

Parenting and the Development of Social Competence in Early Childhood

It is well documented that early childhood (ages 3-8) is an important stage for children's development of social competence.¹ Social competence is generally defined as a child's ability to interact with peers and adults in an effective and appropriate manner.² It includes a child's ability to play well with others, take others' perspectives and manage interpersonal conflicts.

Developing social competence in early childhood is important because it is positively related to academic success and mental health later in life³ and negatively associated with internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors.⁴ Research suggests that parenting during early childhood is associated with the extent to which children develop social competence.⁵ Parenting refers to the interactions that parents and children share that shape the children's development.

Since developing social competence in early childhood is important for later outcomes, and is influenced by parenting, it is valuable to evaluate how parenting specifically impacts this development. This review strives to examine research on the effects of parenting—particularly parental approaches to discipline and connecting with their child—on social competence to determine the parenting strategies that are most beneficial for promoting it. Knowledge of these strategies, in turn, can provide support for interventions aimed at helping parents interact with their children most effectively during early childhood to foster positive outcomes.

The Theoretical Foundation for this Review

The relationship between parenting and the development of social competence in early childhood is supported by various theories including Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which was chosen as the framework for this review to help focus its analyses and discussion (see fig.1).

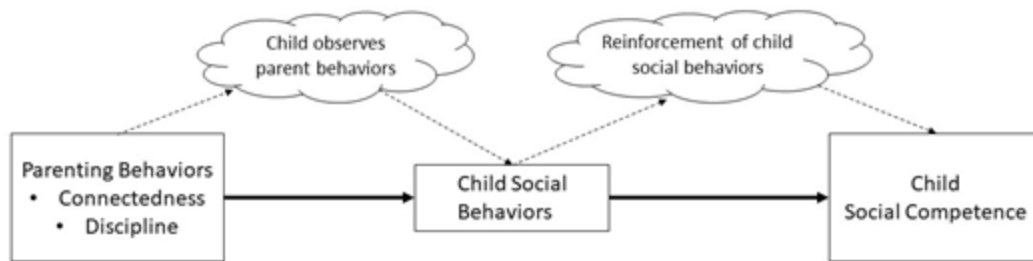


Fig.1. A Social Learning Theory framework for parenting and social competence development.

Social Learning Theory suggests that children learn social skills by observing and modeling the behavior of those around them.⁶ If children see their parents being generous, for example, they, in turn, will be more likely to be generous to peers. Social Learning Theory also suggests that children learn to adjust behavior based on environmental reinforcers. If a parent encourages a child to cooperate with a peer, redirects their negative behavior, or helps them talk through a peer conflict, the child is thought to internalize this feedback and be more likely to act accordingly in the future. Alternatively, Social Learning Theory would suggest that if a parent does not provide this reinforcement or provides feedback in a negative or controlling way, the child would not be motivated to adjust their behavior and as a result, not learn to modify it in a socially appropriate way.⁷ Taking these notions into account, it was hypothesized that this review would demonstrate that connected, consistent, and supportive, yet firm, parenting is positively associated with social competence development during early childhood, and that harsh and rigid parenting is negatively associated with this development.

The Development of Social Competence in Early Childhood

As noted above, early childhood is an important developmental stage for social skills. During this stage, children begin to actively explore their environment and develop a sense of self. As they develop this sense of self, children also begin to experiment with not complying with parental requests as a way to assert independence and test boundaries.⁸ Young children's active, individual exploration and testing of boundaries coincides with increased interaction with peers and teachers as many enter preschool. This interaction provides children with more opportunities to develop socially competent behaviors like showing empathy, working cooperatively, and initiating play with others.⁹

Developing social competence in early childhood has been linked to positive outcomes across multiple domains of functioning. Children who demonstrate socially competent behaviors in early childhood, for example, have been shown to be well-liked by their peers, perform well in school, and have positive emotional adjustment and mental health later in life.¹⁰ Children who lack this social competence, however, often have significantly weaker peer relations and are at a greater risk for problem behaviors throughout childhood and adolescence.¹¹ Since social competence in early childhood benefits later outcomes, research has explored factors that contribute to its development.

