Review of Social Emotional Competence: Definition, Constructs, and Significance

Yuan-Yang YUE
Shanghai Normal University Tianhua College, Shanghai, China
ccjcjm@163.com

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Abstract. Social emotional competence is a very important predictor of children’s mental health, positive behaviors and development in the coming periods of adolescence and adulthood. Recently, there has been a growing body of research focusing on people’s social competence as well as its long-term effects on development. This paper is to investigate the definition, constructs and significance of social emotional competence in order to provide an overview of related researches and suggestions on further studies.

Introduction

Social emotional competence in children plays an essential role in the processes and outcomes of their development. It is a predictor for healthy relationships with peers and adults, which lead to success in adolescence and adulthood. As the complexity of the connotations of social emotional competence, the constructs are defined into four aspects: empathy, social skills, self regulation and responsibility which are based on a previous study. Recently, there has been a growing body of research focusing on people’s social competence as well as its long-term effects on development. Therefore, the significance of social emotional competence is also investigated in the paper.

Definition of Social Emotional Competence

To give the definition of social emotional competence is a very complex task, since it encompasses a variety of constructs based on different dimensions: psychology, cognition, and biology [41]. Generally, the term of “social competence” is included in research as “social emotional” competence and these two words are usually associated [1, 26]. Social emotional competence involves the ability to understand one’s own perception as well as another’s and it is the base for children’s future social activities [1].

In addition to emotional competence, social emotional competence includes other dimensions, such as social skills and social behaviors in communication [11]. Executive functions consist of abilities that allow an individual to evaluate one’s behavior, assess its appropriateness and make changes adaptive to the requirement [10]. Furthermore, Spitzberg [44] argues that the dimensions regarding social competence should be considered, such as culture, time, relationship, situation and function. Social behaviors may be appropriate for one setting but not for another.

In summary, social emotional competence is an integrated ability of emotional competence and social skills functioning together in social interaction. Emotional competence is referred to as the ability to understand the one’s own and the other’s intention in social interactions. Social skills are appropriate behaviors performed in different social situations and contexts.

Constructs of Social Emotional Competence

Based on the previous researches, social emotional competence is defined as an integrated ability of emotional competence and social skills. In this review, the integrated ability is comprised of four constructs: responsibility, social competence, self-regulation, and empathy [29, 31].
Empathy

The conceptual meaning of empathy across different studies varies. Researchers in the last century considered that there were two parts of empathy: one is emotional empathy; the other one is cognitive empathy [22]. The first one is referred to as sharing affection, and the second one means to understand the others’ emotional states [22]. Empathy is the capability of understanding and having sympathetic emotional experiences with others when they appear to be in distress, grief or other emotions [21].

With the development of psychology and neurology, a comprehensive concept of empathy is generated [18, 19]. It includes three parts: 1) identify and experience the other one’s emotion; 2) take the other one’s perspective through cognition process; and 3) initiate an effective empathetic response. Empathy includes two important factors: 1) feeling recognition, which is the ability to experience the other’s feelings; and 2) the ability to arouse and show an emotional reaction during socialization [20].

Self-regulation

Self-regulation has multiple dimensions of implications and has been recognized as a vital factor in influencing children’s academic and social success. In the past two decades, numerous studies have examined the effects on human development of self regulation [3, 37].

Some researchers view it as ways to control one’s emotion and behavior in adaptive ways to different situations [28]. However, in many studies self regulation is defined solely as emotional regulation. Zachariah [49] argues that self regulation is referred to as the capability to deal with tough emotional status and to manage emotions when adapting to social circumstances.

Social Skills

Stephens [45] defines social skills as a range of behaviors related to social function, including environmental behaviors, interpersonal behaviors, self-related behaviors and task-related behaviors, all of which impact social functioning. Cartledge and Milburn [7] expand Stephens’ theory of social skills into three items: interpersonal skills, self-related behaviors and task-related behaviors. According to Elksnin and Elksnin [14], the term social skills is the ability to perform appropriately according to a specific task.

