



The Relationship Between Parenting Stress and Social Skills of Preschool Children

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ABSTRACT

Social skills refer to specific task-related behaviors in daily life, such as participating in peer interactions, making friends, or making requests. In early childhood, social skills have a significant impact on their future academic performance, behavior patterns and even mental health. In this quantitative study, a questionnaire survey was conducted, selecting samples from urban kindergartens in Heze City, Shandong Province, China, and collecting a total of 256 valid questionnaires. The results showed that preschoolers' social skills (2.69 ± 0.34 , 2.5 is the mean score) were at a medium level and parents' parenting stress (2.34 ± 0.60 , 3 is the mean score) were at a medium to low level. Children's social skills differed significantly on the mother's education variable but not on other demographic variables. Children whose mothers' education was undergraduate had better social skills than children whose mothers' education was college, and children whose mothers' education was postgraduate had better social skills than children whose mothers' education was college. There is a significant and negative correlation between children's social skills and parents' parenting stress (correlation coefficient = -0.171^{**}), and parents' parenting stress was predictive of children's social skills ($\beta = -0.143$). This study may contribute to designing social skills intervention programs for preschool children from the parents' perspective and expand research considerations on social skills interventions.

KEYWORDS: parents, parenting stress, preschool children, social skills

INTRODUCTION

Social skills are important skills for children to engage in social interactions and adapt to social life, and influence their peer relationships, such as the quality of friendship, and peer acceptance (Pickard, Happé, & Mandy, 2018). They are advantageous for children to establish healthy interpersonal relationships, promote their socialization, and enable them to thrive in a diverse, dynamic, and complex world. Developing social skills and building successful relationships with others is an important task in childhood.

Children with good social skills are better able to learn social rules, adopt social behaviors, develop social cognition and form good friendships with peers (Caemmerer & Keith, 2015). Inadequate social skills can lead to negative outcomes, internalizing behavior problems such as depression and anxiety, peer rejection, school maladjustment, increased school dropout rates and delinquency (Curlee, Aiken, & Luthar, 2019). The social skill deficit model states that a lack of social skills often prevents individuals from social interaction and they are more likely to experience frustration during interpersonal interactions (Segrin, McNelis, & Swiatkowski, 2016).

The family is an important microsystem that influences individual adjustment and development, and one should discuss child's development in the context of the family. Social skills are first developed in interaction with parents (Ölçer & Aytar, 2014). As the most important caregivers for children, parents play a particularly prominent role in the development of their children's social skills. The Chinese government also emphasizes the important role of the family in children's development. However, some negative parenting factors that are prevalent in the family can negatively affect children's social skills.

Almost all parents have experienced a certain degree of stress (Tupper et al., 2020). Parents of preschool children face many challenges and stresses in caring for their children, mainly including time stress (caring for young children requires a significant amount of time and energy, and parents may need to balance family and work), economic stress (childcare and education can be expensive, including costs such as daycare fees, medical expenses, and education fees), parenting stress (parents need to play the role of guide, supervisor and role

model, which requires good parenting skills and experience), emotional stress (children may face difficulties during their growth process, and parents need to provide them with enough attention and support) and social stress (parents need to act as guides for their children's social skills to help them establish good interpersonal relationships). However, when parents experience high levels of parenting stress and are tired of coping with it, their parenting effectiveness may decrease (Rollè et al., 2017). Parenting stress can affect parents' social functioning and mental health, limit the appropriate environment for children's development, expose children to an unfavorable emotional environment in the family, and impair children's social adjustment and social communication skills (Hu et al., 2019). Parental stress can be a crucial point for therapeutic interventions for children and families.

Preschool is a critical period for the social skills development (Kramer et al., 2010), and children's early social skills have a significant impact on their future academic performance, behavior, and even mental health (Park et al., 2018). Although the importance of preschool children's social skills has been recognized by society, little is known about the relationship between preschoolers' social skills and parenting stress in China. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the level of preschoolers' social skills and their differences by demographic variables, and to explore the relationship between parenting stress and preschoolers' social skills through correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study collects data from parents of preschool children aged 3 to 6 years in China using surveys. This section also includes the survey process and data analysis.

Instruments

Social Skills Improvement System

The Social Skills Improvement System (Gresham & Elliott, 2008) was used in this study. The scale was scored on a four-point scale with a total of 46 items (1=never, 4= almost always). Higher scores on the questionnaire represent better social skills of children. The Cronbach's coefficient of the scale in this study was 0.936.

