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Dong Hwa Choi

Park University

ShamAh Md-Yunus

Eastern Illinois University, smdyunus@eiu.edu

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Integration of a social skills training: a case study of children with low social skills

Dong Hwa Choi^a and Sham'ah Md-Yunus^{b*}

^aEarly Childhood Education, School of Education, Park University, Kansas City, MO, 64105, USA; ^bEarly Childhood, Elementary and Middle Education, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL 61920, USA

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This study explores changes in children's social skills after a cognitive-social skills model intervention. The intervention was conducted over a period of 12 weeks within a regular preschool setting. Sixteen children including four considered to have low social skills participated in the study. Data analysis revealed that the four children with low social skills demonstrated changes in social skills through positive play behaviours such as asking positive questions, offering suggestions, initiating play episodes, and sharing play materials, although they had limited ability to maintain play episodes.

Keywords: social skills; young children; case study

Introduction

Social competency during early childhood influences children's academic achievement, emotions, and life adjustment in adulthood (Zimmerman 2008).

Children who have attributed social failure to their own incompetence have been less likely to adapt their behaviours in a way that might improve their chances of gaining peer acceptance. These children may also encounter problems in understanding and communicating with other people when they get older. Social skills training programmes have been used to help children become more socially competent and develop prosocial skills (Corsaro, Ladd, and Oden 2002; McClellan and Katz 2001; Mize 1995; Mize and Ladd 1990). Prosocial skills are defined as 'the behaviours people use to help them get along with others' (Asher and Williams 2009, 1). Some examples of prosocial behaviours are empathy and giving help and comfort to others. Most social skills training programmes have been based on cognitive-social learning model training and children with low social skills who have participated in these programmes have developed better competency in social skills and prosocial behaviours (Broadhead 2003; Smith 2002).

There is a positive relationship between the development of social ability and children's social-cognitive abilities such as the ability to interpret social cues in constructive ways, understand socially approved cognitive strategies, and provide appropriate solutions in social situations (Mize 1995). The term 'cognitive strategies'

*Corresponding author. Email: smdyunus@eiu.edu

in this context refers to how individuals think and learn, and how they perceive and remember their experiences. Children with low social skills usually have inappropriate social behaviours which are related to deficiencies in social cognition or information processing (Corsaro, Ladd, and Oden 2002). Specifically, three types of deficiencies have been identified and labelled as skill deficits in children with low peer acceptance (Corsaro, Ladd, and Oden 2002; Hartup 1992). First, children may lack knowledge or concepts typical of their peer group such as asking the right questions or asking permission to play together. Second, these children may lack actual abilities to apply socially appropriate behaviours with their peers, perhaps as a result of insufficient practice of the skills. Third, children may be deficient in giving themselves feedback about their own interpersonal encounters, specifically lacking the abilities to monitor and evaluate their own behaviour and its effects on others (Corsaro, Ladd, and Oden 2002).

Cognitive-social skills model

A cognitive-social skills model is defined as 'a social-skill training methodology formulated on a cognitive social learning explanation of skill acquisition and behavior change' (Ladd and Mize 1983, 127). This model is based on the intuitive or 'known' principles of learning and behaviour change (Bandura 1972, 1977, 1978, 1981, 1982; Piaget 1932) applied to children who fail to exhibit appropriate social behaviour because they lack the skills necessary to do so. Children form a concept of cognitive representation of behaviours from informative experiences such as observing a model or hearing verbal instructions (McClellan and Katz 2001).

In implementing a cognitive-social skills model, previous studies have utilised three basic training objectives: (1) enhancing skill concepts; (2) promoting skilful performance; and (3) fostering skill maintenance and generalisations (Hartup 1992; Ladd and Mize 1983; Mize 1995). These studies reported that the training objectives had helped children to develop prosocial behaviours by teaching social skills strategies.

Research findings indicate that preschool children showed significant cognitive and behavioural changes after they participated in the cognitive-social learning model of skills training (Kinsey 2001; Mize and Ladd 1990; Zimmerman 2008). Helping children to develop prosocial behaviours by teaching cognitive social strategies using the cognitive-social learning model is considered an effective way to help children enhance their social behaviours because it focuses on behavioural change (Choi and Kim 2003; Choi, Kim, and Hyatt 2004; Ladd and Mize 1983; Mize 1995).

