

## **Can Social Problem Solving Strategies be a Peer Acceptance Predictor among Preschool Children?**

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### **Abstract**

Peer acceptance and the acquisition of social problem solving are the important accomplishments in the development of young children. However, until recently studies on peer acceptance and social problem solving strategies among pre-school children in Indonesia is still relatively scarce. Therefore this research was directed to examine and explain the differences of three types of social problem-solving strategies in a child's peer acceptance. Research sampling technique was purposive sampling. The characteristic of the subjects study were children 4-6 years old who enrolled and followed the learning program in Kindergarten. These children were from intact family consist of father, mother and children and living together. Subjects numbered of 162 children (70 girls and 92 boys). Respondents of the study were 212 children aged 4- 6 as friends who pass judgments on subjects. The study conducted in 6 Kindergarten in Yogyakarta province. The data were tested by one way variance of technical analysis. The results of the test show Anava F value of 0.753 with a significance level of 0.473,  $p > 0.05$ . The conclusion that can be drawn is that there is no significant difference between the three types of social problem-solving strategies in a child's peer acceptance. In other words, the social problem-solving strategies do not contribute to peer acceptance. Practically, this result will help parents and teachers to design program that stimulates character development to increase children's social skills.

### **Objectives**

This research was directed to examine and explain the differences of three types of social problem-solving strategies in a child's peer acceptance.

### **Perspective of Theoretical Framework**

Peer acceptance during childhood is a supporting factor for a healthy psychological development (Sterry, Reiter-Putril, Garlstein, Gerhard, Vanatta, & Noll, 2010). Compare to children who are rejected by their peers, children who are accepted by peers is believed to be able to adjust. This is showed by the ability to socialize, having no problem and difficulties in emotional and behavior, and having no academic problem (Rubin & Burgess, 2002; Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004). Peer acceptance will enable children to learn how to negotiate, to compromise, to cooperative and to explore any developing ideas (Hartup, 1992).

Previous researches show that peer acceptance is influenced by various behaviors referred to children's social competency (Gresham, 1986; Putallaz & Sheppard, 1992; Vanatta, Gartstein, Zeller, & Noll, 2009). These behaviors indicate children's ability to

balance their behavior in order to achieve personal goals and to maintain good relationships with others (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992; Stormshak & Welsh, 2005). Therefore, these are not only as a basis for social aspect development, socially acceptable behavior but also as a basis for academic function development (Bee & Boyd, 2007; Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005; Rubin, Coplan, Fox, & Calkins, 1995), children cognitive and emotional development (Calkins & Fox, 2002), and a fundamental stage for children to enter a more complex formal education.

Related to socially accepted behavior, social problem solving strategies (hereinafter referred as **SPMS**) is a part of social behavior that becomes an important antecedent for peer acceptance (Walker, 2004). In this case, SPMS is defined as a strategy used by the children in dealing with problems arising from children's conflict (Berk, 2008; Green & Rechis, 2006; Mayeux & Cillessen, 2003). Shantz (1987) claimed that conflict occurs if there is conflict of interest and the discrepancy between children's need and reality. For children, conflict often occurs because of the intention to have or to use limited objects or friends' interference. Strategies used when resolving issues in conflict are the result of an integration of children's cognitive, emotional and social aspects development (Berk, 2012).

The results showed that a prosocial SPMS provides effective solution while maintaining a good relationship with peer correlated with peer acceptance in socio-metric assessment. On the other hand, the agonistic or forceful behaviors that tend to hurt other negatively correlated with peer acceptance (Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Mize & Ladd, 1988; Musun-Miller, 1993; Rubin & Daniels-Beirness, 1983; Rubin & Ross-Krasnor 1983). Aggressive children or likely to harm others is about 40% to 50% of the group of rejected children (Rubin et al, 2005).

