

The Domains that Influence the Development of  
Social Competence in Children:  
A Literature Review

by

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ABSTRACT

The development of social competence in children has been shown to be associated with many positive outcomes in adulthood, such as higher academic success and higher self-esteem. In order to better understand the domains that contribute to the development of social competence in children, a review of the current literature is examined including research on social theories, personality/innate characteristics, family environment, and school environment. The findings are all congruent in that the overall development of social competence in children is a multifaceted developmental process resulting from the contribution of many factors. These factors all work in combination with each other and over time, each factor influences the other. The results of the literature review suggests a need for further research regarding social interventions, such as in-classroom interventions and direct at-home interventions, for children who lack the ability or skills necessary to gain social competence. Additionally, more current research is needed to examine the influence of technology upon the development of social competence in children.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

“The energy between two people is what creates great marriages, families, teams, and organizations” (Rath, 2006, p. 1). This so-called energy, also known as friendship, is both an innate and learned process that begins in childhood. Through many trials and errors in life, friendship is gained only after the development of social competence. Anyone who has worked with, or raised children knows that at times, children can be selfish or self-centered, hostile or rude, or even standoffish and unapproachable. However, these negative actions or feelings are usually brief and only last a few minutes or hours because children usually learn the skills to be socially competent. Eventually, children realize the differences between socially acceptable and socially unacceptable behavior. Mastering interpersonal social skills at a young age are essential for building and maintaining the complex social networks that one will encounter throughout a lifetime. That being said, some children may never develop the skills necessary to become socially competent and, as a result, will have social deficiencies as an adult.

Research has shown that highly developed, socially competent individuals have social networks and are active participants within this network (Zsolnai, 2002). Active participants usually accept others and have the ability to communicate effectively, thus creating the potential for friendships to form. Possessing both verbal and non-verbal communication skills are important in developing and maintaining friendships. A positive attitude towards the self and others are also aspects that make for quality social relationships. Children are able to grow into socially competent individuals overtime, and research has found different outcomes in adulthood to be associated with having social competence in childhood. Having at least one true friend predicts less loneliness in children. Similarly, belonging to a group

predicts more happiness in children (Parker & Asher, 1993). Children who do not develop social competence are lonelier because they are most often rejected by their peers. Additionally, socially incompetent children are more likely to be aggressive to their peers because of this loneliness (Parker & Asher, 1993). Childhood loneliness, however, can be mediated, in part, by learning social skills (Ditommaso, Brannen-McNulty, Ross, Burgess, 2003). If a child feels rejected when they are around their peers, it would seem likely that a child would develop low self-esteem about themselves. Feelings of lower self-worth and psychopathology in adulthood have been linked with lower peer acceptance and greater peer rejection in preadolescence (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998). Maladjustment in social aspects of a child's life may hinder an adaptive transition into adulthood, which may cause social isolation as an adult (Ditommaso et al., 2003). Children with friends have greater academic success when compared with their peers who do not have friends (Parker & Asher, 1993). Therefore, gaining social competence as a child may increase the likelihood of greater academic achievement in school.

Although no one would argue that true friendships enhance a person's personal happiness, research has suggested that friendships in the work place greatly influence the financial and emotional aspects of the work environment. One of the developmental tasks in adulthood is establishing work competence. Effective work performance in adults is predicted by a variety of personality traits such as sociability (Shiner, 2000). Having at least one friend at work has been shown to significantly increase productivity during the day (Rath, 2006). This suggests that not only are employees willing to be more productive if they have a friend at work, but they are also able to make more money for the company because of this higher productivity rate. Fewer accidents occur when employees have friends at work;

consequently, better overall safety records are reported at places of employment where employees reported having a friend at work compared with those places where employees reported having no friends at work (Rath, 2006). Higher customer loyalty and more profitable teams are three times as likely to occur in work groups where the physical environment makes it easy to socialize. Unfortunately, only one-third of people actually report working in a place where socialization is encouraged among employees (Rath, 2006). In order to make a friend at work and therefore, become a more productive employee, social competence is needed. If social competencies are developed as a child, these social competencies will be carried over into adulthood, thus benefiting the adult personally and professionally in the work place. As a result, the adult will more likely be an overall better employee.

As stated above, possessing social competence as an adult is associated with many positive outcomes. However, in order for an adult to have social competence, development of this skill must happen at an early age. One of the main developmental tasks during childhood is to achieve competence within social relationships. Many theories suggest that early influences in life are highly correlated with how well a child will later develop socially. According to psychologist John Bowlby's attachment theory, children begin to develop a cognitive model of relationships with others based on interactions with early caregivers (cited in Shaffer, 2005). In other words, children take experiences early on in their lives and form a working model of what a social relationship looks like. Albert Bandura's social learning theory states that learning from others is one of the main characteristics of developing social skills (cited in Zsolnai, 2002). More specifically, Bandura's social learning theory has shown that children's learning is most influenced through imitation, reinforcement, and modeling

(cited in Zsolnai, 2002). It would seem that, according to developmental theorists, social competence has much to do with environmental aspects. Although this is partially true, more current research has found that social competence has much to do with the child's personality as well (Shaffer, 2005). Cognitive development plays a huge role in socialization. The way in which a child achieves social competence not only depends on how others identify him/her, but how that particular child identifies with his/her self. Cognitive developmental theory states that in order for social interactions to take place, a self-concept must first develop (Shaffer, 2005). Many psychologists believe that a child's identity and social development emerge together and neither can progress without the other (Shaffer, 2005). This means that social competence is progressive because children must first come to know and understand themselves before they are able to understand others and socially interact. Without social cognition, there would be little sense of what is socially right and what is socially wrong.

