



# Relations between social skills and language and literacy outcomes among disruptive preschoolers: Task engagement as a mediator

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## ABSTRACT

Preschool children with disruptive behavior problems are at risk for social and academic difficulties. Many studies have shown a positive link between social skills and child outcomes, but the mechanism driving the link is not well understood. One possibility is that children with better social skills are better able to engage in tasks within the classroom, since preschool classrooms place significant social demands on children. The purpose of this study was to examine task engagement as a mediator between social skills at the start of the year and gains in language and literacy among children with disruptive behavior problems. Participants were 470 children aged 30 to 66 months ( $M = 48.7$ ,  $SD = 6.7$ ). Preschool teachers rated children's social skills and language and literacy, and independent observers rated their task engagement across multiple classroom settings. Path models showed that task engagement significantly mediated the association between social skills and language and literacy gains. When task engagement was divided into engagement during free play and engagement during whole group, only task engagement during whole group time, and not free play, was a significant mediator, although the size of the indirect effect was very small. Results suggest that stronger social skills help disruptive children engage in classroom activities, which in turn leads to stronger language and literacy gains. Results provide very limited support for the idea that task engagement during whole group, rather than free play, is important to language and literacy gains, although this finding needs replication before conclusions can be drawn.

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## 1. Introduction

There is currently a great deal of debate over the roles of social-emotional learning versus academic learning in early childhood. Some preschool models have been criticized for focusing too much on providing opportunities for play, teaching emotional well being, and teaching other “soft” skills at the expense of time spent on academics (Finn, 2009; Marcon, 1999). These critics often point to the need for a greater focus on curriculum and structured learning and a reduced focus on social-emotional development. Opponents of this position argue that children learn critical relational and language skills through play, and that those skills are as important to healthy development as traditional academic topics (Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006).

Despite the debate, there is a strong and growing consensus in the research literature that children's social-emotional functioning is related to psychosocial development and achievement

in substantive ways. One example of this is that research consistently shows associations between children's social skills and later developmental outcomes, including academic outcomes like language and literacy (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Doctoroff, Greer, & Arnold, 2006; Girard & Girolametto, 2013). Social skills may be especially salient for young children with disruptive behavior problems, who tend to have more difficulty engaging with peers and are also at elevated risk for academic difficulties (Bulotsky-Shearer, Bell, Romero, & Carter, 2012). As researchers continue to parse which types of instruction are best for different children and how much time should be spent in structured learning time, it seems important to better understand the mechanisms through which social-emotional factors, like social skills, affect disruptive children's development and learning. This may ultimately help stakeholders provide these children with the full range of supports that lead to positive developmental trajectories.

To advance this goal, the current paper examined a potential pathway through which social skills may affect learning. Specifically, we examined the associations between social skills, task engagement, and children's gains in language and literacy skills during preschool. Our sample included children identified by

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teachers as having high rates of disruptive behavior problems, which place them at high risk for ongoing challenges with social and academic adjustment (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012). In this high-risk sample, understanding how social skills are associated with outcomes is particularly important.

### 1.1. Social skills in preschool

Social skills, also called pro-social behavior or social competence, are most simply defined as “successful initiation of peer relationships” (Denham et al., 2003p. 238). They are operationalized in terms of children’s helping, sharing, and cooperating with peers, as well as positive peer initiations and peer acceptance (Caprara et al., 2000; Doctoroff et al., 2006). Studies have shown that stronger social skills in preschool are linked with better approaches to learning as well as literacy, language, and math (Arnold, Kupersmidt, Voegler-Lee, & Marshall, 2012; Doctoroff et al., 2006; Ziv, 2013). Furthermore, children who spend more time playing with peers tend to have better school readiness outcomes (Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014). Social skills have been found to mediate the links between behavior problems and learning, suggesting that behaviors that disrupt positive social engagement in the classroom may negatively impact children’s learning (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012). Longitudinal studies also provide evidence for the importance of establishing strong social skills during preschool, in that early social skills are associated with achievement over time (Hindman, Skibbe, Miller, & Zimmerman, 2010; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O’Neil, 2001).

This research strongly suggests that social skills contribute in important ways to children’s learning and may have special relevance for children with early disruptive behavior problems. The mechanisms through which this occurs are not well understood, though. The current study sought to address this gap by exploring children’s observed task engagement in the classroom as a potential mediator of the relation between social skills and gains in language and literacy skills among children at academic and social-emotional risk due to their elevated display of disruptive behaviors.

