

AGE AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND INTERPERSONAL COPING MECHANISM OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract: The study investigates the age-group and gender differences on preschoolers` (N = 537) social competence and coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms of negotiation, opposition, seeking for support is characteristic for older children, whereas emotional response and avoidance for younger ones. Regarding to genders, girls choose the emotional response, help seeking or opposition more frequent than boys, boys use more physical aggression or they tend to avoid situation when a peer encounters a problem. Girls` social competence is assessed to be higher by adult evaluators, but they receive more peer acceptance as well.

Keywords: social competence, coping mechanism, age differences, gender differences, preschool children

Introduction

Researches have proved that preschool time is a sensitive period in the development of social competence (Berks, 2010, Zsolnai, Kasik, Lesznyák, 2008a; Nagy, 2004) and the best time to notice, prevent and meliorate problems. For an effective prevention we need to know in which age group the suitability for some social skills grows the most. From a demographic point of view we also have to take into consideration the gender of the child in the social development of preschoolers. We can read many researches on the differences between the social competences of boys and girls, and even more on inequalities in academic performance later on. Some researches certify that there are differences in social behavior between genders (Zsolnai et al., 2008a; Oláh, 2005; McDowel and Parke, 2005), whereas others think that all these are only the result of differences in social demands, consequently differences in socialization (Matud, 2004). Some researchers show significant differences in the way we interpret these social manifestations (Duffy, 2011). Naturally, the differences in the social behaviour of preschoolers are not only related to factors of gender and age. Family background, due to its social economic and cultural factors, education style, etc. also has great influence on differences in the social development a preschooler (Lazsádi, 2016). We have studied the variables of family and micro-social background as well, but they are not the subject of the present article.

The Concepts of Social Competence and Coping Mechanism. The link between the two concepts

There is a vast variety of skills and abilities, attitudes belonging to social competence including but not limited to prosociality, communicating skills, self-efficacy, competing and cooperatings skills (Nagy, 2010). Semrud (2007, 1) gave a concluding definition: social

competence is "the ability to respond flexibly and a persons` ability to handle the social challenges". The response to social challenges means that the person can control his emotions and actions and in situations of interpersonal stress can apply adaptive coping strategies (Saarni, 1999). Researchers accept coping as a mechanism belonging to social competence (Goodman and Southam-Gerow, 2010). Liew and his colleagues (2004) point out its volitional character, according to him coping is the effort to temper the effects of stressful circumstances.

The coping responses discussed in this paper are notable in the context of peer stress, most particular in peer rejection. In specific interpersonal situations Zsolnai and her colleagues (2007) study 6 types of coping mechanism in kindergarten: negotiation, avoidance, emotional response, opposition, physical aggression, support seeking from adults and they add a coping strategy for the situations when one of his peers encounters obstacles: offering help. In our previous research we studied the correlation between social competence and coping mechanisms (Lazsádi, 2015). According to our results seeking for support and negotiation coping mechanisms correlate with social competence score positively, whereas aggression and emotional response correlate negatively in situations when the observed child is in an interpersonal conflict. When we observed the intervention of the assessed child when one of his peers is in a conflictual situation, we noticed significant correlation between offering support and high social competence. On the other hand, we stated negative correlation in the case of avoidance. Concordant to our results, international research on children`s social skills concludes that aggression and withdrawal are negative poles of social behavior and they are tackled as maladaptive forms of coping (Semrud-Clickeman, 2007; Skinner et al., 2003), on the other side active problem solving, support seeking are proved to be adaptive at young children (Thorne, Andrews, and Nordstokke 2013; Fabes és Eisenberg, 1992).

Research on Age and Gender Differences of Social Competence and Coping of Children

The age of preschooler` is most often divided in three groups: 3-4, 4-5, 5-7 years. The present paper refers to these age groups to define differences in age specific social development. The social competence, as system of various components, becomes more and more effective in the course of the preschool period, because as the child advances in age, he will become more and more capable of considering another persons` point of view (Piaget, 1983), of controlling his emotions (Izard, 2001), of verbal expression of his feelings, to cooperate in play (Mérei, Reismann and Binét, 2006). By the end of the preschool time, till the age of 8 at least, the child is supposed to own these capacities, than he will be able to understand and to adapt to the rules of school and social life (Berks, 2010; Mérei et al., 2006).

