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**IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING BEHAVIOURS ASSOCIATED WITH CO-OPERATION,
ASSERTION AND SELF-CONTROL IN YOUNG CHILDREN STARTING SCHOOL**

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The transition to the first year of schooling has been perceived as one of the major challenges children have to face in their early childhood years. This transition can be a critical factor for children's adjustment to the demands of the school environment and in determining future school success. When children experience social difficulties in the early years of school they are more likely to continue experiencing these problems throughout their schooling. An understanding of the social skills that predict children's adjustment to the first year of schooling can assist early childhood staff to identify children at risk of maladjustment and to implement appropriate intervention strategies. This paper will identify social skills that contribute to the constructs of co-operation, assertion and self control. Strategies that early childhood staff can use in promoting adjustment to school will be addressed.

The first year of schooling

Starting school has been perceived as one of the major challenges children have to face in their early childhood years. This transition can be a critical factor for children's adjustment to the demands of the school environment and in determining future school success. The passage through this major social change may have a lasting influence on how children view themselves, how others value them, their sense of wellbeing and their ability to learn (Dunlop, 2000). When children experience social and behavioural problems in the early years of school, they are more likely to continue experiencing these problems throughout their schooling (Cowan, Cowan, Shultz & Henning, 1994; Kienig, 2000).

Adjustment requires children to meet social/cultural standards of personal independence and social responsibility and to behave in ways that are acceptable to the classroom teacher (Renwick, 1984; Gresham & Elliott, 1987). This can vary from school to school and classroom to classroom. Children's adjustment to schooling partly depends on past experiences and on children possessing conventional academic skills and practical 'survival' skills or adaptive behaviours to respond to the academic, physical, and social and emotional challenges of commencing school (Ladd & Price, 1987; Rice & O'Brien, 1990; Barth & Parke, 1993). Social competence, problem solving skills, self reliance and determination (Fabian, 2000), cooperative play behaviours, non-disruptive group entry strategies and skilled verbal communication skills contribute to the social behaviours that increase children's adjustment to school (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Difficulties adjusting to schooling may arise when children experience personal incompatibilities and dislocations within the new setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Erikson, 1963). It is therefore important to identify the adjustments that children need to make as they move from home or preschool into school.

Social challenges as children commence schooling

When children experience social and behavioural problems in the early years of school, they are more likely to continue experiencing these problems throughout their schooling.

Successful transitions to school requires children to:
meet social/ cultural standards of personal independence and social responsibility
behave in ways that are acceptable to the classroom

conventional academic skills

practical 'survival' skills or adaptive behaviours

- social competence
- problem solving skills
- self-reliance
- determination
- cooperative play behaviours
- non-disruptive group entry strategies
- skilled verbal communication

Starting school involves

- coping with change and uncertainties
- strange buildings and classrooms
- new school and teacher expectations
- new academic challenges
- class sizes
- one adult per class
- more verbal instruction
- focus on literacy and numeracy
- need to use pencils and other small equipment
- increase in waiting times
- more structure, more formal rules and routines
- different teachers and differing attitudes, expectations of teachers
- new and more diverse group of children
- large groups of children and making new friends
- less adult supervision
- long hours away from home
- outside-school-hours care
- conform to rules & moderate behaviour

Adjustment is supported when children possess social skills for interacting with children and adults and meeting the demands of being at school:

- meet social/cultural standards of personal independence and social responsibility
- behave in ways that are acceptable to the classroom teacher

Groups of skills that are often labelled: cooperation; assertion or confidence; self-control; independence; peer relationships

The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) (Elementary Level)

Item No	SSRS items for cooperation
26	ignores peer distractions when doing class work
20	follows your directions
28	attends to your instructions
16	produces correct school work
9	finishes class assignments within time limits
21	puts work materials or school property away
8	uses free time in an acceptable way
15	uses time appropriately while waiting for help
27	keeps desk clean and neat without being reminded
29	easily makes transition from one classroom activity to another

Item No	SSRS items for assertion
7	invites others to join in activities
19	gives compliments to peers
14	initiates conversations with peers
6	says nice things about himself or herself when appropriate
2	introduces herself or himself to new people without being told
3	appropriately questions rules that may be unfair
10	makes friends easily
17	appropriately tells you when he or she thinks you have treated him or her unfairly
23	volunteers to help peers with classroom work
24	joins ongoing activity or group without being told to

Item No	SSRS items for self-control
25	responds appropriately when pushed or hit by other children
11	responds appropriately to teasing by peers
1	controls temper in conflict situations with peers
5	responds appropriately to peer pressure
4	compromises in conflict situations by changing own ideas to reach agreement
12	controls temper in conflict situations with adults
13	receives criticism well
18	accepts peers' ideas for group activities
22	cooperates with peers without prompting
30	gets along with people who are different

The Study

To identify the items in the SSRS (Elementary Level) that best contribute to the sub-scale constructs of cooperation; assertion; self-control
213 children in the first year of school.

12 preparatory class teachers
4 Melbourne state primary schools

To test 'fit' of models
confirmatory factor analysis
structural equation modelling

Results

The results discussed below indicate the skills and behaviours that influenced the adjustment to school of the children in this study.

Cooperation

ignoring peer distractions
attending to and following instructions
producing correct school work
putting away materials, occupying oneself
the ability to wait

Assertion/initiating skills

inviting others to join in activities
complimenting peers
initiating conversations
introducing oneself to others
saying positive things about oneself

Self control (the ability to control oneself in conflict and non-conflict situations)

respond appropriately when pushed or hit or teased by others
control one's temper in conflict situations
respond appropriately to peer pressure

Strategies for supporting the development of social skills

Children should be encouraged to:

have conversations with other children and adults
talk about their own experiences and ideas
share, take turns and cooperate
ask for help from adults
listen to others
follow reasonable instructions.

Children should be supported in developing self-confidence

opportunities to experience success when trying new things
coping with the unexpected

Children should be supported in developing self control and behaving in acceptable ways:

consistent guidance and support
responsibility for their actions and their belongings
encouraged to persevere with difficult tasks

Independence and self reliance are further supported when children:

master a range of physical skills
can coordinate their bodies

To meet challenges associated with the curriculum, children should:

have an awareness of letters and numbers
be able to handle a book and to turn pages
be able to concentrate
complete simple tasks.

Other strategies

- delaying and decreasing attention and praise
- reducing instructions and prompts
- increasing independence
- assigning roles and responsibilities
- school uniforms and bags in dramatic play areas

Opportunities to visit the school prior to commencement

Paired with a familiar playmate

CONCLUSION

The identification of a range of relevant social skills that support children starting school can provide a focus for observations and planning for individuals and groups of children prior to and in the early stages of schooling, and also in identifying the likelihood of children having difficulty adjusting to school.

The use of SEM techniques for exploring and explaining the direct and interdependent effects or otherwise of a range of observable social skills, in this case those identified in the SSRS (Elementary Level), contributes to an understanding of the latent variables of adjustment and the items that contribute strongly to children's early social adjustment to schooling for particular groups of children. Replicating this study in other areas of Australia and in other countries should enable the identification of sets of both generic and culturally specific social skills related to early school adjustment.

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