

**RESEARCH ARTICLE :**

# Interpersonal social competence among school going children

**■ Veena Shahi and Shanti Balda****ARTICLE CHRONICLE :**

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**SUMMARY :** The present study was conducted in Hisar city of Haryana state. The sample comprised of 160 children in the age group of 6-8 years. These children were assessed for interpersonal problem-solving skills in obtaining access to an object in another child's possession with the help of Social Problem-Solving Test. Children's quantitative responses were computed for total number of different categories of strategies, relevancy of strategies and within-story flexibility in use of strategies. Quality of children's responses was computed for proportional use of forceful and non-forceful strategies. Results revealed that in interpersonal problem solving, most frequently suggested strategies by children were non-forceful in nature. Results also revealed that there were no gender differences in quantitative scores of interpersonal social competence among school children. Significant differences were found for usage of quality of strategies. Girls suggested greater proportions of non-forceful strategies as compared to boys; on the other hand, boys suggested greater proportions of forceful strategies as compared to girls. It can be concluded that in interpersonal social dilemmas boys becomes more aggressive as compared to girls.

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**BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

Childhood years are crucial for development of social relations with the world outside of their families, with their peers, teachers and other adults. When children begin formal schooling they must learn to comply with teachers, develop and maintain relationship with peers and learn to be independent. Behaviourally and emotionally, the initial years of schooling are vital, as children's aggression, anxiety, self-regulatory behaviours and social skills set the stage for interactions with others and contribute to

children's sense of competence and well-being (Huston and Ripke, 2006).

Socially competent children use effective social problem-solving strategies to deal with interpersonal dilemmas in day-to-day life (Malik *et al.*, 2005; Malik *et al.*, 2010 and Punia *et al.*, 2010). Children good in interpersonal problem-solving skills are better able to achieve their social goals and are likely to be grown as socially competent individuals. By the time children are ready for formal schooling, they have a wide variety of strategies in their repertoire, both positive and negative, for resolving interpersonal social

**Author for correspondence :**

**Veena Shahi**  
Krishi Vigyan Kendra,  
Dr. Rajendra Prasad  
Central Agricultural  
University, Samastipur  
(Bihar) India  
Email: veenashahi07@  
gmail.com

See end of the article for  
authors' affiliations

dilemmas and issues.

Interpersonal problem-solving skills of children are usually examined in hypothetical scenarios. Children are presented with hypothetical problems to assess their knowledge of problem-solving strategies. Hypothetical scenarios have been used to examine how children achieve their social goals. Social goals include object acquisition (Balda, 1997; Malik *et al.*, 2005 and Punia *et al.*, 2010), friendship initiation (Balda, 1997; Malik *et al.*, 2005 and Rubin and Krasnor, 1986) and avoiding anger of adults (Balda, 1997 and Punia *et al.*, 2010). These researches indicate that unless children achieve minimum social competence they have a high probability of being at risk throughout their life. Parents who tell children what to do or who offer advice to solve the problem are not teaching their children to think. Instead they are doing the thinking for the child. Balda *et al.* (2012) mentioned that the lack of interpersonal problem-solving skills including critical, alternative and consequential thinking affect the way children handle problems that are encountered with peers and adults.

Given the life-long consequences, social skills for interpersonal relationships are of great importance. Social problem-solving approach has potential to reduce, even prevent more severe behavioural dysfunction. It is more important “how” children think, that is, the “process” of thinking or problem-solving. The present study was undertaken with the objective to assess interpersonal competence of school going children. It was hypothesized that school going children would use non-forceful strategies in greater proportion than forceful strategies in interpersonal social dilemmas with their peers. It was also hypothesized that there would be no gender differences in quantitative scores of interpersonal competence scores and qualitative use of forceful and non-forceful strategies in interpersonal social dilemmas with peers.