Parenting Stress Index–Short Form

This study used Parenting Stress Index–Short Form (Abidin & Brunner, 1995) to assess parents' parenting stress. This scale has 15 items, where 1 represents strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree. Higher scores represent higher levels of parenting stress. This scale has been used worldwide, and its reliability and validity have been shown to be good (Luo et al., 2021). The Cronbach's coefficient of this scale in this study was 0.951.

Participants

Parents were recruited mainly through teachers in kindergartens in Heze city, Shandong province, China. Parents received a letter writing the purpose of the study and inviting them to participate. Questionnaires were mailed to participants or hand-delivered by the researcher. Participants were informed that the questionnaire was anonymous and completely confidential and would not cause any privacy breach to them or their children, therefore, they were all volunteered to participate in this study. A total of 256 valid questionnaires were collected (characteristics were shown in Table 1), of which 198 were completed by mothers and 58 by fathers .

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants (N=256)

Variable	Categories	Number	Proportion (%)
child's gender	boy	137	53.5
	girl	119	46.5
child's age	3-4	65	25.4
	4-5	77	30.1
	5-6	114	44.5
number of children	1	75	29.3
	≥2	181	70.7
family structure	nuclear family	154	60.2
	three-generation family	96	37.5
	joint family	4	1.6
	single-parent family	2	0.8
mother's education	junior high school and below	7	2.7
	high school	27	10.5
	college	30	11.7
	undergraduate	76	29.7
	postgraduate	116	45.3

father's education	junior high school and below	10	3.9
	high school	20	7.8
	college	40	15.6
	undergraduate	109	42.6
	postgraduate	77	30.1

Note: Family structure refers to the composition of family members, there are four general types of family structure. nuclear family means that the couple lives together with their children; three-generation families refer to couples, children and grandparents living together, joint family means couples, children, grandparents and other relatives living together; single-parent family means that you live with your child.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis steps of this study are as follows: First, we calculated the means and standard deviations of social skills by each demographic variable. Significant differences between preschoolers' social skills in relation to the demographic variables were analyzed using the t-test or F test. When significant differences were found, post-hoc tests were conducted. Second, we examine the relationships between parental parenting stress, preschoolers' social skills, and demographic variables to determine whether any of these demographic variables should be included as control variables in the next analysis. Finally, we used a hierarchical multiple analysis to check the factors that influence social skills, with predictor variables in the following order: demographic variables with significant differences of social skills in step 2 as control variables; parenting stress.

RESULTS

Impact of Demographic Variables on Children's Social Skill

To test whether there were differences between preschoolers' social skills and demographic variables, t tests or F tests were performed (Table 2). There were no significant differences in children's social skills with respect to other variables, except for mother's education. Post hoc tests revealed that children whose mothers had a undergraduate degree had better social skills than children whose mothers' education were college, and children whose mother' education were postgraduate had better social skills than children whose mothers had a college degree.

Table 2: Tests for Differences in Demographic Variables on Social Skills

Variables	Categories	Social Skill	t/F	Post-Hoc Tests
mother's education	junior high school and below	2.55±0.51	2.605*	college < undergraduate; college < postgraduate
	high school	2.66±0.39		

	college	2.54±0.31		
	undergraduate	2.68±0.33		
	postgraduate	2.74±0.33		
	junior high school and below	2.65±0.37		
father's education	high school	2.68±0.38		
	college	2.61±0.31	0.742	-
	undergraduate	2.69±0.33		
	postgraduate	2.72±0.36		
family structure	nuclear family	2.71±0.34		
	three-generation family	2.65±0.36	0.823	-
	joint family	2.79±0.23		
	single-parent family	2.82±0.26		
child's gender	boys	2.66±0.35	1.512	-
	girls	2.72±0.34		
child's age	3-4	2.62±0.35		
	4-5	2.70±0.35	1.881	-
	5-6	2.72±0.33		
number of children	only1	2.65±0.33	-0.998	-
	≥2	2.70±0.35		

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Below is the same.

Correlation Among Parenting stress, Children's Social Skills, and Demographic Variables

Descriptive statistics were performed using SPSS 22. The mean score for social skill is 2.69, indicating that social skill is at an intermediate level (2.5 is the median). The mean score for parenting stress is 2.34, indicating a medium to low level (3 is the median). Next, we examined the correlation between children's social skills, parenting stress, and demographic variables (shown in Table 3). The correlation coefficient between social skills and parenting stress was -0.171, $p < 0.01$, indicating that social skills and parenting stress were significantly negatively correlated and that higher parenting stress was associated with poorer children's social skills. Children's social skills were significantly and positively correlated with mothers' education. Parenting stress was significantly associated with father's education, mother's education, and child's gender, suggesting that parents raising boys have higher parenting stress than parents raising girls. The lower the parents' education, the higher the parenting stress.

