

## Play settings and social behaviours of young children

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### ABSTRACT

The present study was undertaken to study the social behaviours of children in outdoor play, block play, pretend play and snack time. The sample consisted of 72 video-clippings of 10 minutes duration each in a natural play setting. The captured clippings were further keenly observed and coded for various social behaviours under three different heads *viz.*, social conversations, social body language and acceptance strategies using the Observer Behaviour Software and further statistically analyzed using two way ANOVA. The results revealed that social conversations and social body language of children were found to be high in frequency and duration during Outdoor play and snack time, with a distinct pattern of conversation showing the decline of self talk, and pleasantries with the increase in age and increase in conversations of common interest topics and daily event with the increase in age. Acceptance strategies were more frequent in Snack time and pretend play but long duration of acceptance strategies were found in Outdoor play followed by block and pretend play. The study showed significant difference between social behaviours both in frequency as well as duration among both genders in outdoor play and Snack time. However, among boys, a significant difference was also observed between the social behaviours both in frequency and duration during block as well as pretend play.

**KEY WORDS :** Play setting, Social behaviour, Young children

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Social experiences with peers constitute an important developmental context for children. In these contexts, children acquire a wide range of behaviours, skills, attitudes and experiences that influence their adaptations during the life span. One of the major tasks of the early childhood years is to learn positive and socially acceptable ways of interacting with others. As much of this learning occurs within the context of the peer group, positive peer interactions make a substantial contribution to children's socio-emotional and cognitive development beyond the influences of family, school and neighbourhood. Relationships with peers have significant importance in the lives of even very young children by allowing them to experiment with roles and relationships and develop social cognitive and behavioural skills (Asher, 1990; Rubin and Asendorpf, 1993).

Parten (1932) described six social participation categories that purportedly unfolded as stages as children matured. In order of presumed maturity, these categories include: unoccupied behaviour, solitary play, associative play, co-operative play, socio-dramatic play and games with rules. The demonstration of elaborate forms of social pretence during the pre-school years is impressive. It

provides opportunities for developing communication skills, allows children to negotiate over roles, rules and play themes and to practice a variety of roles in particular play scripts.

Children's interactions with one another do, in many cases endure over a long period of time and are vital for normal social development. Children who do not play with age mates miss-out on important social experience and are at considerable risk of becoming socially inept and uncertain of themselves in the interpersonal situations later in life.

With increasing age, play partners become better able to agree with each other about the roles, rules and themes of their pretence. They are also better able to maintain their play interactions by adding new dimensions to their expressed ideas. These developments reflect the pre-schooler's capacity to take the perspective of the play partner and even more important, reflect the increasing sophistications of pre-schooler's notion "theory of mind" (Watson *et al.*, 1999). Hence, it provides the right context to understand social skills which can form foundations for future social competence.

Children learn from each other. They exchange

information about the world and themselves, they offer each other suggestions about appropriate ways to behave. The notion that pre-school children can learn from one another is an important one, as it provides a basis on which to structure pre-school programmes.

The present study was undertaken with the objective of observing social interactions of children in the age group of 3- 8 years in various play setting (natural/ informal settings) to understand the trends and patterns of social interactions among young children.

## RESEARCH METHODS

As the present study is a basic research; aimed at observing the early social skills of children from 3 – 8 years, both positive and negative social behaviours of children in their interactions with peers in natural settings, an ‘Exploratory research design’ was adopted for conducting the study. The city of Hyderabad was selected for the present study as there are number of schools and has a cosmopolitan environment wherein children from various backgrounds, cultures and wide socio-economic groups could be observed and studied so that it makes a comprehensive sample in order to understand the interactions, the content and all the stuff that children use in different play settings. Purposive sampling method was employed because the research aimed at studying the conversations of 3 – 8 year children in outdoor play, block play, pretend play and snack time using video recordings of interactions of 10 minutes duration. A sample of 72 video clippings was selected for studying the early social skills of children in various natural setting; both indoor and outdoor. Video recording was used as a major technique to observe the social interactions of children in various play settings. The social interactions of children were video recorded using hand video camera for about 10 to 12 minutes duration each in various play settings as mentioned above. These recordings were further used for coding the behaviours of children using the ‘observer behaviour software’.

