



# Assessing early childhood social and emotional development: Key conceptual and measurement issues



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## ABSTRACT

This concluding paper takes stock of key issues that have emerged across the papers of this special issue on measuring early childhood social and emotional development, as well as in the broader literature anchoring these papers. While we include separate sections focusing on conceptual and measurement issues, it quickly becomes clear that the two are intertwined. The field lacks conceptual and definitional clarity, thus hindering our understanding of the focus and utility of specific measures. Indeed, our overarching conclusion is that the greatest progress will be made when measures of young children's social and emotional development are clearly mapped onto an agreed upon conceptual framework that both distinguishes social and emotional development from other broad domains (such as cognitive development), and includes carefully delineated and defined subdomains (broad areas within social and emotional development, such as emotional competence), constructs (specific aspects within subdomains, such as emotion knowledge), and corresponding behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

The papers in this special issue focus both on conceptual and measurement issues in seeking to describe young children's social and emotional development. Key conceptual issues include the need to more clearly identify the borders of social and emotional development, those that separate it from other key domains (such as cognitive development), and to more clearly delineate and distinguish the subdomains of social and emotional development (such as emotional competence) and the specific constructs within these. Conceptual issues also include the need to more fully acknowledge that measures of social and emotional development reflect not only children's behaviors, skills and knowledge, but also features of the contexts in which children grow, learn, and play. Key methodological issues include the large and widely varying number of measures of social and emotional development identified by careful review, and the relatively small number with appropriate psychometric properties needed for administration in different types of studies. A dearth of measures that have not simply been translated but that have been standardized so as to be appropriate for important demographic subgroups has also been underscored as a central issue by the special issue papers.

While identifying serious conceptual as well as methodological issues, the papers in this special issue also point to promising new developments in the measurement of young children's social and emotional development. For example, the special issue papers point to the emergence of direct assessments in this domain, helping to address longstanding issues related to heavy reliance on parent and teacher report measures. They also note critical work towards developing measures appropriate for infancy and toddlerhood, a developmental period that until recently has had an important but limited set of measures.

The purpose of this concluding paper is to highlight and provide further discussion of what we see as some of the most important issues that have emerged across the papers of the special issue, and to identify the next steps that appear most important and potentially fruitful. While we have separate sections in this concluding paper focusing on conceptual and measurement issues, it quickly becomes clear that the two are intertwined, with the lack of conceptual and definitional clarity hindering our understanding of the target and utility of specific measures. Although we begin by focusing separately on the key conceptual and measurement issues that the special issue papers highlight, it is virtually inevitable that we must conclude with a discussion of how these intersect. Indeed, our overarching conclusion is that the greatest progress will be made when measures of young children's social and emotional development are clearly mapped onto an agreed upon conceptual framework that both distinguishes social and emotional development from other broad domains, and that includes carefully

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delineated and defined subdomains, constructs, and corresponding behaviors.

## 2. Conceptual issues

We begin our discussion of conceptual issues important to understanding young children's social and emotional development by returning to a statement from the Introduction to this special issue: "Despite this preponderance of evidence supporting the need to foster young children's positive social and emotional development, the development of psychometrically valid measures that are aligned for use within assessment and accountability systems has lagged" (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, this issue, p. XX). How is it that the last two decades have generated so much useful information about the importance of early social and emotional competencies for success across developmental periods, and yet we still have relatively few easy-to-use, psychometrically strong tools to measure children's discrete competencies, track them over time, and to act upon our knowledge with relevant strategies? In our view, one central reason, likely among many, lies squarely in how social and emotional competencies (skills, processes, outcomes, etc.) are defined, codified, and operationalized in research, and how that information is translated in the worlds of practice (e.g., as standards) and policy (e.g., as accountability systems).

To begin, as suggested by several of the commentary writers for this special issue, the area of social and emotional development suffers from what have been called the "jingle and jangle fallacies" (e.g., Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & ter Weel, 2008; Garcia, 2014). In short, the "jingle fallacy" refers to the use of a single term or names for constructs to represent a wide variety of skills, and the "jangle fallacy" refers to the use of different terms or construct names to refer to the *same* skill (Duckworth, Quinn, & Tsukayama, 2012; Jones & Bailey, unpublished manuscript; Reeves & Venator, 2014). The social and emotional domain is rife with these two challenges.

