

The Predictive Power of Preschool Children's Social Behaviors on Their Play Skills

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Received: July 23, 2017

Accepted: August 15, 2017

Online Published: August 17, 2017

doi:10.11114/jets.v5i9.2601

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v5i9.2601>

Abstract

The aim of this research study is to investigate children's play skills in terms of social behaviours (physical aggression, relational aggression, positive social behaviors, and depressive feelings). The participants in this study consisted of 300 children between 60 and 72 months studying at preschool education institutions. The research data were collected via the "Preschool Social Behaviour Scale-Instructor Form" and the "Play Skills Assessment Scale". Pearson's correlation analysis and simple linear regression analysis were performed to evaluate the data. The results of the research study indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between children's positive social behaviours and play skills while there is a significant negative relationship between children's play skills and the subscales of physical aggression, relational aggression, and depressive feelings. Besides, the results indicate that children's social behaviours (physical aggression, relational aggression, positive social behaviors and depressive feelings) are predictive of play skills. It can be concluded that 16.8% of total variance is explained by the subscales "positive social behaviors", 9.6% is explained by "relational aggression", 2.4% is explained "physical aggression" and 1.2% is explained by "depressive feelings".

Keywords: preschool, social behavior, play skills

1. Introduction

Human beings interact with their environment from birth to death. This interaction is a must requirement by life circumstances. Each individual has to interact with their environment. Individuals who live together in a society have to build correct relationships in order to maintain a sound life. These relationships are also crucial for ensuring the unity, peace and continuance of a society. Social skills underlie healthy relationships between individuals (Samanci & Ucan, 2017).

Gresham defined social skills in three ways, based on peer acceptance, behavioral perspective, and social validity (Gresham, 1997). Peer acceptance refers to individuals' friendship relationships and it is observed that individuals who receive acceptance from their peers have sufficient social skills (Sucuoglu & Cifci, 2001). According to the definition in terms of behavioral perspective, social skills are learned behaviors that enable an individual to get positive results and hinder him/her from getting negative reactions (Ergenekon, 2012). In a definition based on social validity, social skills are referred as behaviors that enable an individual to get positive results in different areas such as academic skills and social relationships (Sucuoglu & Cifci, 2004).

When the literature regarding social skills is reviewed, social behaviors have been associated with several variables (Curran, Wallander & Farrell, 1985; Bacanli, 1999). Mize & Abell (2006) reported that socially sufficient children develop more sophisticated skills, act more positively, have more positive relationships with their parents, avoid criticism, and are less controlling towards other children. Peer relationships play an essential role in social skills. Children acquire or consolidate their social skills by means of peer relationships. It has been reported by a study by Mize & Abell (2006) that socially sufficient children have fewer difficulties in their relationships with peers (Gresham & Reschly, 1987; Hartup, 1996; Slaski & Cartwright, 2002; Thompson, 2006; Verschueren, Buyck & Marcoen, 2001).

The education settings and methods provided especially in early childhood present a variety of models to modify and amend behaviour issues in children and create social interaction opportunities for children and enable them to develop environment-friendly behaviors (Kargi & Erkan, 2004). One of these methods is play.

Even though play exists in every moment of life, it is the best way for children especially in the early years of life to discover the world they live in, express the emotions like happiness, anxiety and joy, and express themselves to the people around them. Children learn to discover the environment, imitate the models surrounding them and develop their already existing skills through play (Rae & Cohen, 1987).

Play contributes to a child's development and education, helps their mental development and physical growth, enables them to conform to society rules, exchange help with other people and show them respect. Besides, it helps the child protect both his/her own rights and his/her friends' rights and learn the ways of not hurting his/her friends. Play is a sum of activities that make it possible for a child to integrate with people with different personality characteristics and discover the life with a different learning method (Gunes, 2011; Kocyigit, Tugluk & Kok, 2007). The reason for the emphasis on social-emotional development in the research conducted in the literature regarding play is shaping children's social life, which is one of the major needs of children, through play. The child starts to learn the roles in life, keep up with his/her playmates, know them better and have stronger relationships through play (Lowenthal, 1997; Poyraz, 2011; Girmen, 2012).

When the literature is reviewed, many studies have been conducted on the relationship between children's play behaviors and their cognitive skills (e.g. Bergen, 2002; Guney-Karaman, 2009; Peisach & Hardeman, 1985; Saracho, 1995; Sener, 1996; Yilmaz, 2006), language skills and communication skills (e.g. Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2002; Kurudayioglu, 2003; McLoyd, 1980; Toret, Ozdemir, Selimoglu & Ozkubat, 2014; Suhonen, Nislin, Alijoki & Sajaniemi, 2015). Most studies focused on the relationship between play and social skills (e.g. Christie & Johnsen, 1983; Denham, Renwick & Holt, 1991; Farver, Kim & Lee, 1995; Lester & Russell, 2010; Mathieson & Banerjee, 2011; Newton & Jenvey, 2011; Papatga, 2012; Russ & Kaugars, 2001; Tannock, 2008; Kocyigit, Yilmaz & Sezer, 2015). Summarizing the findings of these research studies, one can say that play and children's social development interact with each other. In this scope, this research study aims to investigate children's play skills in terms of social behaviors (physical aggression, relational aggression, positive social behaviors and depressive feelings).