Parenting in Early Childhood

One important contributing factor to the development of social competence is parenting. Parenting, as noted above, refers to the interactions that parents share with their children that help shape the children's development. These interactions include those focused on disciplining children and setting rules for their behavior based on social norms, teaching children skills such as socialization, and fostering connectedness (e.g., a strong emotional bond) between parents and

children. Because of the developmental changes occurring in early childhood (discussed above), parenting during this stage often requires different strategies than parenting during infancy.¹² With infants, parents focus mostly on recognizing and attending to their children's basic needs. The degree to which parents are sensitive to their infant's basic needs and respond to them in an appropriate manner impacts the type of attachment formed.¹³ This attachment forms the foundation for the parent-child relationship in early childhood, but this relationship is also influenced by other dynamics. In early childhood, parents must not only attend to their children's basic needs. They must also support their children's growing need for independence, while still connecting with them, setting rules for their behavior, and disciplining them when they do not follow these rules.¹⁴ Recent work also suggests that parenting by mothers and fathers during early childhood may contribute to children's development of social competence in differential ways.¹⁵

Generally, research suggests that the degree to which parents set behavioral rules in a way that fosters children's autonomy, while still encouraging compliance, impacts children's social competence development during this stage.¹⁶ William Roberts and Janet Strayer, for example, found that parents who were observed and reported to be more sensitive to their children's growing needs for autonomy and consistent, yet gentle, with their delivery of these rules had children who demonstrated more prosocial behavior and had more playmates in preschool.¹⁷ Martin Hoffman discussed the benefits of inductive discipline where parents focus on limit setting, logical consequences, and conversations with children about the rationale for disciplinary acts.¹⁸ By including children in this disciplinary process and using reason and compassion to enforce rules and consequences, parents demonstrate a respect for their children's burgeoning sense of self. Showing this respect can help parents gain their children's trust and

support, and ultimately, this helps children internalize the rules and apply them to future situations. This application of parental messages to peer situations contributes to children's development and display of social competence.¹⁹

Children who trust and feel supported by their parents not only tend to listen more to them, but also are more likely to see them as positive role models. Since they see them as positive role models, it is thought that these children value their parents' feedback more and feel more comfortable discussing social challenges with them.²⁰ In these conversations, parents can help children understand their own feelings and gain perspective on the feelings of others. These conversations can assist children in learning to empathize with others, which benefits their social competence.²¹ In the context of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the supportive delivery of this disciplinary reinforcement helps children be motivated to please their parents, adjust their behavior, and develop and demonstrate competent social behavior.²²

Just as the supportive delivery of positive disciplinary reinforcement can help children adjust their behavior, connectedness and warmth between mothers and children can also help children modify their behavior. Rosie Ensor and Claire Hughes found that the level of connectedness (defined by how related the speaker's utterance was to the interlocutor's previous turn) between mothers and their children during daily interactions predicted children's levels of social understanding in preschool.²³ The findings of Ensor and Hughes speak to the importance of reinforcing feedback, as suggested in Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Indeed, children learn to adjust their behavior based on others' feedback. Parents who are "in-tune" with, and emotionally connected to their children can provide appropriate feedback and, as such, help their children adjust behavior, connect with others, and grow socially.²⁴

In contrast to these parents who help support their children's development of social competence, parents who are inconsistent with disciplinary feedback during early childhood, or are overly rigid or harsh in their delivery of it, can interfere with their children's social competence development.²⁵ Rigid and harsh parenting is associated with power assertive discipline and coercion.²⁶ Parents with rigid approaches order their children around rather than including them in decision making or fostering their autonomy, and parents with harsh child rearing styles demonstrate large amounts of negative affect towards their children.²⁷