On the other hand, when facing problems in social context, children who use passive strategies such as anxious, fearful and withdrawn tend to be reported as rejected. Group with these characters are 10% – 20% in a group of low peer acceptance. It is explain further that the relation between withdrawn attitude and low peer acceptance is getting stronger when children move to the end of childhood and early adolescence (Rubin et al, 2005). Rubin's research approved by Asendorpf, Denissen and Aken (2008) showed the result of 19 years longitudinal research on preschool children who are likely to be aggressive and withdrawn in solving their social problems. Apparently at the age of 23 they still posses these attitudes.

From those literatures can be concluded that SPMS affects individual adaptive functions (Chang, D'zurilla, & Sanna, 2004) from preschool to adolescence (Laundry, Smith, & Swank, 2009) even in early adulthood (Asendorf, Denissen, & Aken, 2008). Therefore, children need to be taught and familiarized with acceptable social strategies in daily basis. Some advantages for children with social acceptable SPMS are they will have a lot of

friends, fight rarely, doing work in a group more effectively (Crick & Dodge, 1994) and responsively facing their social situation (Stormshak & Welsch, 2006). On the contrary, there is a relation between socially unaccepted SPMS and poor academic achievement, mental disorder, delinquency (Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995), and various psychopathology forms in the next level of development (Asendorf, Denissen, & Aken 2008; Fagot, 1998; Mayeux & Cillessen, 2003). Various social behaviors on children cannot be separated from how the children relate with their immediate environment, family, peer, and educator (Berk, 2012; Santrock, 2007).

In this research, theoretical basis referred are Ecological System Theory of Bronfenbrenner (2005) and social information processing models of Kenneth Rubin (1986). In Ecological System Theory, researcher emphasizes the importance of micro system layers and meso-system of 5 layers of ecology system. On micro system layer, it is explained that their immediate environment such as parents, teachers, and peers influences children development. Social problem solving strategies (**SPMS**) as one of the antecedents of peer acceptance in preschool is formed through learning experiences gained from their immediate environment. Related to children social aspect development, Kostelnik, Whiren and Soderman (1988), and also De Hart, Sroufe and Cooper (2004) states that since early age children are stimulated by their environment to establish the ability to acknowledge, to interpret and to respond to social situation in a certain way.

## **METHOD**

Research sampling technique was purposive sampling. The characteristic of the subjects study were children 4-6 years old who enrolled and followed the learning program in Kindergarten. These children are from intact family consist of father, mother and children and living together. Subjects numbered of 162 children (70 girls and 92 boys). Respondents of the study are mothers of 162 subjects and 212 children aged 4- 6 as friends who pass judgments on subjects. The study conducted in 6 Kindergarten in Yogyakarta province. The research data collection are in 2 measurements: **1). Peer Acceptance measuring tool.** These data revealed by rating-scale socio-metric technique addressed to the subject in peer kindergarten. In order to measure the validity of peer acceptance, logical validity is used, while the reliability was tested by test-retest ( $r = 0.735$ ). **2) Social problem solving strategy instrument.** This contains hypothetical social situation dilemma. There are 6 social situations presented: 3 situations concerning the existence of limited resources such as limited books, stationery and toys. Three other situations are to join into a group, to maintain position with friends' disturbance and to have a self-defense against the provocation of mockery. SPMS measuring tools consist of 4 parts, 2 parts for girls interact with girls and boys. Two other parts are for boys who interact with boys and opposite gender. Validity used