### Observer behaviour software:

The ‘observer’ is an important tool for the study of behavioural processes to record a level of detail that cannot obtain without an automated system. The observer can be used to record activities, postures, movements, positions, social interactions or any other aspect of the behaviour of humans and animals. In human psychology, the observer aids in collecting data on behavioural development, parent-child as well as any social interaction, communication, education, language acquisition, cognition, psychological assessment. The observer is also useful

whenever one needs to collect observational data that is essential, for instance, to assess a physical workload, usability of products or to study human-machine interactions.

The entire process carried out by the observer may be summarized as follows: A researcher watches one or more individuals (humans or animals) in a certain place/ setting, and enters the observations of their behaviour in the form of codes according to what he/she or another collaborator has specified in an earlier phase, when he/she created the Coding Scheme. Different behaviours of interest are listed along with codes, either specified by researcher or the software. The behaviours are listed under different heads as per convenience. The subjects to be observed are also mentioned along with codes. Modifiers; a list of variables that affect the subjects or behaviours, are specified for in-detail analysis. The video clippings selected for the study are loaded into the processor, and stored as media files. Once the coding scheme is ready, the observer file is used to observe and code the behaviours of the interactions of children by simultaneously viewing the media file of video clipping. After coding the behaviours, a data profile is created using the software, where the coded behaviours are selectively filtered and fed into processor for getting a result sheet with frequencies, durations, mean durations of the behaviours and modifiers for each of the behaviours. This is later used to perform further statistical analysis and graphical representation to answer specific research questions. The data were empirically analysed using statistical measures such as frequencies, and tests such as tests of group differences *i.e.* two-way ANOVA was used to find out differences in different age groups, gender, inter age and inter gender differences and in different settings.

The data in the form of video clippings were analysed using observation behaviour software as mentioned above and further empirically analysed using statistical measures such as frequencies, and tests such as tests of group differences *i.e.* two-way ANOVA was used to find out differences in different age groups, gender, inter age and inter gender differences and in different settings.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Fig. 1 and 2 show the frequency and duration of social behaviours in outdoor play. Figures show a very high significant difference between social behaviours and between age groups in frequency and duration of among boys but among girls significant difference in duration and frequency have been seen only between the social behaviours. Boys, as young as 3 – 3.11 years, were found

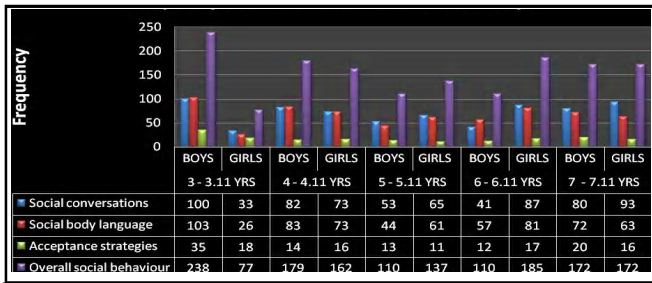


Fig. 1: Frequency of social behaviours in outdoor play setting

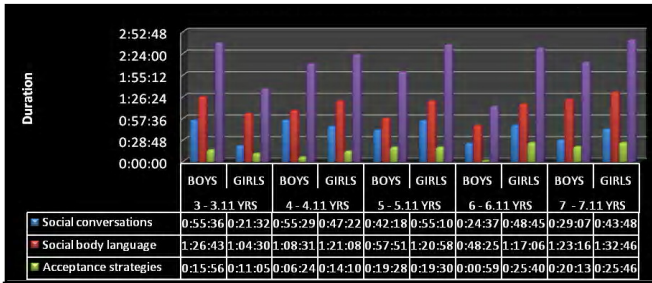


Fig. 2: Duration of social behaviours in outdoor play setting

to express high overall social behaviour, followed by 6 – 6.11 years girls in outdoor play setting. Surprisingly girls of 3 – 4 years were found to express social behaviours to the minimum extent in outdoor play setting. Social conversations were found to be high among 3 – 3.11 years old boys followed by 7 – 7.11 years old girls and others whereas it was found to be low among 3 – 3.11 years old girls followed by 6 – 6.11 years old boys and others.

