

from:

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Summary

This research investigation has succeeded in assessing several hundred children over nine timepoints of data collection, and the analyses outlined above have provided valuable insights into the longitudinal associations between the measures of peer relations, behaviour, social understanding, and emotional characteristics.

Perhaps most importantly, our analyses have illustrated the need to specify children's behaviour, emotion, and cognition at a *detailed* level. The assessment measures completed by the children were related to each other in complex ways over time, and these relationships often differed depending on age and gender. Moreover, at the individual level, our analyses serve as a reminder that 'social skills', 'social competence', and 'emotional literacy' are not unitary constructs on which children can be described as either high or low. Rather, any effort to understand and support a child's socio-emotional development should be based on a rich multi-dimensional profile of his or her peer relations, behaviour, emotion, and social understanding. The findings from our analyses, therefore, provide a critical foundation for the design of intervention strategies.

A summary of the findings listed in this document is provided below.

Stability of measures

Our analyses have shown that children's responses to the measures remained fairly stable over a period of three school years, even for the younger cohort (the children of which were aged 5 years at commencement). Thus, children who scored relatively high on a particular measure at the beginning of the project tended to score relatively high on the same measure over three years later. This underlines the fact that children's socio-emotional characteristics are not momentary and fleeting, but often reflect stable patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Interestingly, the most entrenched peer status category seemed to be the 'rejected' category, with a majority of children in both age groups remaining in this category after three school years.

Age and sex differences

The most substantial age differences appeared on the social understanding measures, reflecting children's growing understanding of social processes (e.g., faux pas, or unintentional insults). There was also a general tendency for loneliness to decrease with age, and self-rated social acceptance to increase with age, perhaps reflecting a greater sense of peer support as children grow older. There were also several gender differences, with slightly higher levels of loneliness in boys, higher self-rated athletic competence in boys, higher self-rated behavioural conduct in girls, and better performance on the advanced theory of mind tasks among girls.

School differences

There were relatively few occasions where a particular class of children significantly deviated from the overall sample mean, with just 28 out of 209 possible deviations being statistically significant. However, those differences that were observed can help us make sense of behavioural and emotional patterns within the participating schools.

Associations among key variables

Throughout the three years of the project, we found that behavioural, emotional, and cognitive characteristics were associated with peer acceptance and rejection. Our longitudinal analyses showed that the factors which predicted changes in children's peer relationships were complex, often varying according to age and gender.

Social behaviour and peer reputation

Starting with the sample as a whole, we found that:

- **Popular** children were high on Popular-Leadership and Prosocial characteristics and low on Aggressive-Disruptive and Sensitive-Isolated characteristics.
- **Rejected** children were low on Popular-Leadership and Prosocial characteristics and high on Aggressive-Disruptive and Sensitive-Isolated characteristics.
- **Controversial** children were high on Popular-Leadership and Aggressive-Disruptive characteristics and low on Prosocial characteristics.
- **Neglected** children were low on Aggressive-Disruptive and Sensitive-Isolated characteristics.

However, separate analyses for each age group showed that while Popularity-Leadership and Aggressive-Disruptive characteristics were the best predictors of peer acceptance and rejection in the younger cohort, Sensitive-Isolated and Prosocial characteristics became more important for older children. In fact, by Year 6, the Aggressive-Disruptive score was no longer predictive of peer rejection. Overall, though, it is clear that the Rejected group is likely to be the most 'at-risk' group; Neglected children, in contrast, did not appear to be maladjusted despite their low social visibility.

We also found evidence for the opposite causal direction. For both cohorts, peer rejection led to decreases in prosocial behaviour, suggesting that Rejected children may be caught in a 'vicious cycle' whereby rejection limits the acquisition of social skills, which in turn predicts more rejection.

Emotional characteristics and social understanding

Moving on to children's subjective beliefs and interpretations, we found that children's self-rated social acceptance had an effect on later Aggressive-Disruptive and Sensitive-Isolated behaviour, even after controlling for actual peer acceptance. In fact, emotional characteristics like social anxiety and depression can predict a child's sense of loneliness above and beyond the effect of actual peer rejection.

We also demonstrated that measures of social understanding play a key role in children's peer relations, self-perceptions, and emotions. Negative self-perceptions regarding athletic competence, scholastic ability, and social acceptance were found to be predicted by a less positive attributional style. Thus, the way children explain events in their lives may be a crucial predictor of later depressive symptoms.

Similarly, we were able to make sense of children's social anxiety in terms of a high concern about self-presentation (as shown by their use of many overt strategies to create favourable impressions on others) coupled with a low responsiveness to audiences' preferences and attributes. Social anxiety was also linked to stronger beliefs in the effectiveness of avoidant coping style among boys, while girls in years 4 and 5 who were relatively poor at differentiating between moral and social-conventional rules tended to be more socially anxious. These results confirm that children's emotional responses to social situations are linked to specific patterns of motivation and cognition.

Finally, we showed that children's understanding of complex social situations, such as those involving unintentional insults (faux pas), predicted later peer relationships. In fact, Year 5 children who were performing relatively poorly on this task ended up more rejected by their peers at the end of the project. This finding underlines the importance of social understanding for children's peer relations during the later primary school years.