

# Does Child's Temperament Determine the Social Skills of Boys and Girls

By

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## Abstract

*The aim of this study was to examine the temperamental characteristics (approach-withdrawal, persistence, rhythmicity and reactivity) and social skills of 5-6 year old children in relation to gender. The research sample consisted of 128 Turkish children (between the ages of five and six); 65 of them were girls (50.8%) and 63 of them were boys (49.2%) all attending kindergarten in the city of İzmir, administered by the Ministry of National Education. Data collection instruments implemented are Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales-2 and The Short Temperament Scale for Children. The results obtained from the study revealed a statistically significant difference between the reactivity subscale scores of children in relation to gender indicating that reactivity scores of boys are higher than girls. On the other hand, no statistically significant difference was detected between the approach/withdrawal, persistence, rhythmicity subscale scores of children in relation to gender. The results obtained from the Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scale (social skills subscale) items social cooperation; social independence and social interaction average scores were significantly different in relation to gender. Further analysis indicate that average scores of girls were higher than average scores of boys. According to the results, no significant correlation was found between social cooperation and social interaction and approach/withdrawal, persistence and rhythmicity subscales. On the other hand, a statistically significant correlation was observed between the social independence and reactivity subscale.*

**Keywords:** Gender, preschool education, social skills, temperament.

## 1. Introduction

During preschool period, children's social awareness and interaction with other people increases while developing their self-concept and receiving social acceptance from their peer groups (Wortham, 1998). Children between 2-6 years start to learn how social relationships develop while spending time with others especially with their own peers (Gülay & Akman, 2009). Generally, the non-verbal skills (eye contact, facial expression, body language) are the first learned skills. The verbal social skills are learned as a result of uttering words and increasing interaction with others. Therefore, preschool period is most suitable and essential time to learn social skills (Namka, 1997). There are various factors that affect the social skills development. Temperament plays an important role in general social functionality and efficacy in the children's social skills (Sanson et al., 2004).

Temperament can be defined as the determining styles of behaviour specific to the individual (Kristal, 2005). The traditional view is that temperamental traits are largely genetic and biological in nature, elicited early in childhood, and generally stable across the lifespan (Grist & McCord, 2010). Theoretically, temperament may operate indirectly in friendships by way of its influence on social development and social skills (Rothbart & Bates, 1998; Sanson, Hemphill & Smart, 2002). Empirical evidence suggests that temperament contributes to social behaviours such as (Rothbart, Ahadi & Hershey, 1994; Russell et al., 2003); withdrawal (Rubin, Burgess & Hastings, 2002); aggression (Guerin et al., 1994), and aggressive behaviors (Rubin et al., 2003; Rubin, Hastings, Chen, Stewart & McNichol,

1998; Tallandini, 2004) in preschool and elementary school-aged children. Temperament determines the nature of social interaction of children with others. While some children may be warmhearted and close to others some choose to be distant and shy in social surroundings (Yağmurlu & Kodlak, 2010). Knowledge about an individual's temperamental traits may be important in understanding an individual's development of social skills. There is a strong correlation between children facing problems in their social relationships and their temperament types (Moon, 2001). Research findings show that flexible and persistent temperamental traits tend to elicit positive emotions, behavioural adaptation (Kyrios & Prior 1990; Youngblade & Mulvihill, 1998) whereas reactive and impulsive temperamental traits correlate with problematic social skills (Sanson et al., 1994).

Yağmurlu, Sanson and Köymen's study (2005) investigated the influences of parenting and child temperament on the development of prosocial behaviors, and the mediating role of theory of mind in this relationship. The participants in the study were 151 Australian and 50 Turkish preschoolers living in Australia, and their mothers and care-providers. Research findings show that as the child's reactive temperament attribute increases, his/her friendliness and patience decrease. Ollendick, Oswald and Francis (1989) studied the classification of children by their teachers. The research findings of investigating popular, aggressive and introvert children show that popular children display more positive behaviour than aggressive and introvert children; aggressive children show more negative behaviour compared to popular and introvert children. In the same study the teachers describe the popular children as extrovert, friendly, enjoying other children's company, being aware of himself/herself and aware of others, generally looking happy, and being liked by others. This description is parallel to easy-going children's characteristics. In a study carried out by Gleason, Gower, Hohmann and Gleason (2005) on temperament and choice of friends in preschool children the results show that the choice of friends could change according to temperament. While girls choose friends being less active and submissive, boys could choose children who are more active. As a result of the study, temperament plays a role in the choice of friends. Moreover, temperament and gender are more important for girls in the choice of friends than boys.