### 1.2. Task engagement

Task engagement is one of the primary mechanisms through which learning occurs in classrooms. It captures the degree to which children actively and positively participate in classroom activities in ways that are appropriate given the demands of the task (Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Grimm, & Curby, 2009); for example, listening attentively to a story, asking questions during a science activity, or preparing a pretend meal in the kitchen area. Engagement has been studied extensively in school-age children and has generally been associated with gains in reading achievement and math (Guo, Sun, Breit-Smith, Morrison, & Connor, 2014; Ponitz et al., 2009; Robinson & Mueller, 2014). Likewise, in preschool, active engagement in a specific subject area is positively associated with later achievement in that area (Hofer, Farran, & Cummings, 2013). Studies suggest that task engagement is, in part, a reflection of children’s attention and executive functioning skills, which have also been extensively linked to early achievement (Brock, Rimm-Kaufman, Nathanson, & Grimm, 2009).

Multiple studies have identified predictors of engagement in preschool and the early school years, including the type of activity, the quality of teacher–child relationships, specific teacher behaviors, and child age and gender (Kontos, Burchinal, Howes, Wisse, & Galinsky, 2002; Ponitz et al., 2009; Powell, Burchinal, File, & Kontos, 2008; Vitiello, Booren, Downer, & Williford, 2012). However, very little research has examined associations between task engagement and social skills among preschool students. In a

small, descriptive study, researchers observed that more time spent engaged in tasks during free play was associated with the presence of peers, suggesting that peer interactions may prolong task engagement (Test & Cornelius-White, 2013). Other studies have focused on negative behaviors as they relate to engagement, finding that behavior problems are associated with lower ratings of approaches to learning, a construct related to task engagement that captures children’s motivation, persistence, and attention along with engagement in learning (Domínguez & Greenfield, 2009).

Likewise, school-age research has mainly focused on the effects of peer rejection and behavior problems on task engagement. This research suggests that children who are socially withdrawn or excluded by peers participate less freely in the classroom, which, in turn, has a negative effect on achievement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). As in the preschool literature, behavior problems in school age students are negatively associated with task engagement (Cappella, Kim, Neal, & Jackson, 2013). Although the research on positive social skills is somewhat sparse, findings thus far indicate that negative social experiences and behavior problems disrupt children’s ability to engage in classroom learning; it may follow that social skills enhance children’s ability to engage. The presence of positive social skills may be particularly salient for children who have been identified as having disruptive behavior problems in preschool, as social skills may help these children compensate for the effects their disruptive behaviors may otherwise have on their engagement. We therefore hypothesized that task engagement may be a key mediator of the link between social skills and outcomes among disruptive preschool children.

### 1.3. Activity settings

Early childhood researchers are increasingly focused on the role that basic features of the classroom context play in promoting certain types of engagement and learning. Several studies have shown that activity settings (whole group, free play, meals, transitions, etc.) influence how children engage in the classroom. For example, the quality of instruction and children’s engagement with teachers tend to be highest during whole group activities, but free play and recess foster more positive interactions with peers (Cabell, DeCoster, LoCasale-Crouch, Hamre, & Pianta, 2013; Vitiello et al., 2012). Some research even links the use of certain activity settings, like free play, to stronger language and cognitive outcomes for children (Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006). In examining task engagement as a mediator, it seemed likely that engagement during different activity settings might be differentially associated with social skills. Thus, we included a specific focus on whole group and free play engagement in addition to engagement measured across all classroom activity settings.

### 1.4. Behavior problems in early childhood

Most children exhibit some degree of externalizing behavior in early childhood. The majority of children outgrow these early behavior problems. For some, though, early problems persist into later childhood and can develop into stable and clinically significant patterns (Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000). Behavior problems can interfere with learning as early as preschool: early behavior problems are associated with lower approaches to learning, lower language skills, and lower school readiness (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012; Escalón, Shearer, Greenfield, & Manrique, 2009; Kaiser, Cai, Hancock, & Forster, 2002; Lonigan et al., 1999). Studies further suggest that social problems with peers act as a mediator between early behavior problems and outcomes. Behavior problems contribute to social difficulties, which in turn are associated with lower school readiness and later internalizing behavior problems (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012; Mesman, Bongers, & Koot, 2001).

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