However, in previous research (i.e. Mize and Ladd 1990), children's cognitive changes were assessed by a survey questionnaire method in which participants were asked to describe how they would react in a certain social situation. Children's responses about dramatised social situations can reflect ideal social responses to the situation rather than reflecting actual social behaviours that the child may show in a real-life situation. In addition, children's behavioural changes were assessed by comparing pre-test and post-test scores. Due to the attribution of these methods, it is difficult to understand the processes or dynamics of cognitive and behavioural changes of the participants in the social skills training since no qualitative data were obtained.

In addition to the limitations of using quantitative methods in the previous studies of a cognitive-social learning model of social skills training (Choi, Kim, and

Hyatt 2004; Mize and Ladd 1990), the training sessions were not administered in a real-life setting such as a classroom but in a designated pull-out setting. In the pull-out setting, the participants were put in a controlled environment. Because the artificial training setting may not maximise children's abilities to implement the social skills learned, practicing the social behaviours in a real-life setting is essential to increase children's ability to use the social skills they have learned. In previous studies a major barrier to behaviour change was that newly acquired behaviours did not naturally transfer to other settings such as from clinical settings to mainstream classrooms (Choi, Kim, and Hyatt 2004; Corsaro, Ladd, and Oden 2002; McClellan and Katz 2001). Therefore, implementing a social skills training programme in a classroom setting can be critical to increasing children's ability to generalise their social skills learning.

In the present study, a social skills training programme was implemented based on the cognitive-social learning model in a preschool classroom as a part of the classroom routine and observed children's behavioural changes. A social skill in the present study was defined as 'the children's ability to organise behaviors into an integrated course of action directed toward culturally acceptable social or interpersonal goals' (Ladd and Mize 1983, 127). The goal of the project was to investigate the processes and dynamics of children's behavioural changes when the social skill training was implemented in a real-life situation.

Target social skills

Five social skills were selected as target social skills in this training because they are regarded as discrete social skills used by preschool-age children and recommended to be taught to students in order to promote prosocial behaviours (Choi and Kim 2003; Mize 1995). For the purpose of present study, the target social skills were defined as follows:

- *Comments*: Making positive or neutral statements of objects or ongoing events or comments about objects or events which are not present, for example: 'This is my house'.
- *Suggestions*: Verbally attempting to influence the behaviour of a peer in a positive or neutral way, for example: 'We can play with blocks'.
- *Questions*: Expressing a question in a positive or neutral tone, for example: 'Can I play with you?'
- *Supports*: Reinforcing, consoling, or complimentary expressions, for example: 'I'll help you'.
- *Nonverbal behaviours*: Making eye contact, listening to others, or following another's lead.

Method

A cognitive-social skills intervention was implemented to increase the social skills of the children over 12 weeks. The first and last two weeks were periods of pre- and post-interventions. The study employed a quasi-experimental design based upon the previous research of Mize and Ladd (1990) to determine the effect of a social skills intervention on preschool children. The researchers observed all the children with focus on the four targeted children. The observations were done five times a week for

40–45 minutes during centre time throughout the project period. Researchers' notes, videotaped sessions of the children, and the teacher participant's anecdotal accounts and interviews were utilised in data collection and used to triangulate the data for the validity purposes.

The preschool class and the teacher

A preschool class in a small city in the Midwest United States participated in the project. The class is composed of children from low income families, children diagnosed with special needs, and children of ethnic minorities and mixed race. The classroom has several learning centres including blocks, housekeeping, art, manipulative play, and puzzles. A typical day starts at noon with the arrival of children. They have free choice to play at centres until 12:15 pm, when they have circle time in which they learn about the calendar and weather, and sing songs. From 12:30 pm to 12:50 pm, the children go outside to play. After the children come back to the classroom, they have group time. During group time, the teacher reads books and leads activities related to language arts. After that the children have free play until 2:10 pm, followed by a snack which is served around 2:15 pm. The children go home at about 2:45 pm. The classroom teacher held an undergraduate degree in early childhood education and had been teaching at the centre for eight years at the time of this study.

