

EARLY LEARNING PROJECT



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WHAT IS THE EARLY LEARNING PROJECT?

The Early Learning Project (ELP) investigates how children's interactions with peers and teachers in preschool classrooms foster their academic skills, social competence, and emotional awareness.

The first wave of data collection took place in Winter 2023, involving 68 children and their caregivers, and 11 teachers across 25 classrooms from four preschool centers.

In Spring 2024, we followed up with over half of the children from the first wave to further examine their development of academic skills and socio-emotional competencies.

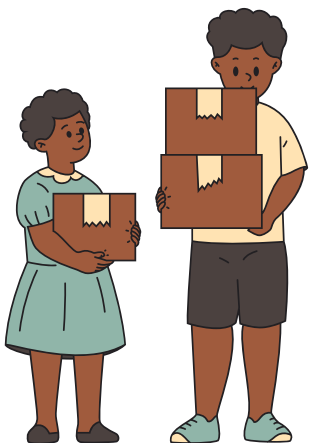
This newsletter highlights some findings from the first wave of our study on children's social skills, prosocial behaviours, and peer relationships, and includes ways to promote children's social skills and positive peer interactions in classrooms.

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LEARNING SOCIAL SKILLS IN THE CLASSROOM

WHAT ARE SOCIAL SKILLS?

Social skills refer to a set of learned, socially acceptable behaviours that help children communicate effectively with others and navigate social interactions¹. Children also use different social skills in different situations based on their personalities and cultural backgrounds². Children often use social skills in classrooms through interactions with peers and teachers. For example, children aged three to five years can demonstrate effective communication skills and cooperative behaviours when playing with peers. Children may also display helping behaviours during structured activities, such as assisting teachers with clean up or by handing out crafting materials³.



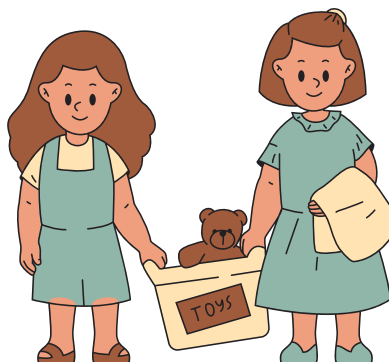
ESTABLISHING PEER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CLASSROOM

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Peer relationships are developed through a series of interactions with peers⁴. Positive peer interactions have been found to reduce mental health problems among preschoolers, such as anxiety when transitioning to new environments^{5,6}.

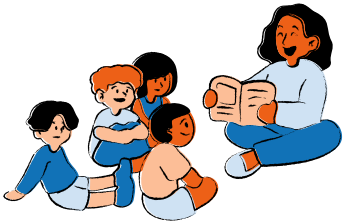
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL SKILLS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

By using social skills, children can engage in positive interactions with their peers, which may help them form healthy, long-term friendships⁴. Children can use different kinds of social skills when socializing with their peers in classrooms, such as sustaining meaningful conversations, sharing toys, and offering help when needed⁴.



HOW DID WE STUDY SOCIAL SKILLS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS?

SURVEY



We asked teachers from each preschool center to report on children's social skills, prosocial behaviours, and acceptance and rejection from peers in the classroom. During the first wave of our study, teachers reported on how often children showed social skills and prosocial behaviours, such as sharing toys and taking turns with other children. Teachers also reported on whether children were well-liked by their peers.

Research assistants visited classrooms in each center to observe how children interacted with their peers and educators. These included whether children were willing to take turns when playing with peers (e.g., playing with a car on a racetrack and allowing another peer to have a turn next) and whether they showed cooperative behaviours when interacting with peers (e.g., holding one end of a jump rope while playing outside).

We also observed if children were willing to share classroom materials with peers (e.g., voluntarily sharing toys with peers), if they showed helping behaviours (e.g., helping peers to draw), and if they initiated and held engaged conversations with peers (e.g., talking about what they did on the weekend or talking while playing).