As cited above, much research and theory has been used to conceptualize social competence in children; however, much of the research conducted has specifically focused on the different outcomes associated with social competence. The actual development of social competence is less understood than the impact of social competence. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the different aspects that influence the development of social competence and determine appropriate interventions for children who lack the cognitive ability or environmental resources to have social competence.

### *Statement of Problem*

Developing social competence as a child has been highly associated with positive outcomes later on in life (Shaffer, 2005). Positive outcomes in life are important not just to the overall life satisfaction and happiness of the individual, but are also important to society

as a whole. When children fail to develop the skills necessary to interact with others in their environment, these deficit or excessive social behaviors can hinder academic success thereby limiting post-secondary opportunities. Social deficits may negatively impact the development of self-esteem, mental health, and the overall happiness as an adult member of society. Much research has been conducted on the outcomes associated with social competence. There is little research, however, about the actual development of social competence in children and the factors that influence these social competencies. Therefore, there is a need for a better understanding of the global influences that help children develop strong social competencies.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this review will be to provide a summative resource for parents, educators, community members, and other professionals interested in working with children who struggle with, or lack, social competence. In addition, the review will identify current empirically-based interventions that professionals and parents use to help children enhance their current social functioning. This literature review was conducted during the spring and summer of 2008.

### *Research Questions*

The following questions guided this literature review:

1. What are the different domains that fundamentally determine children's social behavior and strongly influence the development of social competence in children?
2. What are the most successful intervention strategies for increasing children's social competence?

### *Definition of Terms*

For clarity and understanding, the following terms are defined:

*Social Cognition:* The thinking that people present about their own and others' thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviors (Shaffer, 2005).

*Social Competence:* The ability to make use of environmental and personal resources to achieve a desired social outcome (Hussong et al., 2005).

*Social Inclusion:* Ensuring effective participation in all aspects of life for everybody in the area (Denham et al., 2006).

*Social Skills:* The ability to communicate and interact with other members of society without undue conflict or disharmony (Shaffer, 2005). There are five main clusters of social skills behavior. They are cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self control (Denham et al., 2006).

*Targeted Intervention:* An intervention designed for use with a specific group of individuals. The intervention tends to focus on a selected skill or attribute and is offered over an extended period of time with great intensity (Bullis, Walker, & Sprague, 2001).

*Universal Intervention:* An intervention designed for a large group, such as a school, and is focused on preventing at-risk behavior. The intervention typically impacts the majority of students, but may lack the ability to alter extreme at-risk behavior or already antisocial individuals (Bullis, Walker, & Sprague, 2001).

#### *Assumptions of the Research*

There were assumptions made in the published studies on social competence that are reviewed here. One assumption made was that the participants in the studies and the researchers conducting the research were honest and unbiased throughout the entirety of the studies. Second, the test instruments used in the studies were reliable and valid. Third, the designs of the research and the procedures used were developmentally appropriate for the

participants. Finally, the definitions and terms used throughout the studies on social competence were consistent and accurately utilized.

#### *Limitations of the Research*

There were also some limitations on the research that must be considered. First, with the nature of social competence being a perceived entity, much objectivity on the part of the researcher is needed and some bias is likely to exist within the literature. Second, since the participants are likely to be at different developmental stages due to differences in maturity level, it can be assumed that not all of the procedures used are developmentally appropriate for all participants. Finally, since many definitions of social competence exist, it is likely that different definitions were used in some of the research and there will be some inconsistency between the different pieces of literature.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

The following chapter reviews the current literature surrounding social competence in children. Three different groups will be identified as the main factors that significantly contribute to and influence the development of social competence. The factors include 1) personality/innate characteristics of the child, 2) family environment, and 3) school environment. The chapter will also address current interventions recommended for children who lack social competencies.

### *Personality/Innate Characteristics*

All humans have different personality characteristics, partially because of their different genetic makeup. Although the topic of nature versus nurture is one of much debate, it is well known that most developmental processes are a combination of both nature and nurture working in conjunction with each other (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997). However, humans are born with only certain capabilities because of their genetic makeup. The frontal lobe is a section of the human brain that controls many processes and functions (Anderson, Anderson, Northam, Jacobs, & Catroppa, 2001). One of the functions that are controlled by the frontal lobe is executive function. The concept of executive functioning can be described as a set of cognitive abilities, such as learning social skills, which control and regulate behaviors and other abilities (Anderson et al., 2001). When an individual displays social competence, they possess the ability to apply social skills according to the rules of social interaction and have the ability to adapt to a situation using skills such as impulse control and behavioral adaptation. The inability to be flexible and apply behavior according to social rules is considered to be social incompetence. Executive functioning is needed for goal-directed behaviors such as planning and utilizing working memory, as well as inhibitory

impulse control, attention shifting, and initiating and stopping actions (Anderson et al., 2001). In other words, many of the cognitive abilities that are a part of executive functioning appear to be fairly congruent to the skills necessary to be socially competent, such as behavior regulation and problem solving. Therefore, the skills necessary to become socially competent are partially due to innate characteristics such as executive functioning (Riggs, Johromi, Razza, Dillworth-Bart, & Mueller, 2006).