Participants

Participants were purposely selected after the researchers were informed by the director of the centre that the teacher was concerned about some children having difficulty playing with other children. Participants were 16 children between the ages of 4 and 5 years old with a mean age of 4.7 years old. Seven of the children were boys and nine were girls. All the children in the preschool class participated in the social skills training intervention for the project period. However, in order to investigate children's cognitive and behavioural changes processes throughout the project, four children who had demonstrated deficient social behaviours with peers were the focus of the study. The children were identified based on the play social and then associated with those with no response or aggressive behaviours by the classroom teacher. The four children were three girls and one boy: Anna, Ally, Cathy, and Kevin. Anna and Cathy appeared to have limited interaction with other children and liked to play by themselves. Kevin and Ally had trouble cooperating and compromising with other children. Ally was also considered too directive to other children. For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms names were used to indicate each child in this study. Participants were volunteers and the centre had parental permission on file for the children to participate in the study including taking pictures, videos, and personal records.

The intervention

A total of five sessions of social skills training were administered by the classroom teacher on a weekly basis for eight weeks under the supervision of the researchers. Each training session focused on helping children to initiate and maintain positive play episodes using five social skills: comments, suggestions, asking questions,

supports, and nonverbal social skills. Each training session consisted of three components, and each component was imbedded into the daily classroom schedule. All the children in the preschool class participated in the social skills training intervention for the project period but the four mentioned above were observed specifically.

Component 1: learning the concept of social skills using books and puppets during group time

The first component was administered during whole class time for approximately 10–12 minutes to introduce and teach the concepts of the target social skills using children's books. The classroom teacher read a book whose story described certain ways to initiate and maintain positive play episode with peers. The books used in the project were:

- Session I: Mayer, M. 1985. *Just you and my friend*. Racine, WI: Western Publishing Company.
- Session II: Bridwell, N. 1985. *Clifford's pal*. New York: Scholastic.
- Session III: Flagny, D. 1982. *Flip flop*. New York: Scholastic.
- Session IV: Beumont, K. 2002. *Being friends*. New York: Penguin Putnam.
- Session V: Gantos, J. 1976. *Rotten Ralph*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

After reading the book, the classroom teacher dramatised a simple story to facilitate children's use of the five target social skills to initiate and maintain a positive play episode using puppets. Enacting with puppets is recommended for preschool children to express their ideas and feelings because they produce more and a greater variety of responses to personal and fantasy materials (Getz, Goldman, and Corsini 2004; Nelson 2000). A total of 12 hand puppets were used throughout the study. All stories consisted of scripts or a series of events occurring in certain situations such as a child in a conflict situation caused by the child's inappropriate social behaviours, a way to solve the conflict, and the consequences of its resolution. The stories were made up by the classroom teacher and the researchers based on common social situations that may occur in any preschool classroom. For example, in one story a boy who got a bicycle for Christmas let his friend ride it because the boy's parents could not afford to buy a bicycle for him. This story is supposed to teach about empathy and being nice to other children. Puppets were used to act out the story to show the children how to express empathy.

Component 2: practicing the learned social skills after the puppet show

The objective of this component is for the children to rehearse the target social skills after the puppet show is finished. This session was conducted in the whole group for approximately 15–20 minutes. The classroom teacher asked the children questions in relation to how to behave in a socially appropriate way in a particular situation using the puppets and asked the children to respond to her questions. These puppets represented some of the characters in the stories from the books. In this component, each session focuses on helping children perform the social skills corresponding to the skill concept developed in component 1.

Component 3: applying the learned social skills in free play time

The third component is designed to provide feedback to the children about their social skills performance in a real-life play situation. After training components 1 and 2 were finished, the classroom teacher encouraged children to play with the puppets used in the social skills training during free play time in a small group. Puppets were placed in the corner of the classroom so the children could easily access them and rehearse their social skills at anytime. While the children were playing with the puppets or interacting with others, the classroom teacher provided comments and suggested prosocial ideas to promote their positive social behaviours, focusing in particular on the four children with low social skills.