## RESOURCES AND METHODS

The present study was conducted in Hisar city of Haryana state. From Hisar city four schools, two school affiliated to Central Board of Secondary Education and two schools affiliated to Haryana Board of School Education were selected at random. From each school a list of children in the age group of 6-10 years was prepared and 40 children were randomly selected. Thus, a total of 160 children were selected from four schools

irrespective of sex. Of these 160 children, 84 were boys and 76 were girls. Interpersonal social competence of these children was with help of Social Problem Solving Test (SPST) developed by Rubin (1988). Earlier this test has been used by Balda (1997), Malik (2004), Punia (2002) and Balda *et al.* (2012a and b). Hence, this test was reliable and valid for assessment of interpersonal social competence of school going children.

Five stories from the Social Problem-Solving Test-Revised developed by Rubin (1988) were used to assess children’s interpersonal social competence in hypothetical situations with their peers. These stories were concerned with object acquisition. The characters in the stories wish to gain access to a toy or material in another child’s possession. The stories aim to assess children’s cognitive repertoire of strategies for obtaining access to an object. Picture cards were used to depict the stories.

The child was shown a picture card and a story was read. The child being interviewed was asked what the story character could do or say in each situation to accomplish the desired goal and then prompted to give a second response. The sex of the children in the stories was same as that of the child being interviewed. In each story the characters were given different names to maintain interest and variety. Care was taken that a story character’s name was not the same as that of the child being interviewed. Responses were recorded on interview sheets.

Children’s scores were computed for number of different categories of strategies suggested by children, number of different categories of strategies suggested by children, relevancy score and within-story-flexibility scores. Within-story-flexibility score represents alternative use of different strategies in a social dilemma once the first suggested strategy did not solve the problem.

### Total number of categories of strategies:

The total number of categories of strategies found in all the five stories was computed. Different strategies suggested by children could be categorized as- ‘ask’ (e.g., Can I have it?), ‘politeness’ (e.g., Please can I have it?), ‘tell-agonistic’ (e.g., Give it to me.), ‘tell-prosocial’ (e.g., Please, give it to me.), ‘wait’ (e.g., Wait until he/she’s finished.), ‘authority-aid’ (e.g., Tell his/her mother.), ‘fair, share, turn’ (e.g., Can I have a turn?), ‘trade, bribe’ (e.g., I’ll let you read my book.), ‘plan for future’ (e.g., When his mother calls him, he can get it.),

'manipulate affect' (e.g., I'll get mad.), 'force, grab' (e.g., Grab it.), 'physical attack' (e.g., Push her off the swing.), 'damage to property' (e.g., Break the cycle.), 'loan' (e.g., Can I have it for a minute?) and 'finagle' (e.g., Why don't you play with other toy?). In all children could suggest 15 categories of strategies.

#### **Total number of different categories of strategies:**

The total number of different categories of strategies found in all the five stories was computed. Categories 'ask', 'politeness', 'tell-prosocial', 'wait', 'fair, share, turn', 'plan for future' and 'loan' were grouped under the category 'prosocial'. Category 'authority-aid' was grouped under 'authority'. Category 'manipulate affect' was grouped under 'manipulative'. Categories 'trade, bribe' and 'finagle' were grouped under the category 'trade-bribe'. Categories 'force, grab', 'physical attack' and 'damage to property' were grouped under the category 'forceful' strategies. Children could score a maximum of 10 for total number of different categories of strategies (five in first response and five in second responses).

#### **Non-forceful and forceful strategies:**

Category types 'prosocial', 'authority', 'manipulative' and 'trade-bribe' were further grouped under 'non-forceful' strategies. Categories 'force, grab', 'physical attack' and 'damage to property' were grouped under the category 'forceful' strategies.

#### **Proportional use of non-forceful and forceful strategies:**

Ratios of the non-forceful and forceful strategies suggested by a child were computed. This was done in order to compare the relative use of non-forceful and forceful strategies by a child in proportion to the total number of non-forceful plus forceful strategies used by the child. For example, the ratio of non-forceful strategies (e.g., please give it to me); that is, proportion of non-forceful strategies = Total of non-forceful strategies / (Total of non-forceful + Forceful strategies).