The human brain regulates almost all human activity such as breathing, thinking, and acting (Anderson et al., 2001). All human brains are “wired” differently depending on their genetics, which causes individuals to learn, perceive, and think uniquely. However, damage to the brain can affect the way in which an individual acts and thinks which can affect an individual’s ability to gain social competence. A traumatic brain injury (TBI) occurs when a sudden trauma causes injury to the brain. Research on infant TBI has shown that differences in social functioning exist when compared to infants who have not suffered a TBI (Landry, Swank, Stuebing, Prasad, & Ewing-Cobbs, 2004). Infants who have suffered from a TBI have problems starting social interactions with others and have difficulty coordinating their attention (Landry et al., 2004). The results of Landry et al.’s (2004) study indicates that executive functioning is very susceptible to disruption in children sustaining a TBI. The efforts of the following studies start to generate a better understanding of the different personality characteristics necessary for social competence to develop in childhood.

Personality is one innate attribute that has been studied because a child’s personality has been considered a strong predictor of later adaptation and competence in adulthood (Shiner, 2000). The characteristics of a developing child can change over time allowing for new emotions, feelings, and behaviors. Therefore, longitudinal studies are excellent for

looking at these social adjustments overtime. Longitudinal studies also provide a more comprehensive idea of children's genuine competence because their behaviors and attitudes are examined at multiple times. In order to better understand the relationship between personality and peer social competence, Shiner (2000) conducted a longitudinal study that examined how well childhood personality predicted later social competence. The participants, at the beginning of the study, consisted of 205 third through sixth grade children from two elementary schools in Minneapolis. Samples of data were taken starting in 1990 over a period of 10 years during three different time periods. The first round of data (Time 1, 1990) was collected through child and parent questionnaires, interviews, and teacher and peer ratings. Seven years later (Time 2, 1997), questionnaires were filled out by the children and their parents. Ten years after Time 1 (Time 3, 2000), children and their parents were interviewed again and were asked to fill out questionnaires. Interviews with the parents were done to acquire information about the children's developmental history and current behavior at Time 1 only. The subsequent interviews and questionnaires with the parents and teachers at Time 2 and Time 3 pertained to perceived child sociability and academic achievement. Child interview topics included peer relationships and self-concept; interviews with the children were conducted at Time 1, 2, and 3.

The results of Shiner's (2000) study indicated that children who were described by their parents as being extroverted were found to be socially competent at a later age. Similarly, teachers who reported children with mastery motivation, academic consciousness, and agreeableness traits within the classroom, were found to be associated with having social competence at a later age (Shiner, 2000).

Although this longitudinal study examined many important personality characteristics that may help to increase a child's social competence, it is important to note that social competence is something that develops over time. Due to a child's natural development and maturity, it is likely that social competence will increase over time. This study failed to directly measure and take into account developmental factors which influence social competence. However, it is noteworthy that certain personality traits, such as extroversion and agreeableness, at a young age were associated with social competence over a period of 10 years. This finding suggests that having certain personality traits, such as agreeableness, at a young age may increase the chances of children developing social competence as they get older.

Just as Shiner (2000) examined the relationship between personality traits and social competence, Deptula, Cohen, Phillipsen, and Ey (2006) similarly explored the construct of personality through peer optimism in its relation to social competence. The researchers collected data from 232 third through sixth grade children from a public elementary school. In Deptula et al.'s (2006) study, the researchers constructed a questionnaire designed to assess children's social competence through optimism regarding peer relations. Children were asked to respond to questions regarding the different expectations they have towards their peers. The questions were phrased as being either optimistic or pessimistic and the children were asked to respond using a four-point Likert scale. In addition, children were given a full class roster and were asked to identify all of their peers who they considered a friend. This procedure was done to identify mutual friendships and to help determine if optimism would influence the number of nominations given and received. Gender differences among the children were also considered (Deptula et al., 2006). After an analysis

of the data, the findings indicated that all of the children were at least somewhat optimistic about peer relations, despite differences of gender or age. However, when comparing social competence and optimism, differences between genders were found. The findings showed that less optimistic boys were just as likely to have mutual friendships and social competence when compared with more optimistic boys. For girls, the results indicated that having friends and displaying social competence has more to do with perceived self-competence (i.e. internalizing variables) than actual optimism. This remarkable finding suggests that the development of social competence may have more to do with the perception of the self, rather than the sole personality characteristics of the child.

