

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Preschoolers' Cognitive Representations of Peer Relationships: Family Origins and Behavioural Correlates

Meece, D., & Mize, J. (2011). Preschoolers' cognitive representations of peer relationships: Family origins and behavioural correlates. *Early Child Development and Care*, 181(1), 63-72. doi:10.1080/03004430903255320

SUMMARY: Preschoolers' cognitive representations of peer relations (e.g., peer affiliation and hostile attributions of peers' intentions) and their associations with prosocial peer-related behaviors and peer competence was assessed utilizing observations and child and teacher surveys. Results indicate that preschoolers' cognitive representations of peer relations (either positive or negative) were associated with their own behaviors and peer competence. Therefore, interventions that teach children to view peer interactions positively may be beneficial to children lacking social competence and prosocial behavioral skills.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Children who stated more often that they would prefer to play with a peer than alone or with an adult were more liked by peers, according to teacher reports; and, more likely to express assertive, sophisticated, and prosocial responses to others.
- Children who had larger vocabularies and more peer affiliation engaged in more prosocial peer-related behaviors. In addition, children who tended to view the actions of their peers more often as hostile or mean were viewed by teachers as less socially competent.
- Positive father-child play interactions were associated with children who were more likely to be socially competent with peers and have positive peer affiliation and response generation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide opportunities for positive social interactions among military children who may not be as socially competent as their peers to better equipped them socially
- Disseminate information regarding service available to military families who have a child with social, emotional, or behavioral issues that influence peer interactions and competence

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that offer opportunities for military children to learn positive social interaction skills that are essential to long-term well-being
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs and schools that work with military children to proactively address peer competency issues

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METHODS

- Participant recruitment methods were not provided.
- Preschool children were asked to engage in social situations (i.e., videotaped vignettes, puppets, and props) and then responded to interviews designed to elicit cognitive and verbal ability, perceptions of the intentions of subjects in the situations, what they would have done if it happened to them, and finally if they would play with the subject.
- Children were also observed interacting with parents, and teachers reports were used to assess the child's social competence.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 55 preschool children.
- Children ranged in age from 55 to 80 months (M = 65.9 months); 29 children were male and 26 children were female.
- Fifty-six percent of children in the sample were White and 31% were Black.

LIMITATIONS

- The relatively small sample size may limit the ability to generalize to a larger population of preschool children.
- The variables were not carefully constructed or explained, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding the variables that were assessed.
- Participants included only civilian youth; therefore, results may not be generalizable to military youth.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess the connections between the quality of the primary attachment relationship (e.g., parent-child) and children's representations of peer relationships and subsequent social-emotional outcomes
- Examine gender difference in children's peer relations and conceptions
- Explore why some children are more oriented toward peer affiliation while others are not

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