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Development of the Model of Social Competence for Young Children

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Introduction:

Social participation occurs during many childhood occupations such as play and school work. It has been proposed by authors of cognate fields that children present two different sets of social skills. Interpersonal social skills (IPS) are important for maintaining friendships and engaging in play, while learning related social skills (LRSS) are important for positive classroom behaviours (e.g. following directions). Social competence is important for developing successful relationships and is necessary for occupational engagement. However, in the literature, there is a lack of theoretical models that can comprehensively guide occupational therapists regarding the assessment and management of young children's social competence.

Objectives:

In this study, a theoretical model on young children's social competence was proposed. The study aimed to investigate the presence of IPS and LRSS constructs, in relation to the proposed Model of Social Competence.

Methods:

In the content validation phase, an expert panel of 16 Australian and Singaporean early childhood and health professionals were consulted regarding the content of two assessment tools. Next, in the construct validation phase, the investigator observed 117 Singaporean children aged three to six years during participation of free play and school work tasks. The early childhood educators completed two behaviour rating questionnaires regarding the child's social skills. Rasch analysis was used to examine the construct validity of the social skill attributes.

Results:

Results indicated the existence of two separate unidimensional constructs namely IPS and LRSS, as proposed by the Model of Social Competence. In addition, other related constructs such as Compliance also emerged from the analysis.

Conclusion:

Empirical evidence was found to support the proposed Model of Social Competence for young children in early childhood environment. Suggestions regarding how clinicians can comprehensively assess social skills and work more collaboratively with early childhood educators when assessing children with poor social skills in their naturalistic environment will be discussed.

Contribution to the practice/ evidence base of occupational therapy:

A theoretical model for occupational therapists to use with young children has been developed and empirically supported hence addressing a gap in the literature. This model will enable occupational therapists to comprehensively assess young children's social skills.