



# Playing with others: Head Start children's peer play and relations with kindergarten school competence<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Time-sampled observations of Head Start preschoolers' ( $N=264$ ; 51.5% boys; 76% Mexican American;  $M=53.11$  and  $SD=6.15$  months of age) peer play in the classroom were gathered during fall and spring semesters. One year later, kindergarten teachers rated these children's school competence. Latent growth models indicated that, on average, children's peer play was moderately frequent and increased over time during preschool. Children with higher initial levels or with higher slopes of peer play in Head Start had higher levels of kindergarten school competence. Results suggest that Head Start children's engagement with peers may foster development of skills that help their transition into formal schooling. These findings highlight the importance of peer play, and suggest that peer play in Head Start classrooms contributes to children's adaptation to the demands of formal schooling.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding factors that promote young children's school competence is important, given that early academic and behavioral adjustment sets the stage for later academic and social competence (La Paro & Pianta, 2000). This is particularly true for children who come from low-income households and are thought to be at risk for difficulties in adjusting to formal schooling (McWayne, Cheung, Green Wright, & Hahs-Vaughn, 2012). Engagement with peers can be influential in several domains (emotional, cognitive, social) that are important for school competence (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). For example, children who enter kindergarten with social skills that have been honed through many experiences with peers may transition to kindergarten with fewer difficulties than children

who are less socially mature and have not had as many experiences with peers (Ladd & Price, 1987). In the present study, we observed children's peer play over 1 year in Head Start classrooms and examined how individual differences in peer play trajectories (i.e., individuals' within-person change over time) predicted school competence a year later at the end of kindergarten.

### 1.1. Development of peer play

Based on observations of children in classrooms and childcare settings, children's play has been conceptualized as evolving from infancy to childhood. For example, nearly a century ago, Parten (1932) classified children's play into categories that varied from nonsocial to social play. Parten noted that as children aged, they spent more time in social relative to nonsocial play. Contemporary research only partially supports the sequence described by Parten (Ladd, 2005; Rubin et al., 2006). Although young children increasingly move from playing alone to playing with peers, the development of play is complex and not necessarily sequential. For instance, social play becomes more frequent across early childhood (Farran & Son-Yarborough, 2001), but nonsocial play also is normative and not replaced by social play (Rubin & Coplan, 1998; Smith, 1978). Furthermore, there are individual differences in the amount of time young children spend playing with peers (Howes, 1988; Howes & Matheson, 1992). Such individual differences have been hypothesized to be associated with factors such as emotionality or regulation (Fabes, Hanish, Martin, & Eisenberg, 2002), cognitive

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and linguistic competence (Rubin & Daniels-Beirness, 1983), and childcare experiences (Howes, 1987).

The quality of children's play also varies across children and time. For instance, Cohen and Mendez (2009) examined Head Start children's peer play reported by teachers in the fall and spring, and classified play quality at each time point as "disordered" if it was disruptive or disconnected. Some children's quality stayed the same and other children's quality differed from fall to spring (stable disordered [13% of sample], disordered improving [14%], stable nondisordered [64%], and nondisordered declining [9%]).

Despite the attention that the development of children's play has received, we know little about individual differences in trajectories (individuals' within-person quantitative change) of children's observed peer play. We identified only one study of preschoolers' play trajectories. Fabes et al. (2002) examined preschoolers' and kindergarteners' trajectories of observed nonsocial play (playing alone in the company of peers) over 3 months. The study suggested that change in nonsocial play was not uniform across children, and that individual differences in change were positively associated with negative emotional intensity. A finer-grained examination of within-person change that captures the consistency and frequency of play with peers is missing from the literature. The assessment of children's latent developmental trajectories offers advantages over previously utilized methods that yielded only aggregate group-level information about change in children's play with peers, and did not correct for measurement error.

Frequency of play with peers may be best measured through observations of play. The use of observational measures offers important advantages. Teachers' reports of children's behavior (often used in play research with Head Start samples) have benefits (e.g., observing the child for long periods of time), but they can be biased by characteristics of the child (e.g., gender, reputation; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2002). Observations by trained research assistants are likely to be more objective than teachers' ratings. Observers also are able to devote their attention to the specific behaviors of interest.