They used pleasantries more often; enjoyed each other’s company, laughed and cooed with peers, Not only did they direct each other but also followed by listening to each other, which shows that the children as young as pre-school age are socially directed and do understand others point of view and also make an effort to accommodate others interests during play situations. On an overall conversations of young children were found to move from ego centric to social, simple to complex and detailed discussions, frequent short conversations to sustained longer conversations, self-directed to socially directed conversations; with refined approach, with increase in age and experience. Children are socio-centric, are capable of sustained social interactions, and can benefit from peer interactions. Children were found sharing their role knowledge and also providing feedback to their playmates, additionally, they were also able to consider the needs of their playmates (Grief, 1977).

Maximum social body language both in frequency and duration was used by 3 – 3.11 years old boys followed by 4 – 4.11 years old boys and 6 – 6.11 years old girls

whereas it was minimally used by 3 – 3.11 years old girls followed by 5 – 5.11 years old boys. On an overall, it is clear that children of 3 – 8 years are generally socially active and pleasant during outdoor play and are excited while playing; laugh and enjoy. However, young children play as separate individuals when compared to older children who form groups at outdoors. The physical proximity increases in the beginning years among children but again it diminishes; with very few such gestures being used as children grow older. Though the duration of social behaviours is almost similar among age groups, older children are capable of expressing variety of emotions and feelings through gestures and facial expressions as compared to younger children.

Acceptance strategies were found to be high among younger group but it was for longer duration among girls of 6 – 6.11 and 7 – 7.11 years whereas it was used for shorter duration by boys of 6 – 6.11 years and 4 – 4.11 years. Analysis of variance showed significant difference in the social behaviours of both boys and girls with social body language differing significantly from other behaviours, whereas there was no significant difference within the age groups for different social behaviours.

Fig. 3 and 4 depict the social behaviours of the young children in block play settings. The overall social behaviour which was found to be highest and for longer duration among girls of 5 – 5.11 and 4 – 4.11 years and the conversations of 3 – 3.11 years children were found to be less frequent and for shorter duration as compared to

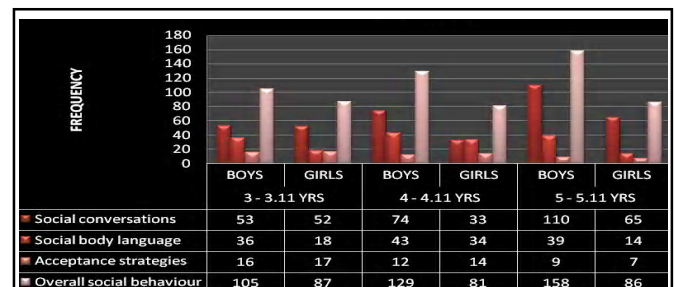


Fig. 3: Frequency of social behaviours in block play setting

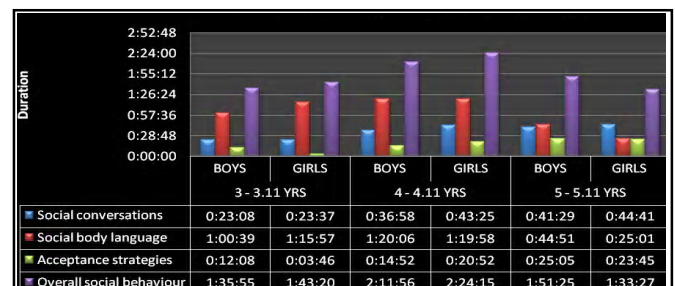


Fig. 4: Duration of social behaviours in block play setting

other older groups. Children of 3 – 3.11 years engaged themselves in self talk for longer duration more frequently as they played with blocks. The conversations of children at block play shows that, younger children use more of self talk to direct their own actions while as they grow, self talk reduces and they begin to direct others. Young Children play besides each other; sharing blocks sometimes, but as they grow they learn to play together forming a group, and later work together distributing work towards a common goal. Conversations regarding topics of common interest increases with increase in age, and overtakes pleasantries as children grow.

