline it may contribute to children's vulnerability to children depressive symptoms.



### Sarah Poirier, Honours Student

Sarah studied how children's emotional self-regulation was related to parent discipline. She found that children had better emotional self-regulation when parents used more discipline, but only for girls. This finding suggests that when parents are consistent in their discipline it may help children, especially girls, learn to manage their emotions.

## Resources for Parents

- **CASA** provides mental health services for children. [www.casaservices.org](http://www.casaservices.org)
- **Canadian Mental Health Association—Edmonton Region** provides programs and information about mental health [www.edmonton.cmha.ca](http://www.edmonton.cmha.ca)
- **Multicultural Health Brokers Collective** supports Edmonton newcomers and their families. [www.mchb.org](http://www.mchb.org)
- **Parent Link Centres** help connect parents to services. [www.humanservices.alberta.ca](http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca)

## THANK YOU

We are grateful to the children, parents, teachers, and school staff for their participation and commitment to this project. Data from the Early Experiences Project is used to help students learn about young children's social and emotional development. We thank our 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.

#### Mailing Address:

Department of Psychology  
P214 Biological Sciences Building  
University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, T6G 2E9

**Email:** [peerslab@ualberta.ca](mailto:peerslab@ualberta.ca)

**Twitter:** @WendyHoglund

**Facebook:** @UofApeerslab

**Website:** [www.sites.psych.ualberta.ca/PEERSlab](http://www.sites.psych.ualberta.ca/PEERSlab)



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