OBSERVATION



SOCIAL SKILLS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS: YEAR 1 FINDINGS

SOCIAL SKILLS AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOURS



Teachers reported that most children regularly used social skills and engaged in prosocial behaviours frequently.



We found that **4-year-old children used more social skills than 3-year-olds** throughout the year. Older children might have had more opportunities to develop social skills through interactions with peers, close friends, teachers, and caregivers than younger children^{1, 2}.

During our classroom observations, most children engaged in helping behaviours with their peers and teachers, such as assisting teachers with simple tasks (e.g., cleaning up tables and toys).

We also observed children engaged in conversations with peers, such as talking about instructions for playing a game, and voluntarily sharing toys with their friends during unstructured play.

There were **no differences between boys and girls** in using social skills and engaging in prosocial behaviours as reported by teachers and during observations.



STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL SKILLS

CLASSROOM LEADER FOR A DAY



Children's social skills development has been linked to early leadership abilities⁷. Children who are given opportunities to act as leaders demonstrate greater communication, empathy, and care for others, as well as higher self-esteem and confidence⁸. Preschool children who act as leaders may also act as good role models for other children in developing their social skills⁸.

Teachers can support children in taking on leadership roles in the classroom by selecting a student to act as classroom leader for a day. The student can help out by leading the other children through circle time and classroom routines and leading the class line when walking to the gym or school library. They can also hand out crafting materials or snacks during small group activities and encourage others during classroom activities.



Teachers can talk about what qualities make a good leader and how children can showcase these qualities when acting as classroom leaders for a day. Teachers can also select children to be leaders during structured games or to teach other children how to play a new game.

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL SKILLS

STORY TIME



Children can also learn and practice their social skills through listening to story books in the classroom. Stories allow children to develop emotional awareness for others, identify characters' emotional states, and practice perspective-taking and active listening skills⁹. Reading stories together also gives children the chance to use problem-solving strategies by talking about the story with teachers and peers and making suggestions about what the characters should do next⁹.

TEACHERS CAN ASK CHILDREN SOME QUESTIONS AS THEY READ THROUGH STORIES TOGETHER ABOUT:

1

THE STORYLINE (E.G. WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE STORY? WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE PICTURES OF THE STORY? WHAT DO YOU SEE THE CHARACTERS DOING ON THE PAGE?)

2

EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS (E.G. DO YOU THINK THE MAIN CHARACTER FEELS HAPPY OR SAD ABOUT THEIR MISSING TOY?)

3

PROBLEM-SOLVING (E.G. WHAT COULD THE MAIN CHARACTER DO TO FEEL BETTER ABOUT THEIR MISSING TOY? SHOULD THEY ASK OTHERS FOR HELP TO FIND THEIR MISSING TOY?)

4

SUPPORTING OTHERS (E.G. WHAT COULD THE OTHER CHARACTERS DO TO HELP THEIR FRIEND FEEL BETTER? COULD THEY SHARE THEIR TOYS WITH THEIR FRIEND? COULD THEY HELP BY LOOKING FOR THE MISSING TOY? OR COULD THEY INVITE THEIR FRIEND TO PLAY A NEW GAME WITH THEM?)

SOCIAL SKILLS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS: YEAR 1 FINDINGS

PEER RELATIONSHIPS



Overall, teachers reported that **children experienced little rejection** from their peers. There were **no differences between boys and girls** by how well-liked they were by their peers.

We found that **4-year-old children were more accepted by their peers than 3-year-olds**, suggesting that older children may be more socially engaged with peers. As older children were found to use social skills and engage in prosocial behaviours more frequently than younger children, this may have provided them with more opportunities to have positive interactions with peers in classrooms¹⁰.

Peer acceptance is also related to how friendships form in early childhood¹¹. Teachers can use different classroom strategies to help younger children practice social skills with their peers and gradually build friendships.

HOW DO SOCIAL SKILLS AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOURS SUPPORT PEER RELATIONSHIPS?

Throughout the first year of our study, children who were reported by teachers to **use more social skills and prosocial behaviours were more accepted by their peers**. Children who were observed having more engaged conversations with peers were also reported to experience more acceptance from peers by their teachers.