4 – 4.11 years boys exhibited social body language more frequently and for longer durations followed by 5 – 5.11 years boys whereas 5 – 5.11 years girls followed by 3 – 3.11 years girls exhibited social body language less frequently. The physical proximity actions were very rarely exhibited by these children during block play as they were busy with play materials and rarely paid heed to others. The physical proximity increases in the beginning years among children but again it diminishes; with very few such gestures being used as children grow older. Though the duration of social behaviours is almost similar among age groups, older children are capable of expressing variety of emotions and feelings through gestures and facial expressions as compared to younger children.

Acceptance strategies were used for longer duration by boys of 5 – 5.11 years whereas it was used for shorter duration by girls of 3 – 3.11 years. Children used acceptance strategies less frequently as compared to other social behaviours during block play. The frequency of acceptance strategies decreased with age but surprisingly the duration increased with the age during block play. They used friendship so as to bargain for the blocks while playing. The mean durations of social behaviours of both boys and girls were non-significant from each other and no significant difference was found within age groups for social behaviours in block play setting.

Fig. 5 and 6 show the frequency and duration of social behaviours in pretend play. Overall social behaviour in pretend play and social conversations were found to be highest and for longer duration among girls of 5 – 5.11 years followed by boys and girls of 3 – 3.11 years, whereas it was found to be least among the boys of 5 – 5.11 years. The children begin to pretend from very young age but the precision in roles, rules and conversations develop with age with pleasantries in conversations being replaced by conversations of daily events, fantasy and other common information. The self-talk reduces over

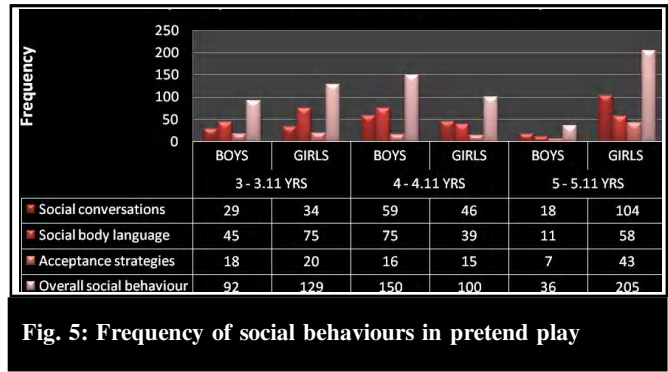


Fig. 5: Frequency of social behaviours in pretend play

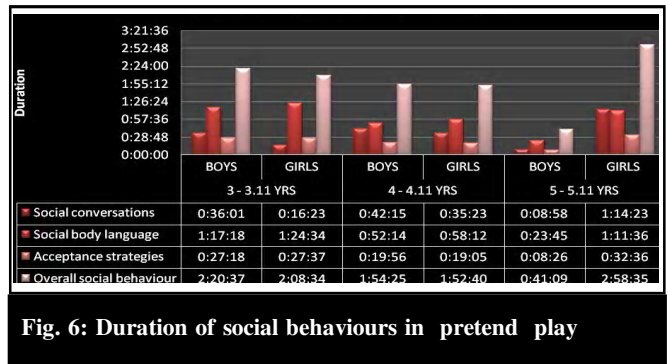


Fig. 6: Duration of social behaviours in pretend play

time with age; as children grow and the use of moral and conventional rules increase with age during pretend play; however the children direct each other similarly and for longer durations as they grow but use requests and learn to bargain and negotiate with peers as they grow older. Girls of 3 – 3.11 years and boys of 4 – 4.11 years exhibited social body language more frequently and for longer duration whereas boys of 5 – 5.11 years exhibited less frequently and for shorter duration.

The young children used body language more frequently and for longer duration than conversation whereas older children used less body language as compared to conversations during pretend play. The children were more active socially, pleasant for longer durations, and were excited more than younger children during pretend play. They enjoyed each other’s company and had pleasant time laughing with peers. Relationships with peers have significant importance in the lives of even very young children by allowing them to experiment with roles and relationships and develop social cognitive and behavioural skills (Asher, 1990; Rubin and Asendorpf, 1993). This shows that as children grow, with increase in their linguistic abilities, their body language decreases whereas their conversations increase.