Several studies have been conducted to find ways to improve social skills using multiple methods. Social emotional learning curricula are widely implemented in schools in the United States. Much evidence indicates that social emotional curricula improve empathy [8, 16, 17, 42] and social competence [5, 35]. Elliott & Gresham [15] consider that social skills can be learned through training procedures: observational learning, instrumental learning and respondent learning. They also identified four strategies in social skills training, which are instruction, rehearsal, feedback/reinforcement and reductive procedure.

Responsibility

Responsibility can be categorized into personal responsibility and social responsibility. Lavay, French, & Henderson [24] consider that personal responsibility refers to the ability to set goals and find ways to make them; understand and agree with others’ ideas and keep promises; accept personal achievement. Social responsibility refers to the ability to respect others’ rights, property, and honor; have good interpersonal relationships; know how to work in teams; and solve problems and conflicts effectively.

In summary, firstly, responsibility refers to the ability to keep promises, solve problems and have good interpersonal relationships. Secondly, social competence is considered to include appropriate behaviors performed in different social situations and contexts. Thirdly, self regulation is the ability to adjust one’s emotion to adapt oneself to resolve problems in social interaction. Lastly, empathy refers to the ability of understanding the other’s intentions and emotional expressions in social interactions.
and, based on this understanding, display appropriate adaptive behaviors. Each construct is an important factor to influence people’s emotion status and social development.

**The Significance of Social Emotional Competence**

As a part of an integrated competency, every construct makes contributions to the significance of social emotional competence. Empathy plays a key role in the growth of social competence, as indicated in the developmental model of Emotion Intelligence (EI). It is also found that empathy is crucial to pro-social actions and interpersonal interactions [34, 46, 48]. Emotional empathy helps to build a link between persons and is instrumental for harmonious relations between individuals, cognitive empathy helps to form precise and correct knowledge of the psychological moods of others [12].

Sound self regulation is beneficial for building self-confidence, self-awareness and interpersonal relationships [9, 28, 30, 41]. Social skills in effective communication, as characterized by following rules, taking responsibilities and showing affection, help children win success in peer relationships. Peer acceptance is a vital influence on young children’s further development of social competence, because good peer relationships offer more opportunities for the practice of social skills in interpersonal communication [30].

Social emotional competence is a key factor in the psychological development of young children. It has direct and indirect impacts on children’s further development, such as capabilities related to problem solving, healthy interpersonal relationships, prosocial behavior, academic achievement, leadership competence and career success [13, 23, 25, 27, 40, 47].

Social emotional competence plays an essential role in children’s future development, and there is a growing body of research studies focusing on the influential nature of the socialization of children [2, 4] [38, 43]. Maladjustment in social development can be recognized in the period of childhood. If interventions or therapies are not carried out in appropriate stages of development, these kinds of problems or deficits have the potential to extend to adolescence and adulthood and be a predictable factor of antisocial behaviors, poor school readiness and even crime [36, 39]. While researchers in psychology have focused more on deficits, more recent studies focus on positive psychology. The assessment of positive social emotional assets or resilience is often neglected [32]. Therefore, there is a need to carry out studies addressing the efficacy of curricula designed to develop social emotional assets during early childhood [32].

**Recommendations on Further Studies**

Educators should pay great attention to improving social competence in preschoolers and kindergarteners because this age is considered critical [2, 33, 38].

In addition, researchers in psychology have focused more on deficits, more recent studies focus on positive psychology. The assessment of positive social emotional assets or resilience is often neglected [32]. Therefore, there is a need to carry out studies addressing the efficacy of curricula designed to develop social emotional assets during early childhood [32].

**Summary**

In summary, social emotional competence plays an essential role in the processes and outcomes of human’s development. It is a predictor for healthy relationships with peers and adults, which lead to success in adolescence and adulthood. Further studies can focus on children’s social emotional competence in early childhood and improvement of positive psychology of people.

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References