Such harsh and non-reciprocal parent-child interactions in early childhood have been associated with aggressive, unsociable, and uncooperative peer interactions as reported by children's teachers in preschool.²⁸ The focus on power for parents demonstrating more rigidity and harshness towards their children can prevent children from seeing these parents as positive role models. If these parents are not seen as role models, their children are less likely to respond to parental feedback on their behavior or turn to them for social guidance.²⁹ Moreover, these children's exposure to harsh parental behavior can lead them to model this behavior and act harshly towards others. Children's modeling of harsh behavior reflects the notions put forward in Bandura's Social Learning Theory.³⁰

Increasingly, research on parenting in early childhood is evaluating the role that both fathers and mothers have in children's development of social competence. Understanding the role that fathers play in social development is especially important in countries like the United States where mothers are becoming increasingly more involved in the workplace and fathers are participating more in family life. According to Natasha Cabrera and colleagues, by the late twentieth century, two thirds of married women with young children in the United States were in the workforce and American fathers in two-parent households spent upwards of 87 percent as

much time with their children as their wives did. These numbers continue to increase.³¹ Research on maternal and paternal parenting has found differences in the parenting behaviors of each as well as the influence each has on children's social development. Specifically, mothers report engaging in more caregiving behaviors than fathers, and fathers in more intense play with their children, and these activities influence children's reported behavior in different ways.³²

Supportive, connected maternal caregiving is believed to help children modify their behavior and connect emotionally with others, while connected paternal play with reasonable rules is believed to foster independence and build social confidence.³³ Negative maternal and paternal parenting also contribute uniquely to children's social development. Rigid and controlling maternal caregiving hinders children's ability to modify behavior and connect with others and can lead to behavior problems.³⁴ On the paternal side, negative and hostile paternal play can inhibit confidence development and lead to antisocial tendencies and/or aggression.³⁵

Mothers and fathers not only impact the social development of their children in unique ways, but also influence girls and boys differently. Some research, for example, has shown that the quality of maternal caregiving is more positively associated with the development of prosocial behavior in girls (than boys),³⁶ and that paternal-child mutual negative affect during play is related more to the development of parent- and teacher-reported aggression in boys (than girls).³⁷ Moreover, it seems that parents influence their children both individually and together. Rigid and controlling maternal caregiving along with paternal play lacking in discipline, for example, has been shown to lead to greater parent- and teacher-reported child aggression and less social competence.³⁸ Alternatively, mothers and fathers who both engage in supportive and connected parenting can foster more positive social development for their child. Research by Joshua Jeong and colleagues, for example, suggests the combined benefits of maternal and

paternal positive engagement in caregiving and play activities, respectively, on preschoolers' social development.³⁹

While research differentiating maternal and paternal parenting is expanding more research could help elucidate the underlying mechanisms that create differing effects of maternal and paternal parenting for girls versus boys. This research, in conjunction with the ideas put forward by Bandura's Social Learning Theory, could help further determine if children are more likely to model the behavior and listen to the guidance of one parent over the other in certain situations. Such research could ultimately also provide insight into the impact on boys and girls of single parenting as well as same-gender parenting dyads. Additionally, future research could explore how the parenting of each parent influences the parenting of the other parent in two parent households, and whether the suggested maternal and paternal effects are present in countries where there has not been the influx of women into the workforce in recent years that there has been in the United States.⁴⁰

The Influence of Temperament

In addition to the direct effects of maternal and paternal parenting on the development of social competence in early childhood, there is growing evidence that the parenting strategies that help some children develop social competence might not help other children develop social competence. One main explanation for these differences is temperament.⁴¹ Temperament has a genetic or biological basis and relates to a child's predisposed behavioral and emotional response to the world around them.⁴² Since temperament impacts the way children respond to their environment, children with different temperaments may benefit from different parenting strategies.⁴³ More specifically, for children to model positive behavior from their parents and modify their own behavior in accordance with parental reinforcers, as suggested in Bandura's

Social Learning Theory, the parenting they receive needs to complement their temperament.⁴⁴ In this way, the inclusion of temperament in the discussion of parenting and the development of social competence expands upon the original hypothesis of this review based solely around Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (see fig.2).