Deptula et al.'s (2006) study concluded similar results as Slocumb (2006), who found differences in personality between males and females as well. Slocumb (2006) conducted six separate case studies on three males and three females ranging from age six to ten over a span of five years. Interviews with teachers, students, and parents were conducted two times during the course of the school year. Interview questions consisted of topics such as academic achievement, sociability, school behavior, and home behavior. The students were also observed in the classroom. Slocumb (2006) concluded that males tended to have lower self-esteem than females in the classroom. The researcher alleged the differences in self-esteem to the stereotypes that parents and educators have about males. Stereotypes such as, males should not show emotion and males are more successful in sports than in academics, leads many males to see themselves as incapable and inefficient individuals in the classroom (Slocumb, 2006). The study also found that because of this low self-esteem, males were less likely to perform academically because it was not seen as acceptable to be smart. Low self-esteem affects the development of social cognition. Since social cognition is needed

to develop before social competence is achieved, low self-esteem in individuals may hinder this development (Shaffer, 2005).

The results from Deptula et al. (2006) and Slocumb's (2006) research helps to identify differences among gender regarding the development of social competence. However, the results from Deptula et al. (2006) should be taken with caution as the results are not able to be generalized to the population as a whole due to the small sample size used. Additionally, perceptions between genders of social relationships differ and the authors did not take this factor into account when interpreting their data. It is also important to note that not all males have low self-esteem due to stereotyping because not all parents or educators stereotype males. Therefore, the results from Slocumb (2006) are also not able to be generalized to a larger population.

The research indicates that the development of social competence in childhood may partially be due to innate personality characteristics such as extroversion, agreeableness, and optimism (Shiner, 2000; Deptula et al., 2006). In addition, Deptula et al. (2006) found evidence that the perception of the self may also influence the development of social competence. Additionally, Slocumb (2006) found self-esteem in males rejected by peers may affect the development of social competence.

In order to better understand children's personality attributes and its relation to the development of social competence, it is necessary to not only study school age children, but also look at a younger population such as preschool children. Preschool children's social skills are often challenged for the first time when entering into the school environment. For many children, school is the first experience in forming new relationships outside of the family circle. With this in mind, it can be inferred that personality is a main contributor to the

child's developing social skills prior to school. Expectations of having social competence arise because having the ability to interact appropriately with others is necessary for a child to learn; therefore, the personality of the child impacts the learning environment. In an effort to identify the personality profile of social competent preschoolers, Mendez, Fantuzzo, and Cicchetti (2002) conducted a study that included 141 African American children from 11 urban Head Start classrooms in the Northeastern part of the United States. Measures of a child's temperament, emotion regulation, language, and peer play competence were taken using the Temperament Assessment Battery for Children – Teacher Form (T-ABC) and the Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale (PIPPS), which is an observational coding system. The results of the study indicated that socially competent children possess many different skills that enable them to adapt in different social situations. Children whose profiles included a high adaptable temperament, an ability to approach new situations, and an above average vocabulary displayed the most social competence with peers. On the other hand, children profiles that contained calm, reserved, and quiet characteristics were children who were least likely to engage in peer play and more likely to engage in disruptive peer play, suggesting poor social competence.

The results of this study helps to form a more comprehensive picture of what the personality profile of a socially competent child would look like. Since the study was done in the child's natural environment, it is likely that the behaviors that the children displayed were consistent with their everyday behavior, thus, making the results reliable. However, the study only looked at a small sample of children which means that the data as a whole cannot generalize to all children.

The studies reviewed gives insight into the different personality characteristics that are necessary for social competence to develop in children. Shiner (2000) concluded that certain characteristics, such as agreeableness and extroversion, are displayed in children who demonstrate having social competence. In addition, it was concluded that children who tend to be quiet, calm, and introverted are less socially competent when compared with their peers (Shiner, 2000; Mendez et al., 2002). The results from Deptula et al. (2006) proposed that differences among the development of social competence may exist between genders which suggests that internalizing and externalizing characteristics play a role in social competence. Slocumb (2006) found similar results that differences in personality occur between males and females. The results of Mendez et al. (2002) study indicated that social competence is a multifaceted construct in which children need to draw upon many different capacities to interact appropriately and have social competence. These characteristics included adaptable temperament, extroversion, and high self-esteem. Since self-perception and social cognition must develop before social competence is able to develop (Shiner, 2006), having characteristics, such as high self esteem, will promote the development of social competence. Overall, it was found that a child's innate personality characteristics influence the development of social competence in some way.

### *Family Environment*

The following section presents research that examines the influence of family environment and parental perceptions on the development of social competence in children. In particular, this section not only explores the effect of family size and number of siblings, but also focuses on parenting style. The domains of the family environment which impact the

development of social competence that will be examined are 1) economics, 2) siblings, and 3) parental involvement.

*Economics.* According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2004), divorce rates are at their lowest since the 1970's. However, many children are still living in homes with single parent families. With the assumption that parental resources are limited in terms of time, money, and energy, as the number of children in the family increases, the amount of resources spent on each child decreases (Downey & Condron, 2004). Parents' economic resources can influence a child's ability to develop social and emotional competence (Payne, 1996). Thus, it would seem that fewer siblings within the family where two parental figures are present would be advantageous to the child's social competence development because the parent(s) would be able to spend more of their time, money, and energy on their only child. A parent's income brings social status to the family and can influence a child's social development by providing social opportunities to the child that costs money such as being on an athletic team or singing in the community choir. Children who live in homes where financial resources are limited are less likely to have those social opportunities. Also, it is shown that children who are raised in low-income houses score lower on school achievement tests than children from more prosperous homes (Payne, 1996). In addition, evidence suggests that the longer a child resides in a home with few economic resources, the lower the quality of the family environment (Payne, 1996). However, a competing argument is that parents' social adjustment to society and cognitive competence prior to parenthood overcompensates for limited resources such as money (Shipler, 2004). This means that some families with few economic resources are still able to raise children with high social competence.