The use of the term "self-control" in the literature on social and emotional development provides a good example of this conceptual clutter. In an important and much cited paper, Moffitt and colleagues report self-control in childhood to be a strong predictor of a variety of life outcomes (Moffitt et al., 2011). In their paper, they describe self-control as "an umbrella construct that bridges concepts and measurements from different disciplines (e.g., impulsivity, conscientiousness, self-regulation, delay of gratification, inattention, hyperactivity, executive function, willpower, intertemporal choice)" (Moffitt et al., 2011, p. 2693). Each of the concepts and constructs under this umbrella holds its own distinct set of definitions, operationalizations, and measurement tools.

In another recent paper, in contrast to Moffitt et al., Diamond (2013) presents self-control as a component of self-regulation, and as a feature of the inhibitory control dimension of executive function. Indeed, in the broader literature, self-regulation itself is characterized by similar levels of complexity (e.g., Burman, Green & Shanker, 2015). As noted by Williford and Vick Whittaker (article 3 of this issue), the distinctions among emotion regulation and emotion expression, for example, and between behavioral regulation and aggression, as another example, are not always clear.

A further key complication is that the borders between social and emotional development and other important domains of young children's development are not always clear or agreed upon. The area of research on executive function (EF), as discussed in the paper by Willoughby (article 3 of this issue), suffers both from a lack of clarity on where EF fits in terms of domains of development, and also in terms of what specific skills comprise EF. Executive function has become prominent in the literature on young children's development over the last decade, and with good reason, as EF skills have been linked to a variety of positive outcomes for children (e.g., Blair & Razza, 2007; Carlson & Wang, 2007). The challenge is that, in both research and popular writing, the term EF has been used to refer exclusively to mental tasks

performed in a lab-like environment (e.g., computerized memory and attention tasks) as well as to a broader set of skills including how children manage their feelings, exercise self-control, and interact with peers or adults (e.g., delay gratification, listen and follow rules, cope with frustration).

In lumping all of these skills together and using the term EF to refer to any of them, the meaning of each and the specific research findings tied to it, are obscured (Jones, Bailey, & Partee, 2015). In fact, in a comprehensive review of the EF and self-regulation literatures, over 50 distinct construct terms were employed to represent and operationalize EF. In some cases different terms were used to refer to the same underlying phenomena (and deploying the same measurement tools to represent them) and in other cases the same terms represented different phenomena (and deployed different tools to represent them; Jones et al., 2015). As such, one could say that both the jingle and the jangle fallacies are represented in the EF literature.

It may be that some of this conceptual clutter makes sense given the rapid expansion of research in this area over the last two decades, and the intensive interest in the field from practice and policy circles. It may also be that a variety of terms are legitimately deployed across development to represent a core underlying process (e.g., self-control in children may be willpower in adults), and that developmental growth and change is truly a process of hierarchical reorganization and differentiation over time (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). If this is the case, the result is a real overlap of skills, especially early in development, as also suggested by Willoughby (article 3 of this issue).

What are the implications of such definitional messiness for measurement? One direct consequence is that we may lose sight of the actual behavior or skill we think is important. For example, we might be seeking to develop a set of early childhood standards focused on essential regulatory skills necessary to success in the classroom (e.g., managing self in face of frustration, collaboration, dealing with distractions, etc.). If we were to *define and measure* these regulatory skills using EF terminology and referencing the EF literature (e.g., inhibitory control, working memory), we wouldn't necessarily be capturing the basic skills and behaviors we think are actually central to success in the classroom environment (Jones et al., 2015).

Two of the guiding principles (outlined more fully in a subsequent section of this paper) that emerged from the review of the state of measurement of young children's social and emotional development are that "what gets measured matters," and "know what you want to know." These are very important principles for making progress in the domain of social and emotional development, but we must also proceed with care and caution while keeping these in mind. If measurement drives what matters, we may miss the mark because of the definitional clutter and misalignment that currently characterizes the field. If, however, we begin with "know what you want to know" and then build measurement around it, we are certain to be more successful in providing a measure with sufficient clarity for the field (both for research and the worlds of practice and policy) (National Research Council, 2008).

A further and no less important conceptual challenge is related to context. As several authors of the commentaries (article 3 of this issue) note, skills and competencies in the social-emotional domain are highly attuned to, or susceptible to, characteristics of the immediate environment, and may actually be more so than academic or achievement-related skills. Indeed, as indicated by Jones and Yudron (article 3 of this issue), social competence, for example, is defined in part by the nature of the social dynamics and opportunities embedded in the relevant context. Said another way, children's social and emotional competencies are likely to vary in meaningful ways depending on where and when they are measured. That is not simply a problem of measurement, but a genuine feature of this domain that must be adequately captured by measurement and carried into the design of and use of assessment and accountability systems.

With sufficient understanding of contexts, in conjunction with individual children's skills, we will be better able to understand and make

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