Data collection and analysis

Four sources of data were used to investigate children's social cognition changes as well as social behaviour changes. The sources of data are as follows:

- (1) The transcriptions of video recordings of all the children especially focused on the four target children's social behaviours for the project period of 12 weeks including two weeks of pre-training; eight weeks of training, and two weeks of the post-training. The children were videotaped for approximately 40–45 minutes each, five times a week during free playtime. The video camera was set up in a hidden location to observe the children's behaviours in a naturalistic environment.
- (2) The researchers' anecdotal accounts of the four target children's social behaviours during free play, outdoor play, snack, and transition time. Between 32 and 35 accounts were documented for a total of 1400–1575 minutes. At the conclusion of the study, these were coded and common themes were identified.
- (3) The classroom teacher's anecdotal accounts of the four target children's social behaviours during free play, outdoor play, snack, and transition time. These were obtained through a daily journal.
- (4) The classroom teacher's interview data regarding her perceptions of social behaviour changes of the target children and the impact of integration of social skills training into a daily classroom schedule. The following questions were posed to the teacher as open-ended questions:

Based on your observations and field notes,

- *What changes have you observed in the target children's social behaviours after the implementation of the social skills training?*
- *What do you think of integrating of social skills training into daily activities?*

The teacher's observational and interview data were used to triangulate the researchers' analysis of the children's social behaviour changes and the effects of the training programme.

Data from observations, transcriptions, interviews, and anecdotes were analysed using an open, inductive, axial, selective coding system (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and data reduction (Miles and Huberman 1994). The data analysis focused on

emerging patterns, categorising the children's social behaviours, and investigating the research questions used to investigate the processes and dynamic of children's behavioural changes when the social skills training was implemented. First, the four target children's verbal expressions such as conversations with others or monologues during the pre-training, training, and post-training periods were analysed. Second, the data were analysed to examine the children's cognitive and social behavioural changes in each period.

Results

Overall, there was a positive effect of the social skills training on children with low social skills. The targeted children demonstrated changes in social skills through positive play behaviours such as asking positive questions, offering suggestions, initiating play episodes, and sharing play materials which appeared to be the most frequent themes in the analysis, but they had limited ability to maintain play episodes. Below are detailed examples of behaviour changes of each target child before and after the training.

Anna

During the pre-training period, Anna was observed playing alone at the house-keeping centre for most of free play time. She usually put on the same dress and shoes then wandered around the room. Anna showed a limited form of socio-dramatic play behaviour even though she was engaging in socio-dramatic play areas with other children. Sometimes Anna wandered around the classroom to watch other children play and physically stayed with them without any form of interaction. For example, Anna did not make eye contact with peers even when they talked with her. Verbal interaction with others was not observed at all by the teacher or the researchers before the training. In addition, she had not shown any assertive comments or expressions even when other children demonstrated aggressive behaviours such as grabbing or snatching her toys.

During the social skills training, Anna started to explore other learning centres such as the block corner, water table, and manipulative play materials that she had not played with before. Observational data indicated that Anna was engaged in parallel play at these centres.

Episode 1. Anna is playing side by side with other children at the water table.

Child A: (to Anna) 'I don't think I can play, right?'

Anna: (shaking her head side to side and frowning).

Anna's communication method with others was still nonverbal. Child A's way of initiating play with Anna is interesting. An interesting finding was observed in the way of initiating play from child A to Anna during the training period. Child A said, 'I don't think I can play, right?' It seemed that Anna's classmate had the perception that she is not a player or does not want to play with others. The image of Anna created by her classmates may work as an obstacle to block social interaction among Anna and her classmates.

By the end of the social skills training period, Anna occasionally started to initiate verbal interaction with others by getting their attention. For example, when

she played at the housekeeping centre, Anna showed her hat to other children and said, 'Look at my hat'. She also started to initiate play by asking questions, showed more frequent responses to others' comments or questions, and even clearly expressed her own ideas.

The classroom teacher said about Anna, 'She was a quiet child who rarely initiated play with other children, although she would join in play that was already in progress'. After the training, she was more likely to approach another child and ask 'Can I play with you?' or offer 'Do you want to play with me?' However, Anna's interaction with others did not last long enough to maintain a play episode after the training.

Episode 2. Steven and Anna were in the housekeeping centre and Steven initiated a conversation with her.

Steven: 'You want sticker?'

Anna: 'Yes' (paused, then after a while) 'I changed my mind, I don't want the sticker'.

Steven: (Looked confused, waiting an answer from Anna).

It was observed that Anna's interaction with others was inhibited by behaviours such as a refusal to an offer or no response to children's questions. It seems that Anna has not yet developed the ability to maintain a play episode by making positive comments or suggestions. Due to her lack of ability to maintain play episodes, there was limited social interaction observed in Anna's play episode.