*Siblings.* There has been limited research conducted regarding sibling influence on the development of social competence. Most sibling research has focused on educational outcomes rather than social outcomes. Therefore, in an effort to better understand the influence of siblings on the development of social competence, Downey and Condrón (2004) gathered information using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Class (ECLS-K). The ECLS-K data was gathered from the National Center for Education Statistics, which includes information from parents, teachers, and school officials. The sample consisted of 21,260 children who attended Kindergarten in the fall of 1998. Dependent variables, such as interpersonal skills, self-control, and externalizing problem behavior were compared to the number of siblings in the family. Data was collected through teacher questionnaires and parent phone interviews. The results of the study showed that teachers rated students having one sibling as having better interpersonal skills than those with no siblings. In addition, teachers also rated students with siblings as exhibiting fewer externalizing problem behaviors than an only child. Parents noted that children benefit socially from the interaction with full siblings rather than half or step siblings.

The study conducted by Downey and Condrón (2004) concluded that children's social and interpersonal skills are positively influenced through sibling interactions at home and that these skills become useful outside of the home as well. In addition, the authors suggested that children may miss out on important social lessons by not having at least one sibling at home (Downey & Condrón, 2004).

*Parenting style.* Although research states that the number of siblings present in the home does play a role in the development of social competence, an only child can still develop social competence (cited in Downey & Condrón, 2004). Since most children have at

least one parent or guardian present in their lives, an examination of parenting style was conducted. Three dimensions of parenting styles were assessed in a study done by Grolnick and Ryan (1989). The domains examined were autonomy support, involvement, and provision of structure. Each domain was chosen because the researchers expected these specific domains to have the most significant impact on the development of school and social competence. Participants in the study consisted of 480 children and their parents from 20 classrooms in a northeastern town in the United States. Data was collected by having parents fill out a questionnaire and a packet which was brought home by each child. Parent interviews were conducted and children filled out self-report forms on their ability to regulate their own behavior. The results of the study indicated that children exhibiting the ability to self-regulate their own behavior had maternal support for developing autonomy. It was found that mothers were more involved than fathers in child rearing; according to teacher reports, more involved mothers had children who were better socially adjusted (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Home environments where there were clear and consistent expectations seemed to foster a child's ability to have self-control, which is a critical skill in developing social competence (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).

It is important to note that having more economic resources, fewer siblings, and autonomous parenting alone is not enough to promote social competence in children. Children's external environments, such as neighborhoods, play an important role in the development of social competence in children. Parents have a vital role in selecting an external environment that will support a child's friendships, such as choosing to live in neighborhoods that promote positive social interactions at a peer and community level. Furthermore, the way in which parents work in tandem with the school and community in

support of the child can influence the development of social competence (Sheridan, Buhs, & Warnes, 2003). A child who is resilient from an unfavorable condition such as poverty always has at least one positive relationship in his/her life (Payne, 2006). This relationship is usually a parent, teacher, or mentor. Adults present in a child's life (including parents and teachers) are responsible for modeling prosocial behaviors and reinforcing all attempts at appropriate social interactions and in turn promote social competence in children regardless of their family environment (Sheridan et al., 2003).

In summary, the studies highlighted gave a description of the different ways in which the family environment influences the development of a child's social competence. Downey and Condrón (2004) found that having at least one other sibling in the house contributes to the development of positive social skills. Grolnick and Ryan (1989) pointed out autonomous support, parental involvement, and family structure as being key dimensions of influences on the part of the parent in the development of social competence in children. Sheridan et al. (2003) noted important parental choices such as choosing positive neighborhoods and schools as an influence on the development of social competence in children.

### *School Environment*

Another domain that influences a child's development of social competence is the school environment. Sheridan et al. (2003) pointed out the significant role that teachers play in helping to develop a child's social competence. In order to fully understand the social development of a child, it is necessary to investigate the influences of a child's main social environment. For nearly all children, the most social place is in the classroom at school. Schools are critical places to promote the importance of not only cognitive aspects (i.e. learning), but also behavioral and emotional aspects (Warwick et al., 2005). The promotion

of students' well-being within the classroom is enhanced by fostering environments, social structures, and classroom cultures. Therefore, social competencies will be more likely to develop if the school promotes an environment that allows for social interaction among the students.

The school has a large influence on the development of social competence throughout childhood. The physical environment of the classroom, the classroom social structure, and culture of the classroom all interact and influence the child (Zsolnai, 2002). According to Sheridan et al. (2003), the physical arrangement of the desks in a classroom or the availability of toys or games, can facilitate or hinder interactions between children thus influencing the development of social competence. A classroom that has more toys, games, or equipment creates an environment that encourages social interactions and gives children more opportunities to practice their social skills.