One reason developmental trajectories of children's observed peer play have not been an object of focus is that this requires a fairly large sample size and multiple occasions of measurement. Obtaining such data is a demanding and challenging research endeavor. We addressed this gap by using time-sampled observations that allowed us to identify latent trajectories of Head Start children's engagement with peers during free play across the preschool year. Furthermore, our examination of variability in trajectories of play with peers allowed us to investigate the relation of individual differences to the successful transition to kindergarten.

### 1.2. Transition to kindergarten and its potential association with peer play

Children's entrance into kindergarten marks a transition for them and their families. It is children's first experience in a more formal learning environment, one in which academic skills are emphasized to a greater degree than in preschool (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In kindergarten, children spend more time in larger groups of peers relative to preschool (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The teacher-child relationship becomes more instrumental and less emotionally responsive than in preschool (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Furthermore, social and behavioral expectations are higher during kindergarten than in preschool. Children are expected to show sustained attention, be more autonomous, and have more self-control (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992). Due to the numerous shifts that occur at the kindergarten transition, pre-academic, behavioral, and social skills have been emphasized as important aspects of school readiness (Snow, 2006). Children's

adjustment to kindergarten is predictive of later academic performance and achievement (Claessens, Duncan, & Engel, 2009).

Relationships with peers, parents, and teachers are key mechanisms through which children gain the skills necessary for school readiness (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006), and multiple theoretical perspectives describe how children may learn through their interactions with peers. For instance, constructivists (Vygotsky, 1978) assert that children can learn with the assistance of more experienced and knowledgeable peers. Peer play provides a context in which children can learn academic skills from more advanced playmates, and is associated with cognitive growth (Wentzel, 2009). Social learning theorists suggest that children can learn from others by observation (Bandura, 1977). Children imitate same-age and older peers (Brody & Stoneman, 1981), and can learn new actions by observing others (Nielsen, Moore, & Mohamedally, 2012). Interactions with peers also provide opportunities for development of a variety of skills that support children's academic and social competence. In peer play, children receive feedback, and have opportunities to practice problem solving, communication, social coordination, and perspective taking (Cheah, Nelson, & Rubin, 2001; Coplan & Arbeau, 2009). Sociodramatic peer play provides children with practice in regulating their behavior in ways that help sustain the interaction (Elias & Berk, 2002; Howes, 1992). Even peer interactions characterized by conflict may benefit children as they learn to negotiate a balance between their own and others' desires (Ladd, 2005). Given the ways in which children can learn from their peers, it is not surprising that children's frequency of engagement with peers has been positively associated with numerous outcomes, including cognitive skill, language development, perspective taking, autonomy, and academic performance (for meta-analysis see Fisher, 1992; Provost & LaFreniere, 1991). Peer play appears to help set the stage for the transition to kindergarten.

Although the developmental benefits of children's early engagement with peers have been described by theorists (Vygotsky, 1967) and have been the subject of studies for decades (Fisher, 1992), research is needed that tracks children's trajectories of peer engagement over time and how these trajectories relate to developmental outcomes. Trajectories of peer play are important to investigate as they may reflect children's accumulation of new experiences, which may result in the development of skills that support the transition to school. In a review of the literature, we found no study in which individuals' trajectories of observed peer play were examined in relation to school competence. Given the research that shows children's adaptation to kindergarten and early schooling is related to later academic performance and achievement, understanding how trajectories of peer play in preschool predict kindergarten competence is important. The present study fills this gap by observing children's peer play over a year of preschool and examining their peer play trajectories in relation to the transition to kindergarten.

### 1.3. Socio-demographic risk and the transition to kindergarten

Identifying how peer play trajectories foster social and academic skills may be especially important for children from families with socio-demographic risk factors associated with poor adjustment to the transition to formal schooling. Latino children from low-income families have been rated as having lower interpersonal skills than White children at entry to kindergarten (Galindo & Fuller, 2010). In addition, children from impoverished backgrounds may have difficulty adjusting to the academic demands, behavioral expectations, length of the school day, and interacting with other children, particularly compared to peers from middle- and high-income households where there likely are more resources and

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