2. Method

2.1 Research Model

In accordance with the aim of this research, the present study has been conducted on relational screening model.

2.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 300 children, 156 girls (52%) and 144 boys (48%) between 60 and 72 months studying at preschool education institutions in the city center of Konya during 2016-2017 academic year. As a data collection instrument, the "Play Skills Assessment Scale" was filled out the children's parents and the "Preschool Social Behaviour Scale - Instructor Form" was filled out by their preschool teachers.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

The "Play Assessment Scale" and the "Preschool Social Behaviour Scale - Instructor Form" were used as data collection instruments in the present study.

2.3.1 The Preschool Social Behaviour Scale-Instructor Form

The Preschool Social Behaviour Scale - Instructor Form (PSBS-T) developed by Crick, Casas & Mosher (1997) and adapted into Turkish by Karakus (2008) was used as a data collection instrument. In the first stage, six items lower than .40 were excluded from the 25-item Preschool Social Behaviour Scale - Instructor Form after the factor analysis. When it comes to reliability of the subscales of the original scale, the internal consistency reliability was found high in physical aggression ($\alpha=.94$), relational aggression ($\alpha=.96$), positive social behaviors ($\alpha=.88$), and depressive feelings ($\alpha=.87$). In the study conducted by Karakus on validity and reliability, reliability of the scale subscales were found to be high: physical aggression ($\alpha=.89$), relational aggression ($\alpha=.83$), positive social behaviors ($\alpha=.88$). The reliability of the subscales of depressive feelings ($\alpha=.67$) was found to be in a sufficient level. This scale consists of 19 items that are aimed to identify physical aggression (6 items), relational aggression (6 items), positive social behaviors (4 items) and depressive feelings (3 items). The items in the Likert type scale are ranked as follows: 1. Not true or almost not true, 2. Not very often, 3. Sometimes, 4. Often, 5. Always or almost always true. Children's scores range between minimum 1 and maximum 5 since the arithmetic mean of the scale scores is taken. As the Likert type scale score rises, it can be said that a child exhibits physical-relational aggression, depressive feelings and positive social behaviors more (Karakus, 2008).

2.3.2 The Play Skills Assessment Scale

The Play Skills Assessment Scale developed by Fazlioglu, Ilgaz & Papatga (2013) was used for the aim of identifying what kind of play skills 6-year-old children have while playing and enabling parents to discover these skills. The scale is a five points Likert type and consists of 27 items. The Cronbach alpha reliability co-efficiency was found to be .93.

The reliability co-efficiency was recalculated in this research study to ensure the reliability of the scale measurement and was found to be .88.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The research data were collected from 60-72 months old 300 children included in the present study as participants. The Play Skills Assessment Scale, which was used as a data collection instrument in this study, was filled out by the parents of the participant children while the Preschool Social Behavior Scale – Instructor Form was filled out by their preschool teachers. Statistical package program was used to analyse the data. Pearson's correlation analysis and simple linear regression analysis were performed to evaluate the research data. The significance level was accepted as $p < .05$.

3. Findings

In this section, firstly the findings regarding the relationship between preschool children's social behaviors (physical aggression, relational aggression, positive social behaviors and depressive feelings) and play skills were given. Then whether children's social behaviors (physical aggression, relational aggression, positive social behaviors and depressive feelings) predict their play skills was tested via simple linear regression analysis.

Table 1. Results of the Correlation Analysis Regarding the Relationship between Children's Social Behaviors and Play Skills

		Physical Aggression	Relational Aggression	Positive Behaviours	Social	Depressive Feelings
Play Skills Assessment Scale	r	-.156	-.310	.409		-.107
	p	.007*	.000*	.000*		.043*
	n	300	300	300		300

$p < .05$ *

Table 1 displays there is a significant positive correlation ($r = .409$; $p < .05$) between the Play Skills Assessment Scale mean scores and the mean scores on the "Positive Social Behaviors" subscales of the Preschool Social Behavior Scale – Instructor Form. On the other hand, it can be seen that there is a significant negative correlation between the mean scores on the subscales named as "Physical Aggression" ($r = -.156$; $p < .05$), "Relational Aggression" ($r = -.310$; $p < .05$) and "Depressive Feelings" ($r = -.107$; $p < .05$). Accordingly, as the mean scores for children's positive social behaviors increase, the mean scores for play skills increase, too. However, as the mean scores for physical-relational aggression and depressive feelings decrease, the mean scores for play skills decrease, too.