What did you do this weekend?

Played with dinos.

SOCIAL SKILLS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS: YEAR 1 FINDINGS

HOW ARE THESE SKILLS CONNECTED TO CHILDREN'S SELF-REGULATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE?

During our classroom visits, we also played a few games with the children that required them to use their behavioural self-regulation abilities (e.g., managing their behaviours and directing their attention to follow instructions) and number and letter recognition skills. Children **who used more social skills and prosocial behaviours in the classroom also had better behavioural self-regulation**. Children who can better regulate their behaviours may be able to navigate social interactions with their peers more smoothly¹².



Having better behavioural self-regulation has been linked to good social skills and prosocial behaviour¹². Encouraging children to use behavioural self-regulation strategies may help them to use social skills and engage in prosocial behaviours in the classroom.

Children who were reported by teachers to **use more social skills and prosocial behaviours** also **did well during our letter-word literacy and number recognition games**. Children with better social skills in preschool also tend to do well in school as they transition into kindergarten¹³.

Behavioural Self-Regulation includes a set of abilities to regulate behaviours, such as being able to follow instructions, maintain attention on tasks, and manage disruptive or impulsive behaviours¹⁴.

Emotional Self-Regulation includes a set of skills that enable children to control their emotions. This includes managing big emotions in a difficult situation through how they react and express them directly towards others¹⁵.

Early Academic Skills refers to abilities that children use to learn new information, such as number counting, word and letter recognition, and reading comprehension¹⁶.

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE PEER INTERACTIONS

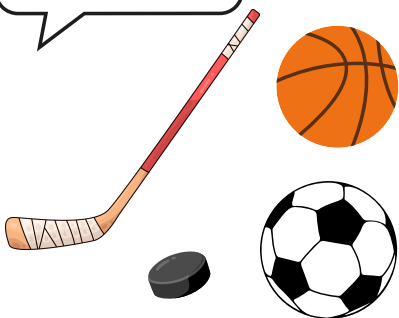
THE NAME GAME

Children can practice social skills by having conversations with peers and teachers about everyday situations⁵. Children can learn more about their peers during conversations by practicing taking turns introducing themselves and listening to their classmates¹⁷. Children will sit in a circle facing each other. The teacher will give a small ball to one child who will say their name and one thing about themselves (e.g. "My name is Michael and I like hockey"). The rest of the class will greet the child (e.g. "Good Morning Michael"). The teacher will ask the class to raise their hands if they have the same interest as their classmate (e.g. "Raise your hand if you also like hockey").



The child will choose another classmate by saying their name and then rolling the ball to them (e.g. "I pick Gracie"). The next child will then say their name and one thing about themselves before rolling the ball to the next child. The game continues until all children have had a turn.

I like sports!



I like superheroes!



I like princesses!



STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE PEER INTERACTIONS

COOPERATIVE ACTIVITIES AND GAMES



Teachers can also encourage positive peer interactions by having children play cooperative games with their classmates. Cooperative games focus on teaching children how to work together to reach a common goal¹⁸. When the goal is to win together as a group, children have more positive interactions with their peers and may develop closer friendships as a result¹⁹.



A few ways that children can engage in cooperative games with their peers include working in small groups or at center stations to build towers, completing puzzles, designing artwork, playing cooperative board games and card games, and completing classroom activities in teams.



THANK YOU!

Our project would not be possible without the involvement of the leadership team, staff, and volunteers at the participating preschools. Thank you! We are grateful to the children, caregivers and teachers for participating in our study. Our research team really enjoyed working with the children. We learned a great deal from them. Thank you for your support for our project!



ABOUT THE PEERS LAB

Dr. Wendy Hoggund and the PEERS Lab study social, emotional and academic development in childhood and adolescence. We are interested in how children's relationships with peers and teachers relate to social, emotional and academic competencies.

To learn more about our research, visit our website: <https://sites.psych.ualberta.ca/PEERSlab/>

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