Throughout the intervention period, it was observed that Anna made progress in her play interests. She showed intention to initiate play through verbal interactions. However, Anna's verbal interaction is limited to self-centred behaviour such as getting attention from others or by not showing any response to others. For example, in episode 2, Anna's interaction with Steven seemed to be disconnected by her refusal of Steven's offer. Even though it was observed Anna's verbal interaction increased after the training, her ability to maintain a positive play episode was restricted by her lack of reciprocal interaction skills with others.

Ally

During pre-training, Ally was observed at the block centre, building towers and making bridges to move her cars around. She spent quiet time there and sometimes talked to other children around her even though she did not get responses from them.

Episode 3. Ally, Kevin, Anna, and Steven were at the block centre where there was a big cardboard box, several miniature cars, and some wooden blocks. They were playing with those materials side by side. Observational data indicated that there were limited interactions involved in the play activities. Ally's play behaviours were rather assertive and dominant; these behaviours did not seem to work well to create positive verbal interaction with other children.

Ally: (Talking to Kevin, who was playing by himself) 'If there is a thing back, hmm?'

Kevin: (did not respond to Ally, continued building his tower).

Ally: (Ally posed another question to Kevin) 'I bet you can do, at least'.

Ally: (Ally paused for a while and then indicated to Kevin that there is a something behind him) 'There's a thing up here' (Talking to herself) 'Too much stuff in here, hmmm'.

Kevin: (looked at Ally but did not respond to her comments).
 Ally: (to Anna) 'Get that thing out of here'.
 Anna: (looked at Ally but did not respond to her demand).
 Ally: (to Anna) 'You can't get out there, there's a wall'.

The classroom teacher said about Ally: 'She was very directive, setting up the play situation and telling the others what their role would be'.

Episode 4. All the subjects were playing in the block corner.

Ally: (Yelling at Kevin, who was pretending to eat a piece of pizza) 'Don't eat yet!'
 Kevin: 'I want the food'.
 Ally: (Yelling) 'Not yet!' (Kevin pretended to eat a piece of pizza again) 'Stop it, Kevin!'

Episode 5. At the block centre, Ally and Anna were making buildings and roads using wooden blocks. They were rolling toy cars around the buildings.

Anna: 'I think the ...' (moving a block from one place to another).
 Ally: (Yelling) 'But not here!' (Anna stopped moving the block to the place that she planned to move it and put it in another place) 'Yes!' (showed agreement to Ally's instruction).
 Anna: 'Okey dokey'.
 Ally: (providing a confirmation to Anna) 'Yes'.

In this episode, Ally's behaviour was different than before the training. She shared materials with others more often even though she still frequently gave instructions and directions to other children.

The teacher said about Ally after the training. 'She seemed to really connect with the training session on compromise and sharing. She was less "in control" and more open to the ideas of others after the training'.

Episode 6. Ally and Anna were playing in a housekeeping centre.

Ally: (Yelling at Anna) 'Don't eat the food yet. Sit down!'
 Anna: (becomes quiet and sits down).
 Ally: (gives one of her kitchen props to Anna).
 Anna: (takes the prop but has no verbal interactions).
 Ally: (gives more kitchen props to Anna. No verbal interactions).

Throughout the training period, Ally's social interactions with others were more likely to be comments, questions, and suggestions as she frequently initiated social interaction. An interesting observation was that Ally maintained a positive play episode with Anna relatively longer than with others because Anna complied with Ally's suggestions or comments in play situations. Furthermore, Ally's taking the lead in play situations seemed to facilitate Anna's verbal interactions with her. However, Ally usually could not maintain longer play episodes with other peers who refused to follow her play behavioural styles.

Sharing behaviours were observed in Ally more frequently after the training. She often shared materials with others rather than giving suggestions and comments. Ally's sharing behaviours can be interpreted as an improvement of her social skills, but her sharing behaviours showed a tendency to be self-centred. For example, in episode 6, Ally gave kitchen props to Anna while Anna was engaging in other play not related to kitchen props. In this case, her sharing may interfere with Anna's play.