Table 2. Results of Regression Analysis Regarding the Predictive Power of Children's Social Behaviors on Play Skills

Variables	R	R ²	β	t	F
Physical Aggression	.156	.024	-.156	-2.73	7.45*
Relational Aggression	.310	.096	-.310	-5.63	31.72*
Positive Social Behaviors	.409	.168	.409	7.74	60.03*
Depressive Feelings	.107	.012	-.107	-1.86	3.47*

$p < .05$ *

According to Table 2, the subscales of the Preschool Social Behavior Scale – Instructor Form named as "Physical Aggression" ($R = .156$, $R^2 = .024$, $F = 7.45$, $p < .05$), "Relational Aggression" ($R = .310$, $R^2 = .096$, $F = 31.72$, $p < .05$), "Positive Social Behaviors" ($R = .409$, $R^2 = .168$, $F = 60.03$, $p < .05$) and "Depressive Feelings" ($R = .107$, $R^2 = .012$, $F = 3.47$, $p < .05$) are found to be a significant predictor variable of children's play skills.

It can be seen that 16.8 % of the total variance regarding play skills is explained by the subscale "Positive Social Behaviors"; 9.6 % is explained by "Relational Aggression"; 2.4 % is explained by "Physical Aggression" and 1.2% is explained by "Depressive Feelings". In addition, examining the t-test results, it can be stated that the scores on the Play Skills Assessment Scale are explained in a significant level by all the subscales of the Preschool Social Behavior Scale – Instructor Form ($p < .05$).

4. Discussion

Using play is an effective means of teaching preschool children social skills (Guralnick & Neville, 1997). Play is essential especially in child development and enables one to observe this natural process in its natural settings. It is emphasized that play has an important role in both preschool children's development and education. Behaviors, knowledge and particularly social skills we need to acquire in our lives are learned naturally during play (Darwish, Esquivel, Houtz & Alfonso, 2001). For this reason, this research study aims to investigate the play skills of children between 60 and 72 months in terms of social behaviors (physical aggression, relational aggression, positive social behaviors, and depressive feelings).

As emphasized by the research results, it can be seen that there is a significant positive correlation between children's mean scores on the Play Skills Assessment Scale and the mean scores of the subscale "Positive Social Behaviors" of the

Preschool Social Behavior Scale–Instructor Form. There is, on the other hand, a significant negative correlation between children’s mean scores on the Play Skills Assessment Scale and the subscales “Physical Aggression”, “Relational Aggression”, and “Depressive Feelings” of the Preschool Social Behavior Scale – Instructor Form. Accordingly, as children’s mean scores for positive social behaviors increase, and mean scores for physical-relational aggression and depressive feelings decrease, their mean scores for play skills increase. Another result of the research is that the subscales “Physical Aggression”, “Relational Aggression”, “Positive Social Behaviors” and “Depressive Feelings” of the Preschool Social Behavior Scale – Instructor Form are a significant variable in predicting children’s play skills.

Christie & Johnsen (1983) reported in several experimental and relational researches that there is a relationship between social competence and play behaviors. In their study focusing on the social skills of four and five-year-old children, Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, Rafferty & Sheehy (2006) revealed that children who attend a play-enriched education program have higher scores in terms of social skills and thinking skills. In their study investigating the social competence of six-eight years old children who exhibit social nonconformity during a play Licciardello, Harchik & Luiselli (2008) concluded that group plays with children, peer interaction and teaching of responding to interaction develop social skills in children and increase their self-confidence. The research by Uren & Stagnitti (2009) revealed that there is a significant and positive relationship between preschool children’s play behaviors and social competence and participation to school activities.

In the study aiming to treat six-eight years old six children who have some psychological problems (having inappropriate social relationships for normal development, communication difficulties with other children, acting aggressively, shyness and introvertedness, nonconformity etc.), Gorker (2001) developed play treatment group techniques, treated the children by means of play and stated that some children showed recovery. Accordingly, it was observed that children’s fears in a group setting diminished and their self-confidence improved. They were interested in different activities, started to socialize, understand others and adapt to the environment. According to a study conducted by Webster-Stratton & Lindsay (1999), children between four and seven who exhibit nonconformity have significantly poor problem solving and social skills, have less control on themselves and display poor play skills in comparison to children deemed normal. In the study investigating the relationship between the games preschool children played with their peers and their social skills, Gagnon & Nagle (2004) suggested developing play-based interventions for children who lack social skills and exhibit social nonconformity. Examining the research results, as Durualp & Aral (2010) stated underlining the importance of learning through play, it can be concluded that preschool education, peer interaction and especially play-based teaching techniques are necessary for children to develop socially and emotionally, act in conformity with the environment and acquire social skills.

Note:

This research study was presented orally in the Congress of Education Research and Practice in Higher Education held in Istanbul on 19-20 May 2017.

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