Acceptance strategies were used more frequently and for longer duration by 5 – 5.11 year girls and less frequently and shorter duration by the boys of same age. During pretend play children of 3 – 3.11 years frequently



showed interest, imitated other's play but the children of 4 – 4.11 years imitated less frequently but for considerable duration, and shared props such as pencils, twigs, chalk pieces etc., and worked as team more frequently and for longer duration trying to co-ordinate each other's role and also recognised leaders who explained the rules of pretend play. However, children of 5 – 5.11 years shared props and usually worked as team for long duration wherein recognised leaders were found to explain the rules of play more frequently and others were also found to suggest and compete to be recognised as leader. This shows the qualitative change in the acceptance strategy of children over years. Mean differences for duration of social behaviours were non-significant both among different social behaviours as well between different age groups in pretend play.

Fig. 7 and 8 show the social behaviours of children in snack time. The overall social behaviour was high among boys of 5 – 5.11 years followed by older boys. Boys of 5 – 5.11 years followed by boys of 6 – 6.11 and 7 – 7.11 years were found to converse socially more frequently and for longer durations. Thus, snack time conversations were more often social for almost all age groups, with pleasantries forming the major content of conversations. The self-centred speech of young children in snack time was slowly replaced by socially directed

speech and later with discussions about common interest topics. Bargaining, requesting, complimenting were all used while sharing of food. Boys of 5 – 5.11 years followed by 4 – 4.11 year boys exhibited social body language more frequently but almost children of all ages under study used it for similar duration. Though snack time seems passive for social interactions of children, even very young children of 3 – 3.11 years form into groups and all children are socially active and pleasant, irrespective of the age. Acceptance strategies were used more frequently and for longer duration by boys of 7 – 7.11 years in snack time conversations with peers. Acceptance strategies were used more frequently during snack time as compared to other settings and they increased in duration with the increase in age. The main acceptance strategy used during snack time was sharing of food which increased tremendously in frequency as well as duration with the increase in age of the children. They used friendship to bargain for food from peers and this was more frequent among older children.

### Conclusion:

The present observational study serves as an important basic research in the area of peer interactions, which brings out the general trends in social behaviours of children, during their interactions with peers in natural play settings. The study focuses on the social skills of young children who are trying to expand their horizon of social network. It reveals the nature of conversations, body language, and acceptance strategies employed by children of 3 – 8 years during various play settings such as outdoor/informal play, block play, pretend play as well as snack time. It also focuses on the transformation of various social skills over years, as children grow older. These results in turn can form the basis for delineating the important guidelines for social competence curriculum which can be incorporated into the “early childhood education programmes, for building up social skills among children at an early age.

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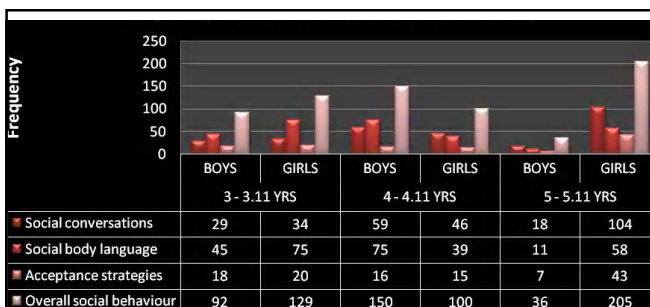


Fig. 7: Frequency of social behaviours in snack time

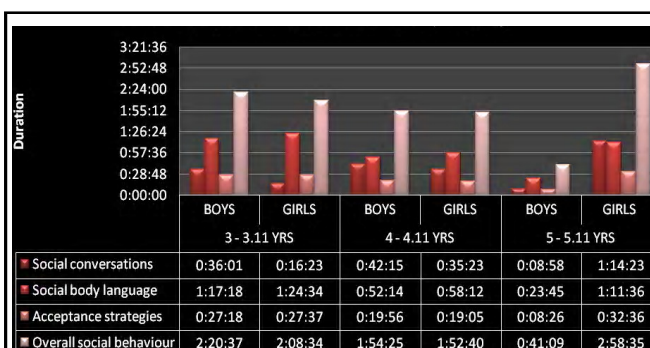


Fig. 8: Duration of social behaviours in snack time

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