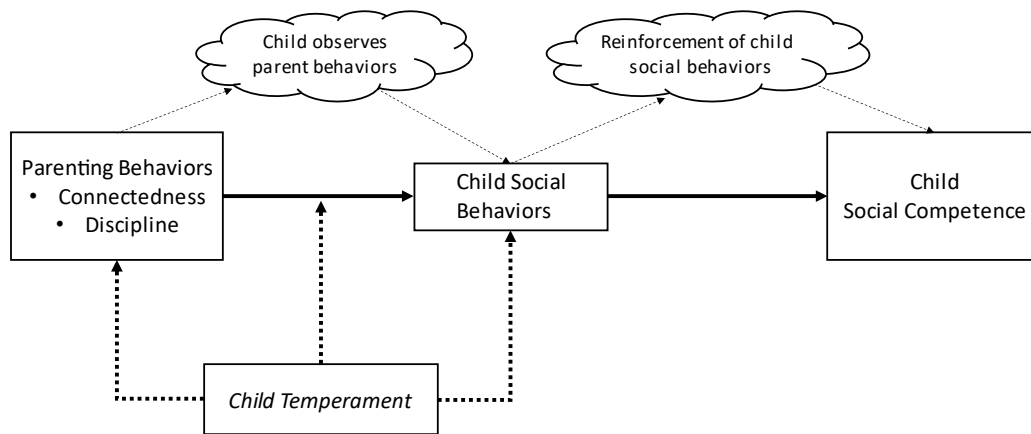


Fig.2. The influence of temperament on the Social Learning Theory framework for parenting and social competence.

Research on temperament has identified children who adapt calmly to changes in their surroundings, can sustain attention, and persist through challenges, as having an “easy” temperament. Separate from these children are those with more inhibited temperaments. These children often express higher levels of wariness and avoidance in new situations, demonstrate anxiety with change, and need extra support in persisting through challenges.⁴⁵ These children with behaviorally inhibited temperaments seem to benefit socially from different parenting strategies than children with “easy” temperaments. Research has shown, for example, that gentle maternal discipline helps inhibited children internalize social norms imparted by their mothers

but does not help less inhibited children with “easy” temperaments do so.⁴⁶ These children with “easy” temperaments are better able to internalize the social feedback when their mothers display high positive affect and are positively responsive to their child when delivering the feedback.⁴⁷

Other research by Kathryn Degnan and colleagues found that gentle maternal discipline as observed in a clean-up scenario hindered the development of observed social competence with an unfamiliar peer in children who demonstrated high levels of avoidance when presented with a novel stimuli in infancy.⁴⁸ It seems that gentle discipline may have kept these children avoidant and inhibited, which influenced their social competence development, and ultimately, put them at greater risk for parent-reported internalizing problems at age five. For those children who demonstrated lower levels of avoidance during infancy, however, gentle maternal discipline helped them develop greater social competence and did not put them at risk for later internalizing problems.⁴⁹

Moreover, additional research has shown that amongst children with behaviorally inhibited temperaments, those with parents who reported supporting their autonomy, but setting few rules on their behavior (i.e., were permissive), had higher levels of internalizing problems at age four than children whose parents reported supporting their autonomy, but setting more rules on their behavior (i.e., were authoritative).⁵⁰ These findings demonstrate how important it is for parents—especially those of children with behaviorally inhibited temperaments—to set rules for their children’s behavior, while still respecting their fear of novelty and growing need for autonomy.⁵¹

