Rethinking social competence in early childhood during crisis

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Abstract

Societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have far-reaching consequences for children's development. This commentary builds upon the timely and important contribution of our study [1] on the social competence of 5-year-olds during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a perspective on how societal crises shape early childhood development. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework [2], we explored the interplay between child characteristics, family dynamics, and absence from early childhood education and care (ECEC). Namely child's gender, child's developmental or health related issues, parental distress, and parent's gender, which should be taken into consideration when further studying early social development. We argue that understanding social competence during societal disruptions requires a broader, more context-sensitive approach—one that accounts for the child's individual characteristics, specifics of family life, and the role of parental perception, to capture emerging social development in naturalistic settings. This commentary also explores implications for early childhood policy, emphasizing the need for crisis-resilient educational environments and mental health support for families.

Keywords: Early childhood, Early childhood education and care (ECEC), Social competence, COVID-19

Revisiting the Role of ECEC in Social Development

One of the key findings in our study is the lack of a significant relationship between time away from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and children's social competence. This result stands in contrast to a body of literature suggesting that reduced peer interaction and structured social environments negatively impact children's socio-emotional development [3–5]. Several explanations may be offered to account for this discrepancy. First, the age of the children studied may be a critical factor. By the age of five, many children have already developed foundational social skills and may be more resilient to short-term disruptions [6]. Second, the home environment, including sibling interactions and parental engagement, may have provided compensatory socialization opportunities [7]. Third, the quality of ECEC is another impactful factor. High quality ECEC has been shown to support social development, especially for the children who come from adverse backgrounds and are predisposed to some developmental risks [6,8,9]. These findings suggest that the impact of ECEC absence on social competence is not uniform and may depend on contextual factors such as age, family structure, and family coherence. Future research should explore these moderating variables and consider longitudinal designs to assess potential long-term effects. Moreover, qualitative or interventional studies capturing children's lived experiences during crises could provide insights into how they navigated social challenges outside institutional settings and whether absence from peer groups have other negative impacts that are not captured by quantitative methodology [10].

Parental Perception and Psychological Distress

Our study provided evidence that parental psychological distress is negatively associated with

children's social competence across multiple dimensions. This leaves room for two explanations, 1) parental psychological distress is affecting children's social competence or 2) psychological distress affects the validity of social competence measures (especially during times of heightened stress). Previous research has shown that parental stress can distort perceptions of child behavior, leading to underestimation of competencies or overreporting of problems [11,12] and there is also proof that stress may be a risk for children's development [13]. Moreover, psychological distress may influence not only parenting behavior [14] but also how parents perceive and evaluate their children's social abilities [11]. In the context of a societal crisis, where parents may be dealing with financial strain, health concerns, and disrupted routines, these biases may be exacerbated [15]. To address this issue, future studies should incorporate multi-informant approaches including teacher ratings, peer assessments, and direct observations, such as MSCS (Multidimensional Social Competence Scale) [16]. Additionally, the use of standardized tools administered by trained professionals could help triangulate findings and reduce reliance on subjective parental reports. Understanding the interplay between parental mental health and child assessment is crucial for designing interventions that support both children and their caregivers especially during and after crises.

Gendered Patterns in Social Competence

Consistent with previous research, we found that boys were rated lower than girls across multiple dimensions of social competence. This observed gender disparity has frequently been attributed to differences in early socialization, play preferences, and culturally shaped behavioral expectations [17,18]. Girls are typically encouraged to engage in cooperative, empathetic, and verbally expressive forms of play, whereas boys are drawn to physical, competitive, or solitary activities [19,20]. These tendencies may reflect a complex interplay of biological predispositions, socio-cultural norms, or pedagogical practices. However, it is essential to critically examine whether these differences represent genuine disparities in social competence or are influenced by biases in assessment. Assessors, teachers and parents, may hold gendered expectations that affect their evaluations, potentially leading to underestimation or overestimation of children's social abilities [21,22]. Furthermore, many standardized instruments used to assess social competence may be implicitly aligned with behaviors more commonly exhibited by girls, such as verbal empathy and cooperative interaction, thereby skewing results. To promote equitable assessment practices, the development of inclusive assessment tools capable of capturing a broader spectrum of social behaviors, including assertiveness, non-verbal communication, and problem-solving, would contribute to a more balanced and accurate understanding of children's social development across genders.

The Complexity of Family Structure and Socioeconomic Status

Another intriguing finding in our study is that children from single-parent households were rated higher in adjustment than those from two-parent families. This contradicts some of the existing literature, which often identifies single parenting as a risk factor for social development [23,24]. One possible explanation is the composition of the sample: highly educated parents were overrepresented in our sample, and higher education may buffer against the challenges typically associated with single parenting [25]. This highlights the importance of considering intersecting factors such as levels of education and income, as well as social support when examining family structure [26]. Socioeconomic status is not a monolithic variable, and its impact on child development may be mediated by other factors such as parenting style, access to resources, and community support [27,26]. For example, a single parent with a strong social network and stable financial status may be able to provide a more nurturing environment than a two-parent household facing financial hardship, high levels of stress, and relational conflict.

Toward a Broader Conceptualization of Social Competence

Our study draws from previous research that defines social competence as the ability to interact with others in socially acceptable ways [28]. While this definition is widely accepted, it may be too narrow to capture the full range of social behaviors, especially in modern times. For example, adaptability, emotional regulation, and digital communication skills are increasingly important components of social competence in contemporary contexts. The pandemic has further accelerated the shift toward online interaction, even among young children. Virtual play in the form of gaming, video calls with relatives, and digital learning platforms have become part of the social landscape. These modes of interaction may require different sets of (social) skills and may influence social development in unique ways [29]. To address this gap, researchers should consider expanding the conceptual framework of social competence to include digital socialization. This could involve developing new assessment tools that capture online communication, empathy in virtual settings, and the ability to navigate digital norms. Such an approach would provide a more holistic understanding of how children engage in social interaction.

Implications and Recommendations

Our findings have several important implications for early childhood research and policy. First, the need to support families holistically, recognizing that parental mental health and education are key determinants of children's social development. Policies that provide mental health resources, parenting support, and flexible work arrangements can help mitigate stress and enhance family functioning. Second, challenges the assumption that institutional care is the primary driver of social competence. While ECEC remains a valuable resource, home environment remains the sole most important social environment the children belong to and this should be supported. This may include initiatives that encourage sibling play, parent-child interaction, and peer engagement outside formal settings. Finally, further research on the topic should include holistic approach to social competence in which individual and family-related perspectives addressed in our study should be taken into consideration. Additionally, new research funding should prioritize longitudinal studies that track children's development across different types of societal disruptions to develop an understanding how children adapt to change and what methods of support are most effective long-termly. This will be essential for building resilient educational systems able to withstand societal crises.

Conclusion

Our study provides a foundation for understanding social competence during societal crises. By highlighting the roles of individual and family-level factors, and questioning the centrality of ECEC, we suggest a rethink of how children's social development

is assessed and supported. This commentary extends the results by further advocating for broader conceptual frameworks, and multi-informant methodologies. As we prepare for future societal changes, whether pandemics, climate events, or geopolitical instability, it is imperative that approaches to early childhood development are flexible, inclusive, and grounded in the realities of children and families. Social competence should be viewed as a context-dependent feature that reflects the interplay between individual traits, relational environments, and societal conditions. Understanding and nurturing this capacity will be the key to fostering social development in the coming generations.

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