Regarding to the changes of coping skills between the ages of 3 and 7 Hungarian and Italian results have found (Zsolnai et al., 2008b) that the frequency of opposition and negotiation grows with the age. The same reasearchers demonstrate contradicting results about the coping mechanism of support seeking: according to the Hungarian research the frequency of support seeking decreases with age, whereas Italian results show that it increases, but only in cases when the observed child himself encounters gets into a situation of conflict. In contrast, in situations when a peer gets into conflict, the frequency of support seeking grows in the case of Hungarian children, and the frequency of offering support decreases with age. As far as physical aggression is concerned in the case of preschoolers belonging to the two different nations, researchers have come up with contradicting results again: the frequency of physical aggression grows with age in

the case of Hungarian children whereas Italian children show more aggression in younger age groups. It is necessary to mention that in the research presented above showed results of a longitudinal research of 3 years long.

Regarding to gender, differences in social behaviour and skills show alterations on the level of prosocial behaviour between boys and girls. Researches on both children and adults have proved that girls are much more willing to offer help and they manifest emotions much more frequently (Zsolnai, Kasik and Lesznyák, 2008b; McDowel and Parke, 2005). Among the negative social interactions of girls the most characteristic one is passive coping which leads to anxiety or indirect verbal aggression (Fiske, 2004). Boys apply active strategies more often for problem solving on the positive pole. From maladaptive mechanisms physical aggression is much more characteristic to them. According to results of Zsolnai (2008a) avoidance showed differences only in the case of the youngest girls, whereas physical aggression was more frequent in the behaviour of older boys than that of girls. McDowel and Parke (2005) points out that boys and girls gain different feedback from peers according to their interpersonal coping: as in the social interaction of girls there are more prosocial elements and boys use aggression more frequently, girls gain popularity much more often and boys face rejection more often. Feedback is very important in forming social skills, it strengthens the tendency for repeating the same behaviour.

We consider it necessary to study differences of age group and gender on social competence and interpersonal coping, even though earlier studies have already dealt with these considerations. The various differences between cultures, population and methods of research can lead to interesting results.

Hypotheses

In the present research we have tested the following hypotheses:

1. Coping methods which require verbalism and cooperation increase with age during preschool, these are: negotiation, opposition, seeking for support and offering support. The number of passive and emotional reactions decreases with age, these being: avoidance, aggression and emotional ventilation.
2. Girls and boys apply different coping strategies in situations of conflict.
3. The social competence of girls` are evaluated to be higher than boys` social competence level
4. Girls gain more likability in their own peer group.

Participants and methods

The sample of current research is made up of 537 Hungarian preschool children from Romania, the town of Targu Mures, where 42% of the population belongs to the Hungarian minority. 280 boys and 257 girls were assessed. Almost half of the children, 49%, are at the age of 5-7, 28% are 4-5, and 23% are 3-4 years old. Due to the frequent absence of the children from the kindergarten, we could not apply all the research methods to each individual child. We measured social competence with three different tools.

The Coping Strategies Questionnaire (Zsolnai, Kasik and Lesznyák, 2007) measures the functioning of social skills in negative interpersonal situations of frustration. It has a Child form and a Teacher form as well. We got self-evaluation data about coping strategies from 360 children and 459 teachers completed the questionnaire about children`s coping skills. Internal