In addition to children with “easy” and behaviorally inhibited temperaments, other children have “easily frustrated” temperaments. These children can be impulsive and struggle with emotion regulation. They can also be reactive and irritable, especially during times of

change. Research suggests that these “easily frustrated” children with high levels of reactivity can struggle with parental efforts to achieve compliance through control.⁵² For these highly reactive “easily frustrated” children, controlling parenting does not generally benefit their development of social competence and can contribute to higher levels of parent-reported disruptive behavior. While controlling parenting is not often socially beneficial for “easily frustrated” children with high levels of reactivity, some maternal control has been shown to benefit “easily frustrated” children with lower regulation abilities. It seems likely that maternal control may provide structure to these children with low regulation abilities and that this structure prevents them from acting out, helping them get along better with others.⁵³

Generally, “easily frustrated” children also struggle to internalize the social norms set forth by their parents and apply them to other social situations.⁵⁴ Research suggests that these “easily frustrated” children are better able to internalize the social norms when parents impart them in a way that is consistent and simple, and when parents praise their children for acting in accordance with them.⁵⁵ Moreover, while providing the reasoning behind rules and social norms helps children with “easy” or inhibited temperaments internalize them, doing so is not as beneficial for children with “easily frustrated” temperaments.⁵⁶

In addition to certain parenting strategies benefitting children with specific temperaments, children’s temperaments may also induce certain parenting styles. Children with “easily frustrated” temperaments, for example, tend to elicit more negative and controlling parenting than children with “easy” temperaments. Unfortunately, the negative responses that these “easily frustrated” children receive from their parents provides them with a poor model for social interactions and creates tension that negatively impacts their development of social competence.⁵⁷ Ultimately, understanding which parenting strategies work best for which

children—especially those with “easily frustrated” or inhibited temperaments—is important because it can benefit children’s development, and help prevent” easily frustrated” and inhibited children from developing the externalizing or internalizing problem behaviors that are often associated with these temperament types.⁵⁸

Review of Search Strategies & Article Methodologies

The articles and readings covered in this review were obtained from Marc Bornstein and Michael Lamb,⁵⁹ and Roy Baumeister and Eli Finkel,⁶⁰ a search on PsycINFO using the keywords “parenting AND social competence AND early childhood” of articles with publication dates as recent as 2019, and an evaluation of other articles cited in the articles found in the initial PsycINFO search. These follow-up evaluations identified articles highlighting the applicability of Bandura’s Social Learning Theory to these constructs and the importance of temperament in the relationship between parenting and social competence. They also identified the names of prominent researchers in early childhood social development like Dr. Grazyna Kochanska. Generally, readings that focused on parenting (maternal, paternal, and both) during early childhood and its relation to children’s social competence during this stage were included, as were those that discussed how temperament impacts this relationship. Articles evaluating the effects of parenting at stages other than early childhood were excluded, as were those that evaluated the impact of parenting on children’s social competence after early childhood.

The studies evaluated in this review relied on a mixture of parent-, teacher- and self-report of children’s social competence and temperament, as well as observational measures of these child attributes. The observational measures of child behavior were performed in either the school or lab setting and on either one or multiple days. Parenting strategies were also measured by either parent-report or observation in the home or lab setting (either on one or multiple days).

Finally, the designs of the studies were mixed, with some being cross-sectional⁶¹ and others being longitudinal.⁶² Limitations of these studies' methodologies are discussed below. In addition to documenting the findings of empirical articles, this review also includes information from book chapters, narrative reviews, theoretical articles, and a policy report. These sources helped provide a framework and context for the empirical findings documented in the review.