It seemed that Ally could not consider others' needs in a play situation. It is more likely that she wanted to maintain 'her' play episode by 'giving' things to others.

Cathy

Cathy is a five-year-old girl. According to the teacher she was diagnosed with mild Down's syndrome. During pre-training, she was observed playing alone at the sand or water table. She was also sometimes observed unoccupied wandering around and watching as other children played.

The teacher said about Cathy:

Cathy was quiet, but enjoyed trying most activities and watching other children play. She was quite content to play alone, but did enjoy the company of the other children. We knew that she could be very verbal and animated as witnessed in the home when I visited with her and her family.

During the pre-training period, Cathy was observed interacting with others but showed limited behavioural interactions with other children. She rarely responded to others when they talked with her and most of her interactions with others could be defined as nonverbal behaviour (Mize 1995). For example, Cathy gave props to a peer without using any words. Cathy also showed a tendency to imitate what other children were doing in a play situation. For example, Cathy observed other children using a certain colour for their paintings on an easel and then she imitated the behaviours. On other occasions, Cathy was observed watching other children bathing dolls at the water table, and then a few minutes later she started to do the same thing with the same dolls.

During the training period, Cathy started to make eye contact and respond to others' comments or questions which had not been observed before the training.

Episode 7. Cathy, Kevin, and two other children were playing in the housekeeping centre.

Kevin: (Pointing at a baby doll) 'Let me have it'.

Cathy: (Handing the doll to Kevin) 'Here is your baby!' (Looking at Kevin) 'Here is the baby!'

(Then she put a hat on another child's head and gave a silk flower to the child.)

Cathy: 'Wear this. Here is a flower for your hat'.

In most cases, Cathy's verbal interactions consisted of comments about the play situation but no suggestions or questions. However, Cathy started to make eye contact with classmates during the training period. This was a noticeable improvement in her play behaviours although verbal interaction remains a difficult task for Cathy even after the training. The teacher said about Cathy, 'She was enthralled by the puppet shows during the training. She seemed to be taking in every bit of information during the shows and the discussion following them'.

Kevin

Kevin is a five-year-old boy. During the pre-training period, it was observed that Kevin walked from one centre to another, sometimes stopping and playing for a short time

but other times just watching other children play and not engaging in a particular form of play activity. His social behaviours were usually nonverbal and more action-oriented. For example, he entered into a play group by playing with other children's toys without asking permission. Sometimes he grabbed or snatched other children's toys and ran away. As a consequence of those inattentive or aggressive behaviours, arguments or physical fighting with children occurred in many cases.

The teacher said about Kevin:

Kevin was an interesting boy. He enjoyed playing with others, but often had disagreements with others due to his lack of skills in communicating and sharing. He would take toys from others or insist on being first and not really see that this caused problems. He tended to blame others for problems that arose during play.

During and after the training, Kevin started to initiate verbal interaction with others more often. He asked permission to play with others and showed fewer aggressive behaviours. He was more engaged in socio-dramatic play with others even though he occasionally showed verbal behaviours which were considered as an out-of-play context.

Episode 8. Kevin and Anna were playing in the house keeping corner.

Kevin: (Giving a prop to Anna) 'This is for you'.

Anna: 'Let me have it'.

Kevin: (Picking up another toy and talking with Anna) 'I am going to watch it' (To himself) 'This is hurt'.

Kevin and Anna are at the housekeeping centre in another play episode, pretending to be a mom and dad.

Kevin: (To a doll) 'Come on baby'.

Anna: 'I want my baby'.

Kevin: 'The baby is crying. Hey, you feed the baby. This is a cookie monster'.

The classroom teacher indicated that Kevin actively participated in the training programme and tried to understand and then transfer the social behaviours he learned in the play situation.

The teacher said about Kevin:

He focused well during the puppet shows and was eager to answer questions that I posed during and after the show. With prompts, he implemented the skills that he learned from the puppets during play time with the other children. He seemed proud of himself when he asked for a turn or invited another child to play with him.

Findings

The aim of this study was to investigate the processes and dynamics of children's behavioural changes when the social skills training was implemented in real-life situations. The researchers concluded that there were four major findings in the present study:

- Finding 1: The target children demonstrated initiative to play with other children.
- Finding 2: The target children appeared to have limited ability to maintain play episodes.