to measure the validity content of SPMS is pilot-test. Pilot-test result is a measure of SPMS can be said to be valid as it brings up answers in the form of SPMS with various categories of 90.4% of the total responses, while it is only 9.26% did not meet the objective response measured. Meanwhile, the reliability on the measure is using inter-rater reliability. Average inter-correlation ratio result in all combination made ( $\bar{r}_{xx'}$ ) of 0.95 to 1. While the reliability of the average made by raters is ( $r_{xx''}$ ) of 0.99 to 1.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data are tested by one way variance of technical analysis. Variability variance with Levene's test is 1.774 with a probability of 0.173, which was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). The test results showed the same variants on SPMS fulfilling assumptions to conduct Anava test. Furthermore, from the results of the test showed Anava F value of 0.753 with a significance level of 0.473,  $p > 0.05$ . The conclusion that can be drawn is that there is no significant difference between the three types of social problem-solving strategies in a child's peer acceptance. In other words it can be said that the social problem-solving strategies do not contribute to peer acceptance. It means, either prosocial strategies, passive or coercive on children when solving their problem do not affect the acceptance of their peers. These will be described two explanations that SPMS does not play a significant role toward peer acceptance. However, these explanations remain within the scope of Ecological Systems Theory that emphasizes the role of peers on children and the intra-child relationships formed which lead to various situations that affect children development.

**First explanation.** Since the beginning, the study conducted using sociometric of Koch in 1933 (in Mpofu, Cartney, & Lambert, 2006), peer acceptance is always determined by the individual popularity within the group. It means that popular kids are the ones who are favored or chosen by their peers. The acceptance indicator is shown by the children who are able to adapt well using prosocial behavior when resolving problems which occur as a result of interaction (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Uni-dimensional approach acknowledges that only children who have peer acceptable prosocial behaviors seems to be believed for some time. However, the reality is not always true. The reality shows there are more complex things in terms of peer acceptance. It is not every popular child is prosocial one (Cillessen & Rose, 2005). Rodkin and Hodges research (2003) has shown that children who behave aggressively are often demonstrate his dominance against small or weak ones. In this context, children who use aggressive behavior are the ones that popular.

In addition aggressive children, children who have manipulative skills are also can be associated with the popularity, both boys and girls (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006). This situation is not considered beneficial for children who have passive SPMS and children who

use coercive strategies, such as aggressive and manipulative. Rodkin and Hodges (2003) states based on the research that children who use passive SPMS can not develop themselves freely, even tend to be affected to have SPMS coercive, the passive nature of children which follows their tendency can be a confirmation of internal coercive behavior. Passive child is acknowledged to be the target as a 'victim' of extortion or oppression by the children who have coercive behavior. This is certainly become a serious problem in the development of the children if there is no early intervention.

In line with previous discussion, Lease, Kennedy, and Axelrod (2002) which examined children aged 4 to 6 years in the United states that children are popular among their peers because they have good social skills as well as socially dominant. Domination is showed in children who have leadership, persuasive, and the ability to control. The results of comprehensive interviews with the subjects about the reasons why they choose favorable friends to play with; the result supports the statement. Some of the reasons why choosing favorable friends to play with is because they have such good social competence, for example they are not irritable, peaceful, helpful, kind, amiable, talkative, and posses the similarity in the selection of favorite games. These findings suggest that the popularity and peer acceptance is not only based on the concept of uniformity.

Related to the previous explanation, Cillessen and Bellmore (2011) states that the heterogeneity of the popularity of the preschool children can be seen from a broader perspective: there are two forms of social competence based on social information processing model which emphasizes the role of children social cognitive. The first form is the form of social competence of children skills to be cooperative and prosocial. This capability is supported by children cognitive skills to assess people and situations around by considering people's perspective and to read other's emotions. Thus, the ability to think positively, interpersonal assessment accuracy, the ability to take the perspective of others, understanding emotions will encourage prosocial behavior, empathetic, understanding, supportive, and sensitive to other children expectation. These children will be favorable. These conditions do not drive children to behave aggressively or forceful. Second forms of social competence are demonstrated by children's ability to act effectively and to achieve ambitious goals in social situations, whether it's for himself or his group. This usually happens when children play which require them to obey the rules. The behavior displayed is will imposing, being violent or aggressive, and manipulate. This kind of children is usually in charge of being able to bring himself and his group to achieve their goals. For some other children, those children look violent, aggressive, or untrustworthy, but on the other side it can be viewed as intelligent, and powerful. Children who have those skills appear to be strong, authoritative, and become the center of attention in a group of friends, although it is not

always necessarily favorable. These kinds of children usually like the passive children or ones that has no power to overcome sorts of things.