The demographic variables that were significant in the social skills were placed in the subsequent regression analysis.

Table 3: Pearson correlations between the variables

Variables	Social Skill	Parenting Stress
social skill	-	
parenting stress	-0.171**	-
family structure	-0.044	0.003
child's gender	0.094	-0.154*
child's age	0.116	0.113
number of children	0.062	0.003
mother's education	0.158*	-0.153*
father's education	0.080	-0.163**

Multiple Regression Analysis of Parenting Stress and Children's Social Skill

Correlation analysis can only show the probability of an influence. To further investigate whether parenting stress can predict children's social skills, a hierarchical multiple analysis was used. The steps of the regression were as follows: Social skills was used as the dependent variable, and child's gender, father's education, and mother's education were included as independent variables at the first level of the regression analysis, and parenting stress was included as independent variables at the second level. The results are shown in Table 4.

For model 1, the adjusted R^2 of model 1 for the three demographic variables and social skills was 0.023, and the F value of model 1 was 3.000 ($p < 0.05$), so the regression model was significant. After adding parenting stress to the model, the adjusted R^2 of model 2 was 0.039 and the F value of of model 2 was 3.578 ($p < 0.01$), and the regression model was significant. From the standardized regression coefficients, parental stress in model 2 had a β value of -0.143 and a significant t-value, indicating that parenting stress is a negative predictor of children's social skills.

Table 4: Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression of Social Skill

Predictive Variables	Dependent variables					
	Social Skill (model 1)			Social Skill (model 2)		
	B	β	t	B	β	t
child's gender	0.063	0.091	1.466	0.047	0.068	1.099
mother's education	0.057	0.185	2.208*	0.054	0.175	2.102*
father's education	-0.014	-0.042	-0.497	-0.019	-0.059	-0.706

parenting stress		-0.082	-0.143	-2.272*
F	3.000*		3.578**	
R ²	0.034		0.054	
adjusted R ²	0.023		0.039	

DISCUSSION

The results showed that preschool children's social skills were at an intermediate level, while parental stress was at an intermediate to low level. There were significant differences in children's social skills between mothers with different levels of education. Parental stress is not only negatively correlated with children's social skills, but also able to explain the variance in children's social skills.

Influence of Demographic Characteristics on Children's Social Skill

In this study, social skills of Chinese preschool children were found to be at an intermediate level, comparable to the level of social skills measured by Li and Zheng (2020) using the SSIS-Teacher for preschool children in Guangdong Province, China. Maleki et al. (2019) also found that most preschoolers' social skills were at an intermediate level, regardless of whether they were measured from a parent or teacher perspective.

Significance tests revealed significant differences in preschoolers' social skills on the mother's education variable, which is consistent with the findings of Yao and Li (2002). The reason for this may be that mothers' educational levels differ in the social adjustment skills they teach to young children and in the behavioral norms they demand (Dodge & Pettit, 2003). Better educated mothers tend to follow infants' developmental patterns, provide more rational guidance and rich verbal stimulation to their infants, use fewer negative discipline strategies, and interact more with their infants (Huang et al., 2005), thereby promoting the development of early social skills. However, there are other findings, such as Sun (2016), who found no effect of mother's education on the social skills of preschool children in Shanghai, China. Maleki et al. (2019) also found no significant correlation between Iranian preschool children's social skills and mother's education.

No significant differences were found in preschool children's social skills with respect to any of the demographic variables, except for mothers' education, which was consistent with and different from previous studies. As for the family structure variables, Sun (2016) found no significant differences in social skills as a function of family structure. As for the father's education variable, Sun (2016) and Maleki et al. (2019) found no effect of father's education on young children's social skills, while Zhang, Yu and Li (2002) found high levels of father's education are associated with good early skills in young children.

Regarding the number of children variable, Sun (2016) found that the social skills of preschoolers in families with more than two children were significantly higher than those of preschoolers with only one child. Li and Zheng (2020) found that preschoolers from families with only one child had higher social skills than children from families with more than two children, but there was no significant difference between the two types of families. About child's age, Stipek and Byler (2001) and Xu (2007) found no age differences in social skills. In contrast, Li and Zheng (2020) found in a follow-up study that preschool children's social skills develop gradually with age.