In addition to the classroom environment, another important factor that contributes to the development of social competence is the teacher-child relationship. In fact, no learning occurs without a significant relationship between the teacher and the child (Zsolnai, 2002). Highly socially competent teachers show more empathy, openness, and understanding than those teachers who are less socially competent themselves. By modeling socially acceptable behaviors, Zsolnai (2002) suggested that students be given a chance to practice and develop their own social competencies. Just as Grolnick and Ryan (1989) suggested that an autonomous parenting style fosters positive social competence in children, Zsolnai (2002) found that the same is true of teachers. Teachers, who give children a chance to practice their social skills independently and allow them to learn from their mistakes, create an environment where social competence is more likely to develop.

Contrary to belief, having good social relationships outside of the school is not enough to deter students from engaging in risky behavior such as marijuana use. Bond et al. (2007) found that having positive relationships with teachers is just as important. In fact, students who did not have connectedness with teachers were more likely to have displayed depressive symptoms as a student (Bond et al., 2007). Students who have poor relationships with teachers are more likely to participate in antisocial behaviors and have more disruptive behavior within the classroom (Bond et al., 2007). Therefore, the teacher-student relationship has lasting effects on the learning of the individual and other students in the classroom. When a student is disruptive, the whole class is affected; however, if all of the students in the classroom have a good relationship with the teacher, it would seem that less disruptive behavior would occur (Bond et al, 2007).

Just as Bond et al. (2007) examined the importance of quality teacher-student relationships, Hoglund and Leadbeater (2004) also researched the unique dynamics within a school classroom. The classroom composition of students determines the peers in which children will most directly interact with throughout the school year. Therefore, Hoglund and Leadbeater (2004) researched the effects of classroom peer interactions on social competence. Participants in the study included 432 first-grade children from 17 different schools in a Canadian city. Parents and teachers completed questionnaires that rated the child's social competence and emotional/behavioral problems before the start of the school year and then again at the end of the school year. The children filled out questionnaires as well, which asked questions about their friendships. A comparison between the teacher, parent, and student responses were compared. The results indicated that prosocial behaviors, such as helping, caring, and sharing increased over the course of the year within the

classroom environment. Teachers reported that the social competence of the students improved as a whole. However, parents reported no increase in social competence or any decreases in behavior problems in the home at the end of the school year. Hoglund and Leadbeater (2004) concluded that children in first grade are unable to generalize from one environment to the next. Therefore, although social competence and positive behavior increased within the school by exposing students to social situations, more research is needed on how to teach children to generalize skills to all areas of life.

The school is a place where children develop many competencies through relationships that define the child's self and abilities. However, the culture of the classroom and overall instruction within the school has a profound effect on a child's ability to develop social competencies. In an effort to identify ways to promote social competence in the schools, McNamara (2005) identified the school's curriculum as an area that affects children's social competence development. The explicit part of the curriculum that is taught by the teachers specifies desired attitudes and skills that children will learn. In contrast, the implicit part of the curriculum, which is more subtle, conveys messages of appropriate interpersonal interactions and communication. Therefore, McNamara (2005) stressed the importance of using empirically-based curriculum that has been proven to be successful in sending not just explicit, but also implicit messages to children. Sending messages in every lesson that promotes positive behavior and relationship building will help students generalize from situation to situation. Warwick et al. (2005) noted that the outside environment of the school has an impact on the culture promoted within the school. Warwick et al. (2005) found that giving students the chance to design the playground themselves in a way that encouraged many different activities lowered the number of quarrels during recess time. Warwick et al.'s

(2005) findings pointed out the importance of allowing children to play an active role in creating an environment in which they feel most comfortable. Giving children the ability to make decisions helps the child feel more accountable; therefore, the child is more likely to act more mature in interactions with other peers (Warwick et al., 2005).

The community in which the school resides is another factor that plays into the development of social competence in children. Economically disadvantaged schools tend to yield less socially competent individuals (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004). Therefore, a child who attends a school that is economically disadvantaged tends to have fewer counselors or other professionals who promote social skills training. Consequently, less social skill promotion is done during the school day because resources are limited, and children are found to be lacking in the skills necessary to develop social competence (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004).

As described in the previously stated research, the school environment as a whole largely impacts the development of social competence in children. A child's autonomy, relationship with the teacher, the social structure of the classroom, the curriculum, and surrounding community all influence a child's social competence development. Zsolnai (2002) suggested that teachers who give children opportunities to practice their social skills independently allows children to learn from their mistakes and helps to create environments where social competence is more likely to develop. The student-teacher relationship was also found to be an important factor in developing social competence. Students who have poor relationships with teachers are more likely to participate in antisocial behaviors and have more disruptive behavior within the classroom (Bond et al., 2007). Hoglund and Leadbeater (2004) pointed out that the peers with whom the child interacts with in the classroom are

important because children learn from modeling their peers' behavior. Positive role models and relationships increase the likelihood of developing social competence. The explicit and implicit curriculum, such as empirically-based social skills training or school-wide discipline programs, that is taught in the school is important because it relays messages to students about appropriate interpersonal interactions (McNamara, 2005). In addition to the school, the community in which the school resides is another factor that affects the development of social competence. Schools that have community support, in terms of financial resources, will more likely have counselors and enough professionals to help meet the needs of the students in terms of social skills training (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004).