In the preschool period, temperament traits and social skills may differ depending on gender. For example, in their study Winsler and Wallace (2002), collected psychometric data about children using the "Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales developed by Merrill (1994) to determine 3-4 year old preschool children's problem behaviours and social skills. Parents and teachers were asked to check on the scale the behaviours of children in their natural environment through observation to evaluate the criteria reliability of this measurement. The scale was applied to 47 preschool children's parents and teachers in the study. According to the findings of the study, both teachers and parents stated that boys had more externalized behaviour problems than girls. The teachers' reports on children's independently observed behaviours pointed out to the importance of goal-directed behaviour, attention span, maladaptive behaviour, persistence, establishing close contact with the teacher. Martin, Wisenbaker and Baker (1997) have investigated whether temperament traits differed in relation to gender, finding that boys' activity levels were higher, and their adaptation levels were lower.

The main idea of this study can be interpreted as such: if the type of temperament tendency and the social skill problems encountered during preschool period are together taken into consideration, problems which may arise in later life can be prevented. Barron and Earls (1984) state that the early behavioural problems in kindergarten are the indicators of serious psychological and behavioural problems such as depression at school and in puberty, suicidal tendencies, anxiety and culpability. The following questions were asked for this purpose:

1. Does the temperament traits for preschool children differ according to their genders?
2. Does the social skills for preschool children differ according to their genders?
3. Is there a relationship between preschool children's temperament traits and social skills?

## 2. Method

### *Model*

This study was used relational survey model.

### *Participants*

The participants of this study include 128 Turkish children between the ages of five and six; 65 of them were girls (50.8%) and 63 of them were boys (49.2%). A random sampling method was used to select the sample group. The sample group were all attending kindergarten in the city of İzmir, administered by the Ministry of National Education.

### *Materials*

***The Short Temperament Scale for Children:*** In order to measure temperamental traits of the children, the Turkish version adapted by (Yağmurlu & Sanson, 2009) of the *Short Temperament Scale for Children* (STSC) was used. Parents evaluated their children's temperamental characteristics on a 6 level Likert type scale consisting of 30 items and 4 subscales (approach, persistence, rhythmicity and reactivity). In Yağmurlu and Sanson's study (2009) internal consistency was .80 for Approach/Withdrawal, .77 for Reactivity, .48 for Rhythmicity and .76 for Persistence. In this current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient scores for Reactivity subscale was .71, Approach/Withdrawal .68, Persistence .74, and Rhythmicity .53.

***Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales (PKBS):*** The Turkish version (Alisinanoğlu & Özbey, 2009) of the Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales was used. Standardized rating scale that can be used by parents or teachers to assess social skills and problem behaviour levels in children 3 to 6 years of age. The Social Skills scale includes the Social Cooperation, Social Interaction, and Social Independence subscales. The Problem Behavior scale includes both Internalizing Problems and Externalizing Problems. Items are rated on a 4-point scale (never, rarely, sometimes, and often) based on the rater's perception of the frequency of the behaviour specified. Internal consistency coefficients have all been in the .90's range. In this current study "The Social Skills Scale" was used. Reliability studies showed that the Social Skills Scale overall score .92, along with the social cooperation subscale was .92, social interaction subscale was .84 and social independence subscale was .85 scores had high internal consistency reliability.

### *Procedure*

The research was conducted in the relational scanning model. The data was collected from the mothers and teachers of children. Before the data collection process, the parents and teachers of the children were informed about the objective of the study and how the measurement tools would be applied. Parents were asked for permission about their children's participation in the study and data was gathered from the parents of children that gave permission.

## 3. Results

The temperament and social skills variable and the children's total points in each subscale were evaluated. Data analysis was carried out in two steps. First, preliminary analyses examining gender differences in temperament and social skills were conducted. Second step Pearson correlation between social cooperation, social interaction, and social independence subscales and also the subscales of temperament like approach, persistence, reactivity and rhythmicity were computed.

The reactivity scores of children are significantly related with gender. It can be seen from Table 1 that, reactivity scores of boys are higher than girls. No statistically significant difference was found between the persistence, approach-withdrawal and rhythmicity scores of children in relation to gender.

**Table 1. Comparison of Scores on Short Temperament Scale for Children (Sub-scales) in Relation to Gender**

	Gender	N	X	t	p
Temp./Reactivity	Girl	65	25.23	-3.19	<b>.00**</b>
	Boy	63	29.34		
Temp./Persistence	Girl	65	27.33	.89	.37
	Boy	63	26.26		
Temp./Approach-Withdrawal	Girl	65	29.20	1.32	.18
	Boy	63	27.68		
Temp./Rhythmicity	Girl	65	27.81	2.41	.81
	Boy	63	27.63		

$N = 128$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table 2. Comparison of Scores on Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scale - (Social Skills) in Relation to Gender**

	Gender	N	X	t	p
Social Cooperation	Girl	65	42.00	2.76	<b>.00**</b>
	Boy	63	39.79		
Social Independence	Girl	65	28.64	2.83	<b>.00**</b>
	Boy	63	26.71		
Social Interaction	Girl	65	13.24	2.343	<b>.02*</b>
	Boy	63	12.17		

$N = 128$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

On the other hand, Table 2 suggests that the highest average value of social cooperation, social interaction, and social independence subscales scores level was obtained from the group of girls compared to the scores of boys.