#### **Relevancy score:**

Children's responses were scored for relevancy according to the protocol proposed by Rubin (1988). A relevancy score was given when a child's response could solve the problem as presented in the story. In all five

stories, both the first and second responses were coded for relevancy. A score of 1 was given for a relevant solution (those responses which could be coded into the category system). A score of 0 was given for an irrelevant response where the response did not suggest a solution to the problem as stated or when second response was repetition of the first response. The relevancy scores for all the five Object Acquisition stories were combined. A child could score a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 10 for relevancy.

#### **Within-story flexibility score:**

Children's response flexibility was determined by comparing the strategies of their first and second responses to the dilemmas posed in any given story. Flexibility was computed by giving a score of 0 if the child failed to offer a further response to the interviewer's probe following the initial response, or when an irrelevant answer was given for either Response 1 or 2 or both, or when Response 2 was coded as a direct repeat of Response 1 (for example, R1: Please can I have it. R2: Can I have it.). A score of 1 was given if the second response contained the same strategy as in the first response (for example, R1: I'll give you a book. R2: I'll give you a candy.); a score of 2 was given when there were modifications of the first response, that is, one or more new strategy from another category was added in Response 2 (for example, R1: Can I have it. R2: Please, can I have it?); and a score of 3 was given for a completely novel response where no categories found in Response 1 were repeated in Response 2 (for example, R1: Can I have it? R2: We can play together?).

The within-story flexibility scores for all the five object acquisition stories were combined. A child could score a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 15 for within-story flexibility.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS**

Quantitative scores were computed for total number of categories of strategies and total number of different categories of strategies. Relevancy for strategy usage and alternative use of strategy (within-story flexibility score) were also computed. Qualitative use of non-forceful and forceful strategies was also computed. Then, ratios of non-forceful and forceful suggested by children were computed.

**Sex-wise comparison of quantitative scores of interpersonal problem-solving skills:**

Sex-wise means and standard deviations for the total number of categories of strategies, total number of different categories of strategies, total relevancy score and total within-story flexibility score for interpersonal problem-solving skills are presented in Table 1. Z-test was computed to examine gender differences in quantitative scores obtained by boys and girls. As presented in table, there were no significant differences in quantitative scores obtained by boys and girls.

It can be interpreted from these findings that boys and girls were at par in quantitative use of strategies, relevant use of strategies and alternate use of different strategies. The hypothesis that there would be no gender differences in quantitative scores of interpersonal competence scores was accepted. Similar results have been reported by Punia (2002) and Malik (2004). In another study, Anita (2010) also found that there were no significant differences in quantitative scores of boys and girls.

**Qualitative use of non-forceful and forceful strategies in interpersonal problem-solving:**

Qualitative use of non-forceful and forceful strategies in interpersonal problem-solving tasks was computed. Then, ratios of non-forceful and forceful strategies suggested by children were calculated to examine relative use of these strategies. As presented in Table 2, children suggested greater proportions of non-forceful strategies (Mean=0.79) and lesser proportions of forceful strategies (Mean=0.21).

It can be interpreted from these findings that more frequently used strategies by children were non-forceful strategies in nature to solve their interpersonal problems

with peers. As a first response, majority of children suggested non-forceful strategies for obtaining object from another child’s possession. These findings suggest that children use non-forceful means more frequently to gain access to objects in another child’s possession.

These results get support from previous research studies. Balda (1997) in a cross-cultural research conducted in Australia and India also obtained similar results. Research studies conducted by Irving (1994) and Rubin and Krasnor (1983) also indicated that prosocial strategies, which are grouped under non-forceful strategies in the present study, were the most frequently used strategies in object acquisition dilemmas. Non-forceful strategies, particularly, prosocial strategies are common instructions given to children by adults, “Say please”, “If you want something, you should ask for it, not grab”. Balda (1997) reported that parents mentioned suggesting these strategies to their children in social interactions with other children (for example, take turns, ask politely). Children learn these socially acceptable strategies from the instructions given by adults, particularly parents and teachers. They may also learn these strategies through observing adults engaged in prosocial behaviour. Research studies conducted by Punia (2002) and Malik (2004) also reported similar findings. In a recent study on social problem solving skills, Anita (2010) also found that most frequently suggested strategies by children irrespective of their IQ were non-forceful in nature.