Discussion

Since parenting is associated with social competence development in early childhood and these developments impact child outcomes, it is important to understand which parenting strategies promote social competence and which do not. This understanding would guide interventions aimed at helping parents promote social competence and foster more positive outcomes for their children. This review evaluated the related research with the hypothesis that connected, consistent, and supportive, yet firm, parenting would benefit children's development of social competence in early childhood and that harsh and rigid parenting would hinder this development. This hypothesis, based on Bandura's social learning theory, was confirmed for both mothers and fathers in the studies that did not account for temperament. Maternal connectedness and supportive discipline during caregiving activities helped children modify behaviors, connect with others, and develop social competence. Similarly, paternal connectedness and supportive discipline during play helped children develop confidence and engage with others more successfully.⁶³ Moreover, there were differential effects of maternal and paternal parenting on boys and girls. Harsh maternal parenting seemed to be more detrimental for girls, while insensitive paternal parenting seemed to be more detrimental for boys. These differential effects and the mechanisms underlying them should be explored more in future research and could provide insight also into the effects of single and same-sex parenting dyads

on boys and girls. Finally, in addition to influencing children's behaviors independently, it seems that mothers and fathers influence one another and together can contribute to their children's development of social competence. Continued research with both mothers and fathers is needed to better understand how each parent influences the other's parenting and how these influences impact child social development.⁶⁴

While the review's hypothesis (noted above) was confirmed for mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior in the studies that did not account for temperament, the hypothesis based around Social Learning Theory was challenged by the studies that did evaluate temperament. More specifically, these studies suggested that different parenting strategies can promote social competence in children with different temperaments. The research demonstrated, for example, that for some children with behaviorally inhibited temperaments, overly supportive parenting can be detrimental to social development,⁶⁵ and that for some children with inhibited or "easily frustrated" temperaments, somewhat more rigid parenting can be beneficial to social development.⁶⁶

Taking these findings into account, the research on temperament suggests that the beneficial and detrimental parenting behaviors proposed in the review's hypothesis may require adjustment for children with different temperaments. These findings stress how important it is for parents to socialize their child in a way that fits their temperament. If children receive parenting that aligns with their temperament, they are more likely to feel supported and valued by their parents, and this can help them model their parents' behavior and internalize their social feedback, as discussed in Bandura's Social Learning theory. Ultimately, by modeling positive parental behavior and internalizing social feedback, these children will develop greater social competence.⁶⁷ Since a child's temperament reflects their internal processes and conceptualization

of the environment, recognizing its value seems to align more with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory instead of Bandura's Social Learning Theory and future research might benefit from exploring the application of this theory instead to the noted relationships.⁶⁸

There are some key limitations to this review and the studies evaluated in this review. First, due to time constraints, only one research database was evaluated which potentially limited the scope of literature assessed. Moreover, within the reviewed studies, child and parent behaviors were observed or deduced at just one time point (e.g., Ferreira and colleagues; Hart and colleagues) Since these observations took place on only one day, it is not certain that the observations reflect typical behavior. Finally, since the designs of some of the studies evaluated were cross-sectional, causal connections between parenting and child behaviors cannot be confirmed. Studies such as those conducted by Degnan and colleagues⁶⁹ with longitudinal designs help inform causality more and should serve as models for future research.

In addition, future research is needed not only to determine further the parenting strategies that benefit children with different temperament types, but also to specify the aspects of these temperament types that require different parenting strategies. As noted above, "easily frustrated" children with high levels of reactivity were generally less receptive to parental control than "easily frustrated" children with low levels of emotion regulation.⁷⁰ Additional research that distinguishes between these subsets of temperamentally reactive children is needed to better determine the parenting strategies that work best for them.

Finally, since parenting and early social development are influenced by cultural factors, it is important that future research utilize a more diverse sample than the studies reviewed in this article as well as samples outside of the United States to assess whether the findings of these studies apply to children from different backgrounds. While some research with diverse sample

has been conducted,⁷¹ more is needed. Research with more diverse samples could also help to better elucidate the role that culture plays in parenting choices (e.g., participation in the workforce) and styles for both mothers and fathers, and how these factors can be acknowledged and accounted for in parenting interventions. It is the authors' intent moving forward to account for these limitations in field research they conduct related to parenting and social competence development in early childhood.

ENDNOTES

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