Commentary on the review of measures of early childhood social and emotional development: Conceptualization, critique, and recommendations

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ABSTRACT

This compilation of five papers provides commentary from researchers devoted to the study of a variety of components that contribute to the broader domain of social and emotional development in early childhood. These components include social competence, emotional competence, behavior problems, self-regulation, and executive function. Each section provides a general definition of the construct, highlighting how it fits in a broader model of social and emotional development, and summarizing its relationship with a range of developmental outcomes. The papers then address developmental and contextual issues that are essential to consider when selecting a measurement tool for social and emotional development in early childhood, and discuss the field of extant measures available for each area of development. Presented intentionally as a part of a single paper, these contributions together provide a comprehensive response to the review, methods, and recommendations presented by Halle and Darling-Churchill (in this issue).

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Social competence in early childhood: Challenges in measuring an emergent skill

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Social competence becomes increasingly important as infants and toddlers transition into the early childhood years and their direct interactions and engagement with peers expands. In this paper, we focus on the development and measurement of social competence in young children. However, before beginning it is important to characterize the manner in which social competence fits into the broader category of social emotional skills. In general, social and emotional competence in early childhood provides a critical foundation for the mastery of a range of skills important to successful academic behaviors and

achievement (e.g., Denham, Caverly, Schmidt, & Blair, 2002; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). In consequence, social-emotional skills have been included as part of the school readiness indicators commonly used to represent, and drive improvement in, young children's ability to succeed in kindergarten and early elementary school (National School Readiness Indicators Initiative, 2005). But, what is social-emotional competence? Conceptualizing and measuring these skills is not straightforward because social-emotional competence is typically considered a broad category comprising a set of more specifically delineated skills. In Fig. 1, we present one conceptual model for the inter-relationship of three primary domains of social emotional skills: cognitive, emotional, and social. As the model suggests these skills are distinct in some ways, but are also fundamentally interwoven and reciprocally influence one another over development (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Defining and measuring social-emotional competence in early childhood is particularly challenging as many of these emergent skills may be indistinct from antecedent competencies and because social-emotional

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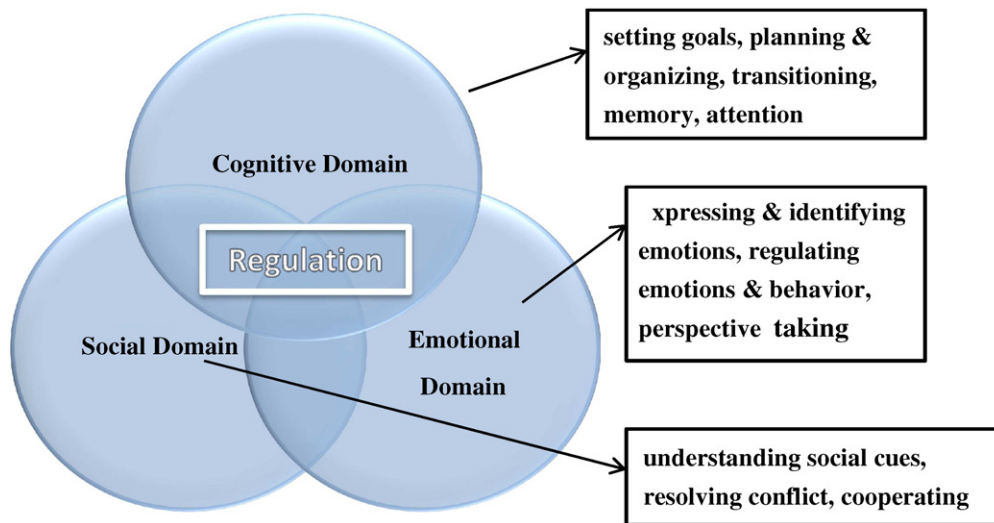E-mail address: kchurchill@childtrends.org (K. Darling-Churchill).

Fig. 1. Domains of social-emotional learning (SEL) and example component skills.

development in early childhood is both rapid and non-linear. In this period of life, we believe that understanding a child's social-emotional competence overall is best done by focusing on discrete skills within each of the domains captured in Fig. 1. In this commentary, we focus on conceptualization and measurement primarily within the social domain of the broader construct of social-emotional competence.

Social competence in early childhood

Early life antecedents of social competence include a child's temperament, self-regulatory skills, emotional understanding, social information processing, and communication skills (Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2006). For example, a child's emotional knowledge is both antecedent to and concurrently developing and expanding in tandem with their social competence. A child's ability to identify and appropriately respond to the emotional cues of a social partner influences the success of their interaction (Trentacosta & Fine, 2009). Yet, it is the behavior that manifests in the context of the interaction, in part resulting from each child's emotional knowledge of themselves and others that represents social competence.

As such, social competence is generally characterized as the effectiveness of a child in social interactions with peers and adults (Fabes et al., 2006). Social competence is distinct from emotional or regulatory competence in that social competence is often conceptualized as the *enactment*, or behavioral manifestation, of these other competencies. In order to be socially competent, a child has the skills to (1) develop positive relationships with others, (2) coordinate and communicate her actions and feelings with social partners, and (3) recognize and regulate her emotions and actions in social settings and interactions. For example, a 4-year-old child entering a prekindergarten classroom must engage peers in order to create play experiences that are mutually satisfactory and fulfilling. In the process, this child will need to negotiate instances when the peer or peers' preferences diverge or conflict with their own. Play can only continue when these instances of conflict are navigated successfully. Self-regulation is an underlying or foundational competency which supports – enabling or impeding – children's success in specific social tasks and in the complex social milieu of early education environments.

These three basic skills are considered general skills within the social competence domain – skills that are important regardless of context. However, mastery of these general skills may be demonstrated differently depending upon the context. Obedience and nonaggression in the face of provocation – behaviors that are adaptive in a school setting – may be a non-adaptive strategy with peers in settings where assertiveness is valued. In addition, there is some research to suggest that adults conceptualize socially competent behaviors in young children differently depending on the sex and/or race/ethnicity of the child (e.g., Nelson et al., 2013). As social competence is apparent in children's interactions with social partners, its measurement should not be divorced from the social and physical contexts in which social interactions take place.

Measuring early childhood social competence

Impetus for measuring social competence

A large body of evidence links social competence in early childhood to a range of outcomes of interest to practitioners and policymakers. For example, Downer and Pianta (2006) found that more socially competent preschool children tended to outperform their less socially competent peers in academic achievement measures administered in first grade. Social competence in early childhood has also been associated with decreased probability of problem behaviors in middle childhood and adolescence (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2010). Social competence is likely an important lever for changing child outcomes in a number of developmental domains (behavioral and academic). Second, social competence is malleable, particularly in early childhood. In 2011, the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* dedicated an entire issue to studies investigating how teachers influenced child outcomes through changes to classroom-level characteristics (Bierman, 2011). Together, these articles illustrate the powerful influence that teachers have in shaping social contexts and interactions which, in turn, enhance children's existing social skills, and support those that are emerging.

Social competence in early childhood and the preschool years is a consequence of children's history of relationships and their experiences in multiple contexts including, of course, the home environment (e.g., Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). For example, parents of young children model with their own behavior, and in interactions with their children, methods for experiencing and expressing negative emotions (Nelson et al., 2013), engaging in exchanges with one or more social partners (Feldman, Bamberger, & Kanat-Maymon, 2013), and navigating conflict (Rispoli, McGoey, Koziol, & Schreiber, 2013). The salience of a child's