### *Interventions*

Ideally, through the interaction between both nature (innate abilities) and nurture (environment), children learn to develop social competence on their own. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. At times, an intervention is needed to help children develop social competence because either they are lacking the ability or the means necessary to socialize with other individuals. The following will describe different empirically-based interventions that may help enhance a child's social competence.

The most practical way to choose an intervention is based on the population in need of an intervention. There are two types of interventions: universal and targeted. A universal intervention is designed for use with a large group and focuses on preventing the development of at-risk behavior. A targeted intervention is designed for use with a specific at-risk group of individuals (Bullis, Walker, & Sprague, 2001). Depending on the situation, either a universal or a targeted intervention is implemented. Preferably in the schools, universal social skills intervention is used with all children in order to enhance every child's

skills; therefore, as-needed, a targeted intervention would be used only for those children who are in need of extra support of improving social skills.

As stated previously, children who suffer from a TBI show a lack of ability to interact socially with others (Landry et al., 2004). In order to aid individuals who are affected by a TBI, Wade, Carey, and Wolfe (2006) conducted a study to research the efficacy of on-line cognitive-behavioral therapy for individuals who suffer from TBI and lack social competence. Thirty-nine families of children with moderate to severe TBI participated to determine if the on-line intervention could improve child behavior problems, social competence, and self-management/compliance following the TBI. The intervention included providing a computer and installing software, printers, webcams, and Internet access in all of the participants' houses. Each computer came with an on-line program that was designed for the child and parents to use together every week. The program involved listening to a therapist via webcam and participating in a self-guided on-line session. Each session included reading content regarding a specific skill (i.e. starting a conversation), video clips showing families modeling the skill, and exercises for the family to practice the skill. Baseline data was taken before the intervention to provide comparison data. The intervention lasted eight weeks. Parents reported that their child presented better self-management and compliance after the intervention compared with their previous behavior before intervention. In addition, the results indicated an increase in executive functioning skills. Children showed better self-monitoring, planning, and problem-solving techniques, which are all necessary skills needed to develop social competence (Wade et al. 2006). The findings suggested that an on-line cognitive-behavioral therapeutic approach can improve child adjustment after TBI, particularly in older children and children of lower socioeconomic status.

A TBI usually influences an individual's ability to socially interact because executive functioning is damaged. However, individuals with injury to the brain are not the only candidates who may need assistance in gaining social competence. Sometimes an individual has the executive function to develop social skills, but needs reinforcement to actually increase the competency. Ervin, Miller, and Friman (1996) conducted a single case study of a 13 year old female who had very poor social skills and was socially rejected by most of her peers. After direct observation, it was concluded that the subject would need positive reinforcement from her peers to increase her social competence. Therefore, all of the students in the classroom were secretly awarded points, which were later exchanged for prizes, for making positive comments about the subject's social behavior. The results of the study indicated a decrease in the subject's negative social interactions and an increase in positive interactions with peers. A possible explanation for this effect may have been due to the whole classroom acting as a social system (Ervin et al., 1996). This suggests that the social situation of a rejected individual may improve by acknowledging positive behavior publicly.

Although Ervin et al.'s (1996) study resulted in a change in social competence, the study cannot be generalized to the population as a whole due to the small sample size. However, forming a social system within a group of individuals is something that can improve social competence in individuals because the environment creates more opportunities to socialize. Interventions that have been known to be most effective in promoting social competence are those in which cooperative learning and peer tutoring have been emphasized (Maddern, Franey, McLaughlin, & Cox, 2004). Social inclusion, which is an intervention in itself, has been proven to be effective in groups of individuals and, specifically, has been shown to be most effective within the schools. The *Social Inclusion*

*Project* (Denham, Hatfield, Smethurst, Tan, & Tribe, 2006) was implemented in six different schools in England over three years. The goal of the project was to increase social inclusion and support children who were at-risk for being excluded by peers. Two different groups (peer mentor group and social skills training group) were formed by the teachers choosing the students that would be involved in each group. One hundred students aged 7-10 participated in the intervention. The social skills training group and the peer mentoring group each completed a social skills questionnaire before and after the intervention. The peer mentoring group promoted peer facilitated learning by having the students contribute and co-lead group discussions. The peer mentoring group received a social problem and discussed how to handle the situation every day. In contrast, the skills training group was led by an adult facilitator. The students were taught social skills such as taking turns, communication, and cooperation. Pre-intervention and post-intervention student questionnaires were compared. The results indicated that self-rating scores for both groups improved significantly post-intervention. The students reported that the intervention, regardless of which one they received, improved their ability to control behavior and solve problems. Denham et al. (2006) concluded that the success of each group may have been attributed to the fact that the students felt more positive and confident with their social competency. Denham et al. (2006) also concluded that the intervention was successful because the whole school was involved in social inclusion between students and because the teacher attitudes towards improving social competence among students was positive (Denham et al., 2006). Therefore, the results of the study indicate that interventions to improve social competence work best at a systemic level rather than at an individual level.

Overall, research has shown that both universal and targeted interventions can be successful. A targeted intervention, such as Wade et al. (2006) study, showed that on-line cognitive-behavioral therapy increases the social competence in a child who has a TBI. Publicly recognizing positive behavior in an individual was also shown to increase social competence in an individual with poor social skills (Ervin et al., 1996). The *Social Inclusion Project* (Denham et al., 2006), which was a universal intervention, also increased social competence in individuals over a three year period.