consistency coefficient confirms the reliability of the questionnaire: $\alpha = 0.78$. The questionnaire included nine social situations in kindergarten, for example: “What does a child do if a group mate excludes him from group play?” Seven questions refer to situations when the assessed child himself gets into conflicting situations (self-centered situations). Another two questions demand answers on what he does when one of his peers encounters obstacles (peer situation). Zsolnai and her colleagues (2007) consider, that these two situations are characterized by different behavioral forms, thus the answers should be interpreted separately according to the type of situation. In the analysis of our questionnaire we explained the results separately for these two situations, and we consequently named these as self-centered and peers situation in our further description. Adults completed the questionnaire individually, indicating only one answer from the enlisted ones. Children were asked by a research assistant and answers were indicated according to the children’s answer. Each answer corresponds to one coping reaction: Support Seeking (asking for adults` help); Negotiation (asking the peer to give back something, to play with him etc); Opposition (arguing to get to the goal); Avoidance (quit the situation); Physical aggression (hitting the other one); Emotional Response (crying). In situations referring to peers the coping mechanism of Support Offering (helping to get up or relate the other child in an adequate way) is also one of the enlisted choices.

The Social Competence Screening for Preschoolers (Miclea et al., 2010) includes a Parent form (SCS-P) and a Teacher Form (SCS-T), questionnaire were compiled for three age groups: 3-4, 4-5, 5-7. 446 parents and the same number of teachers answered the questions.. The screening initially was compiled in Romanian by the researchers of Cognitrom Centre and we adapted it to Hungarian minorities from Romania. Details of questionnaire adaptation are not the focus of the present research. The questionnaire assesses three subscales: compliance to rules, interpersonal skills and prosocial behavior. It inquires the frequency of a specific behavior on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=almost never and 5=almost always., for parents and teachers separately. The reliability indicators are high on all levels: Cronbach-alpha is above 0.7 for each group.

Sociometric assessment was based on the method of Denham and McKinley (1990) for kindergarten children. Children could assess their peers with the help of symbols: ☺ ☹ ☺. The meaning of the symbols were explained to be: “I like him, I like playing with him.” / “I don’t like him, I don’t like playing with him.” / “I like him and I don’t at the same time.” Further, we will name the smiley as a positive nomination, the sad face as a negative nomination and the emoticon with the straight mouth as a neutral nomination. 189 children were rated by their peers with sociometry.

Results

As the variables failed the assumption of normality, the Mann–Whitney U (U , p) nonparametric measure was appropriate to use. All correlations mentioned below are significant.

Differences According to Age

Regarding coping mechanisms, in self-centered situations children’s answer varied according to age concerning negotiation and emotional expression. The choice for negotiation is much more frequent in the age group of 5-7, in contrast with children between the age of 3-4 ($U=4663$, $p=0.001$). Emotional reaction is less frequent in 5-7 year-olds than at younger children (4-5 years: $U=7963$; $p=0.006$ / 3-4 years: $U=4663$; $p=0.001$), but there is no significant difference

between the two lower age-group. The answers given by teachers reflect differences in a more nuanced way: in self-centered situations there are differences between age groups concerning every coping variable except physical aggression. Avoidance and emotional ventilation occur in case of little children more frequently, whereas opposition, support seeking and negotiation occur in children of more advanced ages. 4-5 year-old children choose support seeking more often ($U=3813$; $p=0.008$) than their younger peers ($U=3906$; $p=0.014$), but they avoid more rarely. Older children design opposition as a strategy for their defense more often than their 4-5 year-old peers ($U=12348$; $p=0.016$). There is significant difference in opposition ($U=9077$; $p=0.001$), avoidance ($U=9107$; $p=0.002$), negotiation ($U=8686$; $p=0.000$) and emotional reaction ($U=9633$; $p=0.008$) between 3-4 year-olds and 5-7 year-olds.

In peers` situations, when the peer experienced frustration, differences between age groups were found only according teachers. Avoidance ($U=9030$; $p=0,000$) and emotional response ($U=11223$; $p=0.015$) are more frequent in the youngest age group than in 5-7 year-olds, the latter are seeking help more often than the 3-4 year-old preschoolers ($U=9391$; $p=0.007$). These skills vary similarly in self-centered situations as well, in younger and older age groups. Contrary to our expectations there wasn't a significant difference between age groups concerning support offering.

Differences between age-groups in the frequency of applying coping strategies is presented in Table 1.