**Table 3. Correlation Distribution Between the Short Temperament Scale for Children and Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales (PKBS-2)**

	Social Cooperation	Social Independence	Social Interaction
Temp./Reactivity	r	-.10	-.24**
	p	.24	.00
Temp./Persistence	r	.16	.10
	p	.06	.24
Temp./Approach-Withdrawal	r	-.08	.13
	p	.32	.11
Temp./Rhythmicity	r	.00	.04
	p	.96	.59

\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table 3 shows negative significant correlation between the reactivity subscale and social independence ( $r = -.24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). There was no significant correlations between social cooperation and social interaction subscales approach/withdrawal, persistence and rhythmicity scores. As reactivity increases social independence by the peers decreases.

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the relationship of temperamental traits and the development of social skills during preschool years. The second aim was to investigate if there were any reciprocal relations between the temperamental traits of children and social skills in relation to gender. The social skills of children were measured by Preschool and Kindergarten Behaviour Scales and temperamental characteristics of children were determined by Short Temperament Scale for Children examined through implementation.

A statistically significant difference was found between the 'reactivity' subscale scores of children in relation to gender. On the other hand, no statistically significant difference was detected between the approach/withdrawal, persistence, rhythmicity subscale scores of children in relation to gender. Accordingly, the reactivity levels of boys are higher than those of girls. The social skills scores of children are significantly related to gender. According to results, the highest average value of social cooperation, social interaction, and social independence subscales' score levels was obtained from the group of girls compared to the scores of boys. Research results, which indicated the high relationship between approach and persistence, dimensions of temperament and both social competence and peer preference are parallel with the literature findings. Reactivity means the state of readiness of the child to a specific stimulus or situation (e.g. When upset or annoyed with a task, my child throws it down, cries, slams doors, etc.).

When studying temperament and social skills the gender factor should be taken into consideration as well since gender differences in temperament have been found in preschool children (Buss, 1989). Boys are frequently rated higher in activity level and impulsivity (Gunnar et al., 2003; Mendez et al., 2002). Walker, Berthelsen, and Irving (2001) investigated the relation between difficult children and their peer relationships in preschool-age boys and girls. In a study to investigate if the temperament varies in relation to gender, Martin, Wisenbaker, Baker and Huttunen (1997) concluded that boys had higher and incompatible level of activity and these children had lower adaptation levels. Gleason et al. (2005) explained that some components of gender and temperaments (activity level, impulsivity, and soothability) can be related to the development of friendship in children in early childhood period. Wood et al. (2002) studied 3-5 year old 76 children from various cultures (Asian and African Americans). They found that aggressive, shy/introverted and misbehaved both girls and boys were rejected by their peers.

According to the research findings by Blair, Denham, Kochanoff, and Whipple (2004) who studied the role of temperament and emotional regulation in the development of social skill behaviours, found that ability to cope with emotions was more important than temperament alone in the development of prosocial behaviour in children. In a study carried out by Jamyang-Tshering (2004) on social skills of preschool children, girls exhibited more social skills than boys while boys showed more problem behaviours than girls. Social skills are special behaviours necessary for starting and continuing positive relationships with others (Ladd, 1990; Guglielmo & Tryon, 2001; Westwood, 2003). Social skills should be developed during preschool years to prevent social and behavioural problems which may be elicited in social surroundings (Merrill, 1995; Squires, 2003; Roche-Decker, 2004; Herrera & Little, 2005).

Children who have difficulty in social relationships due to inborn temperamental traits experience psychological problems both in social and academic contexts. Not being able to develop positive social relationships in early years can cause social and behavioural problems as well as developing negative attitudes towards school, being dismissed from school, committing crime during adolescence, maladaptive behaviour in adulthood, and low performance in professional life (Caldarella & Merrill, 1997;

Roche-Decker, 2004). Depending on these findings it is quite important in early childhood that the children's behaviours should be closely observed and positive behaviour support be given when needed.

## 5. Conclusions

Temperament has a significant role in relationships of the child with other people. Temperament is accepted as one of the major factors that might be influencing the way children interact with their peers thus affecting how they form early friendship relations. Peer relationships become important as children develop social skills in early development. Peer problems observed in the first years of life are related to social and emotional problems in later age (Fox et al., 2005; Henderson et al., 2004). Children should be motivated at these early ages to develop positive social skills in their relationships among their peers.

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