### Chapter III: Critical Analysis

#### *Introduction*

Based on examination of the literature, it is evident that many factors are associated with the development of social competence in children. Extensive research has outlined the different outcomes as well as the different domains that are most influential in the development of social competence. There are also different interventions that are available for professionals to use with those individuals who lack the skills necessary to develop social competence. A summary of the literature, which discusses the key points and significant findings, is included here. In addition, implications and recommendations regarding this review of literature are reported.

#### *Summary of Findings*

Much of the research on the development of social competence, which is the ability to make use of environmental and personal resources to achieve a desired social outcome (Hussong et al., 2005), indicates that it is a multifaceted developmental process that begins in childhood. Maladjustment in social aspects of a child's life may hinder an adaptive transition into adulthood, which may cause social isolation as an adult (Ditommaso et al., 2003). Adult psychopathology has been linked to peer rejection in pre-adolescence suggesting that being accepted by peers as a child may help prevent mental health problems as an adult (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998). Children who have at least one true friend are less lonely (Parker & Asher, 1993) and, gaining social skills early in life can mediate loneliness in children (Ditommaso et al., 2003). Children with friends are less likely to be aggressive towards their peers because they feel less rejected. In adulthood, these children have higher self-esteem because of these past successes of interacting with others (Parker & Asher,

2003). Children with social competence also have greater academic success throughout their education when compared with their peers who do not have friends (Parker & Asher, 1993). Therefore, it is important to identify the different domains that influence a child's social competence because it is associated with many positive outcomes such as prosocial behavior and overall happiness as an adult.

The three main domains that contribute to the development of social competence are personality characteristics, family environment, and school environment. Social competence is a comprehensive construct in which children draw upon many different abilities from within and resources from their environment to develop (Mendez et al., 2002). Executive functioning controls and regulates behaviors and abilities that contribute to the development of social competency (Anderson et al., 2001). Children having certain innate personality characteristics, such as extroversion and optimism, have been shown to increase the likelihood of developing social competence (Shiner, 2000; Deptula et al., 2006). In addition, an individual's self-esteem also influences social competencies (Slocumb, 2006).

Family environment and parental resources were also found to have an influence on a child's ability to develop socially. Payne (1996) suggested that children who live in families with few economic resources tend to have less social competence at a young age because social opportunities are scarce due to limited time and money. However, research on siblings resulting in findings that indicated that children who have siblings, regardless of economic situation, are positively influenced by early social interaction and tend to develop stronger social competencies than children without siblings (Downey & Condron, 2004). Parental involvement and autonomous support have also been identified as key elements that influence social competence in children (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).

Research on the school environment was found to have an affect on children developing social competencies. The social structure of the classroom and the physical arrangement of the room were found to impact a child's ability to develop socially. More social opportunities in the classroom led to better social competence development in children (Zsolnai, 2002). Children who had a positive relationship with a teacher were less likely to have depressive symptoms. Children who did not have a positive relationship with a teacher were more likely to engage in antisocial behavior (Bond et al., 2007). Teaching empirically-based curriculum that has been found to promote positive interpersonal interactions was recommended to increase children's ability to generalize appropriate social interaction from one situation to the next (McNamara, 2005). Research has found that community support, in terms of financial resources, will enhance a school's overall student social success rate because more professionals within the school are available to help promote quality social skill instruction (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004).

### *Implications*

This literature review has many implications. First, it will serve as a useful resource for those who work closely with children. Having the knowledge about what factors contribute to the development of social competence in children will help parents, teachers, community members, and professionals in recognizing if a child is lacking the skills necessary to develop social competence. Second, understanding the factors that contribute to the development of social competence will also assist in identifying what area the developmental deficit lies. Third, having an awareness of the empirically-based interventions available will enable professionals to intervene with methods that have been proven to be successful. Finally, the literature review provides evidence of the importance of developing

social competence as a child. This may influence parents, teachers, community members, and professionals to be advocates for children who need assistance to develop the skills necessary to gain social competence.

### *Recommendations*

The literature on the development of social competence in children indicates that there is a need for more thorough research. Much of the research on social competence has been conducted on sample sizes that are too small and limited to generalize to the population as a whole; therefore it is recommended that larger sample sizes be used in future research. Although much of the research conducted on the development of social competence yield similar results, rarely was the same measurement technique used. Therefore, it is recommended that a standardized observational assessment be used by all professionals when measuring social behavior. In addition, it is recommended that one definition of social competence be used by professionals to limit confusion among different observational trials.

Another recommendation is to implement standardized instruction in schools that teach social skills. The current research identifies many positive outcomes associated with developing social competence as a child and having standardized empirically-based curriculum in the schools would help increase a child's probability of developing social competence.

It seems that there is a need for more current research on children's social competence; therefore, a final recommendation is to examine the influence of technology upon the development of social competence in children. Since technology, such as on-line chatting and emailing, is becoming a more frequent activity in which children are engaged in, it is necessary to look at how technology may be influencing a child's development of social

competency. With on-line dating and friendship networks becoming a popular way to communicate, it is likely that less face-to-face personal interaction will take place; therefore, it is necessary to identify and explore the different aspects of technological influences upon social competency.

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