1. Table: Differences in coping strategies between agegroups

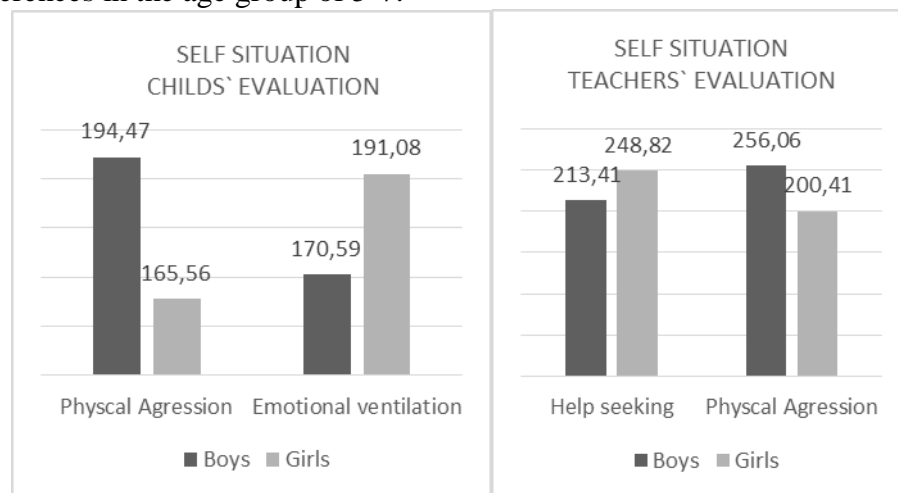
	Self-evaluation		Teachers' evaluation	
	Self-centered	Peers-centered	Self-centered	Peers-centered
Seeking help	n.s.	n.s.	3-4 < 4-5	3-4, 4-5 < 5-7
Avoidance	n.s.	n.s.	5-7, 4-5 < 3-4	5-7 < 3-4, 4-5
Opposition	n.s.	n.s.	3-4 < 4-5	n.s.
Negotiation	3-4 < 5-7	n.s.	3-4 < 4-5	n.s.
Aggression	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Emotional reaction	5-7 < 3-4	n.s.	n.s.	5-7 < 3-4, 4-5
Offering help	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

Note: n.s.=non significant

As the questionnaires for *social competence* were compiled separately for each age group taking in consideration the specific characteristics of development, there is no possibility for comparing the scores of age-groups. Every child has to be competent according to his own age-group level. Moreover, the outcome of research showed differences between genders, which were stronger in specific age-groups.

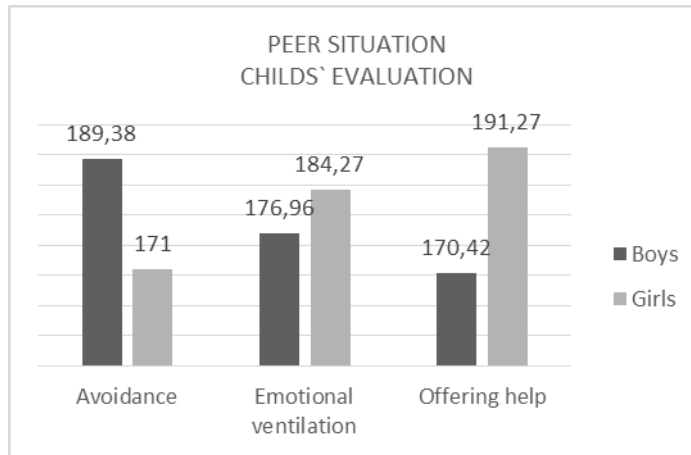
Differences According to Gender

Based on their self-assessment in self-centered situations we found differences between boys and girls on *coping mechanism* in the matter of physical aggression, opposition and emotional ventilation (Figure 1a.): while boys turn to physical aggression more often in conflicting situations, girls often affirm that they cope with obstacles using opposition or emotional reactions. Differences between the aggression of boys and girls is the most obvious in the age group of 4-5 ($U=632$; $p=0.002$), whereas opposition is more frequent in girls than in boys ($U=4707$; $p=0.023$) in the age group 5-7. Differences in emotional reactions are significant ($U=14340.5$; $p=0.015$), but it cannot be presented for each age-group separately. The answers of teachers revealed that girls ask for help more often than boys in problematic situations ($U=6685,5$; $p=0.003$), moreover the answers given by kindergarten teachers correspond with the self-assessment of children regarding the fact that boys use *physical aggression* more often than girls when they encounter problems ($U=5911$; $p=0.000$) (Figure 2b): Both skills show significant differences in the age group of 5-7.