The second most commonly used strategies in object acquisition dilemmas were agonistic strategies. These findings are also consistent with previous research across cultures. In Australia, Irving (1994) and Balda (1997) also reported similar findings. In Western culture, Rubin and Krasnor (1983) have reported that children are likely

**Table 1 : Sex-wise comparison of quantitative scores of interpersonal problem-solving skills**

Quantitative scores	Boys (n=84)	Girls (n=76)	Z-values
	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	
Total number of categories of strategies	11.8±2.3	11.4±1.9	1.23
Total number of different categories of strategies	8.7±2.1	8.7±1.7	0.07
Total relevancy score	9.2±1.1	9.2±1.2	0.10
Total within-story flexibility score	10.2±2.3	10.2±2.2	0.06

**Table 2 : Mean proportions of interpersonal problem-solving strategies suggested by children**

Quality of Interpersonal problem solving strategies	Mean proportion
Non-forceful	0.79
Forceful	0.21

**Table 3 : Comparison of interpersonal problem solving strategies suggested by boys and girls** (n=160)

Quality of Interpersonal problem solving strategies	Sex of child		'Z'-Values
	Boys n=84	Girls n=76	
	Mean	Mean	
Non-forceful	0.75	0.84	3.98*
Forceful	0.25	0.16	3.98*

Note: \* Means differ significantly in the same row at 5% level.

to use agonistic strategies frequently. Several studies have been conducted in India with preschool children (Punia, 2002), socially incompetent children (Malik, 2004) and children with low, average and high IQ (Anita, 2010). All these studies have revealed that the second most frequently used strategies in gaining access to objects in another child's possession were forceful in nature.

### Sex-wise comparison of use of non-forceful and forceful strategies in interpersonal problem-solving:

Sex-wise means proportions of non-forceful and forceful strategies suggested by children in interpersonal problem-solving dilemmas are presented in Table 3. Z-test was computed to examine gender differences in qualitative use of non-forceful and forceful strategies.

As depicted in Table 3, significant differences were observed for use of qualitative strategies. Girls suggested significantly greater proportion of non-forceful strategies (Mean = 0.84), ( $Z = 3.98^*$ ,  $p < .05$ ); and boys suggested significantly greater proportion of forceful strategies (Mean = 0.25), ( $Z = 3.98^*$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

It can be interpreted from these results that boys used significantly more forceful and less non-forceful strategies in interpersonal problem solving tasks as compared to girls. The hypothesis that there would be no gender differences in qualitative use of forceful and non-forceful strategies in interpersonal social dilemmas with peers was rejected. These results also get support from the research conducted across cultures by Irving (1994), Rubin and Krasnor (1983) and Anita (2010). In another study, Shanwal (2010) also found that boys were more aggressive than girls.

Children who have deficit in language comprehension may be due to Down's syndrome (Kammerer, 2009), they are likely to have poor interpersonal problem-solving skills due to poor comprehension of words. Language development, both productive and receptive, in Down Syndrome (DS) is slower than that

of ordinary children. Mishra and Mishra (2009) have shown that major proportion of the population belonging to age-group of 5-16 years showed poor nutritional status in comparison to <5 years as well as >16 years. This could be one of the reasons that some children lag behind in language and cognitive development and indirectly affects children's problem-solving skills in day to day life.

### Conclusion :

Present study may be concluded that most frequently used strategies by children were non-forceful in nature. The second commonly used strategies were forceful in nature. Results revealed that there were no gender differences in quantitative features of interpersonal social problem solving skills of boys and girls, however, significant differences were found for usage of quality of strategies. Girls produced more non-forceful strategies as compared to boys, on the other hand, boys suggested more forceful strategies as compared to girls. Children have a range of strategies in their cognitive repertoire.

Authors' affiliations :

**Shanti Balda**, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Chaudhary Charan Singh Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar (Haryana) India

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