In terms of child's gender, some researchers have argued that there are significant differences in gender of preschoolers' social skills, with girls consistently scoring higher than boys (Maleki et al., 2019; Mohamed, 2018), but others have argued that there are no significant gender differences (Shahim, 2005; Sheikhzakaryaie et al., 2012). The conflicting results regarding preschoolers' social skills on demographic variables are likely due to differences in sample size and area, as well as the use of different instruments to measure social skills.

Parenting Stress Negatively Predicts Children's Social Skill

The combination of correlation and multiple regression analyzes suggests that parental stress, although small in effect, has a significant and negative impact on preschoolers' social skills, consistent with previous findings (Beck et al., 2004; Crum & Moreland, 2017). A longitudinal study tracked that parenting stress at age 6 predicted children's social skills at age 8, suggesting that early parenting stress is a significant predictor of poorer social skills over

time. Parenting stress was therefore highlighted as an important target for interventions to promote children's social skills (Neece & Baker, 2008).

There are several possible reasons for the effects of parenting stress on children's social skills: Emotional instability. Parents may feel anxious and depressed when faced with parenting stress, and these emotions may be transmitted to their children, causing the children to become emotionally unstable. Lack of time. Parents may be busy with their work and other responsibilities, resulting in a lack of time to spend with their children. This can leave children feeling lonely and neglected, and can affect their social skills. Parenting style. Parents may adopt a parenting style that is too strict or too permissive when faced with parenting stress, which can cause children to feel insecure and perform poorly in social situations. High levels of parenting stress can put children at increased risk for problems with cognitive and social skills.

Researchers have reached mixed conclusions regarding whether parenting stress directly or indirectly affects children's social skills. Anthony et al. (2005) concluded that parenting stress directly affected children's social skills without being moderated by parental factors. However, Lee and Joo (2020) found that parenting stress is not only directly related to the adolescents' social skills, but also that the mother-adolescent closeness plays an important mediating role between mothers' parenting stress and adolescents' social skills. The reason for this may be that the emotional climate in the family significantly affects adolescents' ability to regulate their emotions, which may affect the development of adolescents' social skills. The indirect effect is similar to the parenting stress model (Abidin, 1992).

Although the parents of preschool children interviewed in this study exhibited moderate to low levels of parenting stress, there was still some level of parenting stress. Therefore, it is important to understand the causes and factors of parenting stress and to take specific and effective steps to reduce parenting stress when helping parents of preschool children. Providing parents with adequate social support, psychological adjustment training and empowering families is a clear way to improve their children's social skills.

In summary, parenting stress can have adverse effects on children's social skills. Therefore,

parents should try to reduce their parenting stress as much as possible while focusing on communication and interaction with their children and providing them with adequate support and guidance to promote the development of their children's social skills.

SIGNIFICANCE

Studying the effects of parental stress on preschool children's social skills is of great importance. It can help us better understand the influence of the family environment on the development of children's social skills and the important role that parental factors play in the growth process of children. It can advise and support parents in parenting and help them further understand their parenting style and psychological state, and avoid the negative effects of unnecessary parenting stress on children's social skills. It can also provide reference for preschool education and help teachers and parents better understand children's development and growth patterns and provide more scientific and reasonable educational programs and support.

LIMITATIONS

Some limitations should be highlighted. The results of this study may be influenced by cultural backgrounds. The sample of this study was limited to a fourth-level city in China, so the generalizability of the results should be taken with caution. In addition, this study may be biased by self-report. The data for this study came from parents' self-reports, and parents may intentionally exaggerate or downplay certain issues for one reason or another. This research study uses a cross-sectional survey and collects data only once, which may not reflect long-term trends.

CONCLUSION

1. Chinese preschool children's social skills were at an intermediate level and parenting stress was at an intermediate to low level, indicating that parenting stress is not yet very high among parents of Chinese preschool children, which is a reassuring finding.
2. Children's social skills differed significantly by mothers' education and not by other demographic variables. Children whose mothers' education level were undergraduate

had better social skills than children whose mothers' education level were college, and children whose mothers had a postgraduate degree had better social skills than children whose mothers had a college degree.

3. Preschool children's social skills were negatively related to parenting stress. The hierarchical multiple analysis revealed that parenting stress could negatively predict children's social skills.

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