1. Figure: Gender differences on coping mechanisms in self-situations in the assessment of the child (self-report)(a) and in the assessment of the teacher(b)

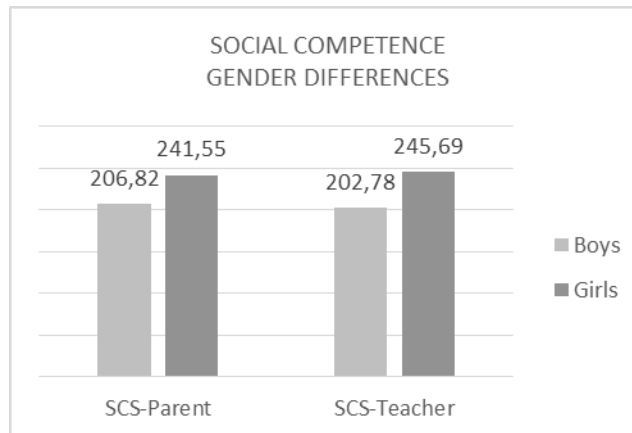
Based on self-assessment, in the situations when other children encounter obstacles (peers' situation), there are significant differences between genders in avoidance, emotional response and offering help (Figure 2.). 3-4 year-old boys choose avoidance more than girls ($U=341.5$; $p=0.017$). Girls cry more than boys ($U=15525$; $p=0.014$). Girls also offer help very frequently to the one in need for protection ($U=14307.5$; $p=0.014$). The last two results were revealed regardless of the age group.



2. Figure: Gender differences on coping mechanism in peers' situation in the assessment of the child (self-report)

In peer-situation the answers given by teachers indicate that the greatest difference between genders is in their avoidant behavior in the youngest age group ($U=747$; $p=0.038$).

In social competence according to the assessment offered both by parents and teachers, girls reach a higher score in social competence than boys (parent: $U=21092$; $p=0.004$, teacher: $U=20177$; $p=0.000$) (Figure 4.). The difference is more significant in the age group of 5-7 (parent: $U=3755.5$; $p=0.001$, teacher: $U=3999$; $p=0.005$), however teachers think that it is also very important in 3-4 year-old children ($U=1146$; $p=0.016$).



1. Figure: Gender differences on social competence in the assessment of the parent and the teacher

Likability in peer group also differs according to gender: girls receive more positive feedback ($U=4652.5$; $p=0.003$), whereas boys receive more negative feedback ($U=4688$; $p=0.004$). Differences between genders are more emphasized at the age of 5-7: (girls: $U=1313.5$; $p=0.001$, boys: $U=1385.5$; $p=0.002$).

Discussion

According to our results the preferences in certain coping competences differ from age group to age group from 3 to 6-7. The assessment made by teachers has revealed these differences in a more nuanced way than the self-assessment of children. Summing up the

differences we can say that negotiation, opposition, seeking for support is characteristic for older children, whereas emotional response and avoidance for younger ones. It differs from assessor to assessor which age groups show the most significant differences, that is why we cannot draw a clear conclusion regarding the exact time (year) when a certain coping skill strengthens the most. In the matter of the most antisocial behavior, namely aggression, none of the assessors have shown any significant difference between age groups. Similarly, the differences in the most prosocial behavior, as offering support, in peer-situations are insignificant as well. Our results on negotiation and opposition coping strategies, have been proved by Hungarian and Italian researches as well, in which they clearly stated that both are mainly characteristic for older age groups of preschoolers. Our results on support seeking corresponded to the Italian results, which say that the frequency of support seeking grows with age. In situations of peer frustration both Hungarian studies from Hungary and ours` from Transylvania, the coping mechanism of asking for support from an adult is more frequent. As for physical aggression, the above mentioned studies have shown that there are differences between age groups, but as in the two studies the frequency of this mechanism develops in opposite direction, and on our sample the differences are insignificant, we can affirm that the results do not confirm each other or they are due to differences in cultural background. As the cultural analysis is not the subject of this research, it will not be a part of this writing.