**Second explanation.** Lemeriso and Arsenio (2000) state that the SPMS cannot solely play in describing the children social competence. Social competence requires the coordination and integration of behaviors that show empathy and appropriate emotional response. In this case, when the children look to have prosocial behavior. It should be also indicated by the expression of empathy and appropriate emotional. According to the researcher observation in the kindergarten, children sometimes being helpful but they are still not capable enough to express their emotions appropriately, both verbal and nonverbal. In another situations, there are children resolving conflicts when interacting using passive or coercive strategies, but in some other situations when a friend gets the displeasure, such as falls, does not have toys, has no stationery, the child will help and show the expression of empathic. Things like this can also make the children to be popular or favored by group.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. Conclusion**

There is no significant difference between the three types of social problem-solving strategies in a child's peer acceptance. In other words, the social problem-solving strategies do not contribute to peer acceptance.

### **B. Recommendations**

#### **1. For parents and educators**

- a. It is noteworthy that there is no result that social problem solving strategy contributes on peer acceptance. Although it is expected that there are other studies to prove the dominance in early childhood group, but parents and educators need to be cautiously continue to observe the social behavior of children at home and kindergarten. This is intended to act preventively as well as curatively as early as possible if a child shows behavioral changes in negative sense.
- b. Various interaction objectives in children as the reason why they use particular strategy can be put as instructional materials to establish children social behavior. It is not only to understand what the children's perception in a situation of conflict is, programs and learning activities can be designed to use the situation to practice social behaviors expected. Repetition and practice is predicted to form a prosocial internalized in children.

## **2. Future studies**

- a. As stated in the conclusion, this study describes a relatively new phenomenon in popularity and peer acceptance. It is an open question whether this fact has been recognized by educator in preschool or has not been yet. To get the ideas on the matters, it needs to conduct further research on the educators' understanding on the subject. The awareness of the phenomenon can lead the guidance to the children as soon as possible, for example, to lead to practical implications in the implementation of learning programs in preschool institutions.
- b. Assessing how coercive strategies children influence those who tend to use passive SPMS. Alternative theoretical perspective that can be used is the Social Learning Theory of Bandura. According to Dereli (2009), in this theory can be seen how the imitation and observation inter-child social behavior can affect the change of previous strategy in children. Furthermore, Dereli also stated that peer is an effective model to children which high capability it shape other friends' behaviors.

### **Educational importance of this study for theory, practice, and policy**

Theoretically, the research will be beneficial to enrich theoretical concept of developmental psychology studies on social aspect particularly on SPMS and peer acceptance on preschool children aged 4-6 years in Indonesia. Practically this can be consideration for parents and practitioners, such as, educators or people involved in this sector. The result of this study will provide reinforcement to maintain, to improve or to enhance various aspects of parenting behavior that contribute in children social development. Moreover, with the progress description of SPMS in 4-6 aged children with its dynamic social situations will help parents and teachers to design program that stimulate character development to increase children's social skills.

### **Connection to the themes of the congress**

This research emphasizes that early child education plays a very important role in children life, particularly in stimulating and teaching social skills to them. As a fundamental stage, early childhood is a golden age in teaching various development aspects which become the fundamentals of the further development. One task of children development in early childhood is to learn to interact in a way that is acceptable by their peers (Berk, 2012). Peer acceptance will provide positive benefits to their way of thinking, behavior and emotional management (Walker, 2004). Those benefits are expected to affect their next development stage (Rubin et al, 2005). On the other hand, rejection or low peer acceptance will be a hindrance in children development process. If there is no early intervention this can lead to mental problem and criminal problem in later development stage (Dodge, Coeie, &

Lynam, 2006). Through a well systematic learning program strengthened by the government policy in each preschool institution, it is hoped that children are able to master some social skills and apply these skills in any condition since their early stage.

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