- Finding 3: The target children were better able to verbalise their ideas and feelings during play times.
- Finding 4: The classroom teacher expressed the opinion that the social skills model is suitable and appropriate for children in her classroom. She saw improvement in positive behaviours in the target children.

Finding 1

All the target children frequently initiated a play episode after they participated in the training. An interesting observation was that the target children initiated play with children who did not have an established playgroup. In this class, several children who have good social skills have their own playgroup members with whom they have established cohesive play dynamics and play together most of the time during free play. These children showed a tendency to keep the play relationship within the group members; other children were rejected when they tried to join the group. Non-playgroup members such as the target children were not seen to try to join the existing play groups. However, the target children tried to initiate play with children who do not belong to existing play groups.

Finding 2

After the target children initiated play, they demonstrated a relatively limited ability to maintain play episodes due to limited social skills. The target children's major

Target children	Target children's social skills before the intervention	Target children's social skills after the intervention
Anna	Appears to enjoy playing by herself or on parallel play. No interaction with other children while playing. No eye contact with other children.	Joined other children at play and asked questions. Made eye contact when asking and responding to other children's questions.
Ally	Attempts to talk with other children during play, but wasn't successful in getting their responses due to her assertive and aggressive behaviours. Displays dominant behaviours, negative verbal interactions, directive, and demanding the others what to do and their roles in play.	Showed positive behaviours such as inviting other children to play together. Offered help to other children. Invited other children to play with her. However, maintaining a longer play episode is still a challenge for her.
Cathy	Likes to play alone sometimes in parallel play. Watches other children play. No verbal interaction. Imitates what other children are playing with.	Involved in group play. Made eye contact with other children when asking questions or making comments.
Kevin	Walks around the centres, but sometimes stops at a centre, plays for a while then leaves to join another centre. Watches other children play. Displays action-orientated interactions such as grabbing other children's play materials, physical fights, and verbal arguments.	Asked permission to play. Asked for a turn to play. Invited other children to play with him.

Figure 1. Target children's social skills before and after the intervention.

social skill for verbal interactions consisted of exchanging comments or statements about objects or ongoing events such as in episode 4, when Ally commented on Kevin's behaviours that she didn't like. According to previous research, preschool children learn more easily by providing comments or suggestions than by asking questions or expressing support because the latter two social skills required more decentralisation of self-centred behaviours (Mize and Ladd 1990). Maintaining positive play episodes with others requires children's ability to provide comments and suggestions, ask questions, or express constant support to keep play dynamics active. The target children had a difficult time maintaining positive play episodes due to their lack of competence in social skills.

Finding 3

Improved verbalisation of their ideas or feelings was a common progress shown among the four children after the training. However, increased verbal interactions do not mean that the children showed socially appropriate or positive behaviours in play situations. For example, Cathy and Kevin showed more verbal responses to others' comments or questions, but the verbal responses made a limited contribution to maintaining positive play episodes because they were somewhat inappropriate in the particular context of play.

Finding 4

The classroom teacher perceived the social skill training programme was a good technique to help children with low social skills. She observed the target children showing changes in their social behaviours and becoming actively involved and interacting with other children in more appropriate ways.

The classroom teacher was interviewed by the researchers to gain her perceptions about implementing social skills training in her classroom. The first question asked her to evaluate the impact of the training on children's behaviours. Her response was,

Yes, the training was beneficial to all of the children (i.e. not just children who showed non-prosocial behaviours). The rest of the children in the class already had very good social skills, but I feel that the training enhanced their skills and made them more aware of themselves and how they interacted with others. I would like to do some form of this in my classroom every year. There were no difficulties in implementing the training.

The second question asked the teacher to evaluate the effects of integrating the social skills training into a daily classroom schedule. The teacher's response was, 'The classroom is the children's natural setting. They are comfortable with the teacher and the classroom. The children have an opportunity to implement what they have just seen and heard immediately following the "training" session'.

Overall, the classroom teacher recognised benefits of the social skills training for children who showed a lack of social skills as well as for those who demonstrated skilful social behaviours. She also found that implementing the social skills training in the daily classroom schedules can maximise the training effectiveness and facilitate transferring social skills to a natural play situation immediately.