Our first hypothesis, that coping mechanisms which need verbalism and cooperation become more frequent as the preschooler advances in age, whereas passivity and the number of reactions lacking emotional control decreases was partially proved. Negotiation and opposition coping showed to be frequent at ages of 4-5 or more at 5-7, on the other hand emotional ventilation and avoidance was characteristic for the lower age group. Changes in offering support and aggressive reactions between age groups has not been proved. Differences between age groups draw our attention on the fact that there is a natural course of changes which occur in coping strategies through the years, following the path from the emotion-focused, less effective strategies towards verbalism and problem solving strategies considering the “others” point of view. The significant extent of this change also points out that it is worth to pay close attention to the development of interactive skills and competences of preschoolers in a preventive way, as this is the most sensitive time in their development.

To certify our second hypothesis, we will sum up our results coming from different assessors and different situations. We found that in self-centered situations girls ask for help, show emotional reactions, show opposition (argue) more frequently, whereas boys turn to physical aggression more. In peer-situation there is a significant difference in avoidant coping, which can be observed more in the behavior of boys, who just look at their peers in trouble or even leave them there. On the other hand girls are more likely to offer help or react with crying. We also examined the differences between genders in each age group separately, thus concluding that the most significant differences can be encountered in the age groups between 3-4 and 5-7, whereas in the period of transition, between the age of 4-5 differences are less obvious. Our results concerning differences between genders correspond with international researches: girls show emotions at a greater extent (Zsolnai et al., 2008a; Oláh, 2005; McDowel and Parke, 2005), ask for help more often and verbal or relational aggression is more characteristic (Fiske, 2004), which we call opposition here. There is a unison in the opinion of assessors regarding the fact

that boys turn to more aggressive problem solving strategies in peer-situations and in peer-situations girls are much more helpful in other countries too. Concerning avoidance, we have come up with different results than the ones gained in previous researches: while in Hungary avoidance is frequent only among the youngest girls (Zsolnai et al., 2008b), our studies have proved that avoidance is the most frequent in the circle of the youngest boys in peer-situations.

Our third hypothesis has been certified in unison with the previous one: the social competence of girls is much highly assessed by adult assessors (parents and teachers). It is in unison in the sense that, the strategies which are considered maladaptive: aggression, avoidance are characteristic to boys, whereas prosocial coping, support seeking and support offering is more characteristic to girls, thus attracting positive assessment according to previous researches too. At the same time mechanisms applied by girls contain many forms of verbal and non-verbal communication, which lead to the reaction of the peer or adult: they ask for help, they offer help, they cry in situations of conflict. The reactions given by boys are less cooperative: they avoid problems – they do not show interest for their peers` problem or they are more aggressive, thus causing inertia to their peer or the adult.

Our fourth hypothesis takes into consideration the assessment of peers as well. It is very much likely to be certified that similarly to adult assessment, girls gain more positive assessment from children too.

The third and fourth hypothesis draws our attention on the fact that girls receive more positive feedback in kindergarten already, this reinforces them in using adaptive techniques in social interactions, which consequently leads to their success in school. This is due to the fact that school also favors the forms of behavior that are more characteristic to girls according to the results of our research. This problem is pointed out in those researches which prove that there are much more boys than girls who tend to leave school at a young age or who show antisocial behavior later in their childhood. However it is a strange contradiction that despite the fact that girls are in a much favorable position as far as education is concerned, they are much more disadvantaged later on in the economic field. Fényes (2010) concluded that this proves that education does not serve either the development of personality.

Having considered all the above presented factors we would like to denounce the social challenge according to which the development of social skills is necessary in preschool time and for their effectiveness it is vital that we take into consideration its differentiated aspects.

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