The researcher and the teacher specifically noted that the rest of the children who were not the targeted participants also benefited from the training. Many of them

were observed playing together and interacting in a positive way with the targeted children. As Kevin and Ally changed their play behaviours into more positive interactions, other children were more comfortable playing with them. Although the targeted children had limited ability to maintain play episodes, they were better able to participate in the group activities because the other children were more willing to share play materials, interacted with and responded positively to the targeted children.

Recommendations to early childhood teachers

Based on the research findings, there are several recommendations for classroom teachers to help children who lack competence in social skills.

A teacher should understand the training purpose, format, and ways of implementing social skills training. By understanding the training model and social behaviour patterns of each child, the social skills training can be carefully planned and administered so that its effect can be maximised. This can help the children with social skill problems interact better with other children.

To maximise generalisation of social behaviours learned, social skills training is recommended to be embedded in the daily schedule by the classroom teacher. When children participate in the training in a familiar situation such as a classroom setting, they are more likely to transfer the social behaviours they have learned to their play with others. For teachers, choosing a beginning point is often the most difficult step in a new programme. To decide which social skills to target for training, a teacher can use a list of social behaviours that are recommended for preschool children to learn, such as the five targeted behaviours in this study. At the same time, each child's social behaviours show unique tendencies, so the classroom teacher can also target particular social skills to be addressed for each child. The observational record (i.e. notes made about students during class) is a critical aid in understanding children's social behaviour changes or patterns and planning for appropriate and specific social skills training. Because the teacher observes behaviour in a classroom setting, he or she can understand each child's behavioural tendencies as well as the causes of the behaviours in a certain social situation. Based on this understanding, the teacher can provide individualised feedback to each child when the teacher is interacting with others.

The use of manipulatives in social skills training for young learners has been well researched (e.g. Kinsey 2000; Mize and Ladd 1990; Zimmerman 2008). These findings specifically support the use of puppets to dramatise a brief episode of the social interaction skills. Puppets can be used to dramatise a brief story that has the following components: a series of events occurring in certain situations such as a child's inappropriate social behaviours, a conflict situation caused by the child's inappropriate social behaviours, a way to solve the conflict, and the consequences of its resolution. A teacher can create stories for puppet shows based on common social situations that may occur in preschool classrooms.

Coaching for behavioural changes can be provided in a naturalistic setting such as free playtime by reminding children about the story used during the training. For example, a teacher can ask a child who is showing an aggressive behaviour, 'Do you remember the story we read this morning? In the story, what happened when somebody hit a friend?' Children can apply or transfer the skills from the story to be used in the play situation.

Share the observational data about children and knowledge about the social skills training with parents. Let the parents know that their child is learning new social skills to improve his or her ability to interact. This will help the children to practice the skills at home as well. In addition, collect information about each child's social behaviours at home from the parents. This can be an indicator of the transfer of social skills learned in a classroom to a more generalised situation. Some children may act differently at home than at school. For example, Anna is very quiet and likes to play by herself at school, but when the teacher visited her at home she was seen to be very talkative.

To sustain the targeted children's positive play behaviours, it is recommended that teachers continue to scaffold children's play by providing more supports to the targeted children. In this study, the researchers observed that the teacher let the children play without any further intervention after initially reading the book and presenting the puppet show. Encouraging the children to look at the books and use the puppets again would reinforce the social skills training. The teacher could also create centres that encourage children to interact through collaborative rather than parallel play such as thematic dramatic play centres (grocery stores, restaurants, etc.) which encourage children to use language in constructive ways.

Educational importance of the study

The findings of the present study are useful to guide early childhood practitioners in understanding children's interactions in the classroom learning environment. Cognitive-social skills training can be used as an intervention technique to both prevent and solve the behavioural problems and to better manage classroom environments by creating opportunities for spontaneous child-initiated social play. However, children's behaviours are not consistent and they do not display the same behaviours in every situation, therefore, this training method should be used cautiously. Because the present study is using a formal training, results of the study cannot be assumed to be transferable to other settings.

However, it is important to keep in mind that children vary in social behaviour for a variety of reasons. What is appropriate or effective social behaviour in one culture may not be in another (Lee et al. 2008). Children from different home backgrounds may act differently at home than at school. Due to these differences, some children are simply shyer and quieter or more inhibited than others. Many children may need help with their differences and in finding ways to learn from and enjoy the company of one another.

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