Emotional Correlates of Social Competence in Children’s Peer Relationships

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of emotional functioning in the social competence of children, with a particular focus on children’s peer relations. Literature on children’s emotional functioning that has the greatest relevance for peer relations is discussed. Using the framework afforded by this literature review, research that provides connections between the constructs of emotional functioning and social competence is examined. Although there is reasonable evidence that accuracy in reading the emotions of others is related to children’s social status, there is no research on the relationship between social competence and the ability to monitor one’s own emotions. There is some support for the idea that high social status is related to the ability to regulate strong feelings effectively, although much of this evidence is based on inferences from behavioral observation. Few data exist on the relation of emotional display rules and sympathetic responding to social competence.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of emotional functioning in the social competence of children. For the most part, we will use a definition of social competence that emphasizes peer relations as a criterion for competence. A brief review is provided of the literature pertaining to children’s emotional functioning that we think has greatest relevance to peer relations. In the framework of this review we will discuss data that seem to speak most closely to the linkages between emotional functioning and social competence, although relatively little research has been conducted on the emotional determinants of peer relations directly. Therefore, we will draw inferences about emotional functioning from studies of the behavioral and social cognitive correlates of social competence and discuss neglected areas of research.

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DEFINING SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Although an accepted definition of social competence for children has yet to emerge, the task of defining social competence has been approached in two ways. First, social competence has been defined solely in terms of social skills. For example, Sarason (1981) discussed the dimensions of social competence that she believed were essential to socially competent functioning; this list included problem-solving behavior, perspective taking, and person perception.

In the second approach to defining social competence, more emphasis has been placed on the social outcomes that children achieve than on the acts that constitute social competence. Foster and Ritchey (1979) and Anderson and Messick (1974), for example, defined social competence as the ability to be effective in the realization of social goals. These social outcomes include having friends, being popular or liked by other children, and engaging in effective social interaction with peers.

We will adopt the latter approach of using social success as a criterion for defining competence, rather than attempt to define the skills that constitute children’s social competence a priori. Whereas lists such as Sarason’s make good sense, they limit the discovery of developmental changes in the nature of social competence by taking an adult-centered perspective on child competence. The strategy in this paper is to review what is known of the functioning of children who meet a certain outcome standard for defining social competence and to allow a definition of social competence based on social skills to emerge empirically from this review.

Taking a criterion-based approach to the problem of defining social competence has its own difficulties because there can be disagreement about what constitutes a competent social outcome. Who is the best judge of childhood social outcomes? We have opted for peers as the source of competence evaluations. Our reluctance to adopt the skills-based approach was partly a result of wanting to be empirical rather than a priori, but also a matter of wanting to describe social competence in terms of a child-centered standard rather than an adult-based standard. In so doing, we emphasize the peer domain of childhood competence. Although a major portion of children’s lives involves getting along with adults, peer relationships become increasingly important with age and play a central role in children’s mastery and display of competent functioning.

The question of which outcomes should define competence is equally controversial. Our choice is to define social competence as being well-liked by peers. Although some children may not view social
success as a primary goal and may focus instead on creative, intellectual, or athletic pursuits, a definition of social competence must be based on social achievements.

An alternative to being well-liked by peers is to define social competence as being able to influence peers and direct their activities effectively, regardless of liking. As it turns out, there is a reasonably high correlation between being perceived as a peer leader and being well-liked by peers (Bukowski & Newcomb, 1984; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). This is not surprising in that one could expect these characteristics to be mutually reinforcing. It is difficult to enlist cooperation from those who dislike you; conversely, those who are able to direct the group toward desired goals are likely to engender respect and admiration. For these reasons, and the fact that more is known about peer social status than leadership, we have opted for social popularity as the childhood index of social competence for this criterion-based examination of the emotional determinants of social competence.

CHILDREN’S UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTIONS

The study of social competence has focused primarily on behavioral skills, with the social behavioral correlates of sociometric status having been investigated as early as the 1930s. For the past two decades, a new dimension has been added to the study of the behavioral correlates of peer status, namely social-cognitive processes that antecedent behavior. More recently, however, there has been a growing interest in the emotional functioning of children, specifically in the ability of children to think about emotions and to regulate their emotions.

Much of the social developmental research of the 1970s related to children’s ability to take the perspective of others and to perceive their thoughts and feelings accurately. It was a short step from this purely social-cognitive research to research on children’s ability to label facial expressions of emotions in other people. Interest in this ability was fueled by the work of investigators who demonstrated that a set of facial expressions can be cross-culturally identified as representing discrete emotional states (Ekman, 1973; Izard, 1971). Izard (1981) and Odom and Lemond (1972) found that by the preschool years, most children can discriminate the facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. However, as Harris and Saarni (1989) stated, only a few emotions are linked clearly to distinct facial expressions (or vocal or postural expressions), and children rapidly require a more sophisticated understanding of emotions than can be provided by knowledge of facial expressions alone.
Emotional development research thus began to shift to children’s understanding of the connection between common interpersonal situations and emotions elicited by these situations. Children were found to understand at the ages between the ending of the preschool period and the early elementary school years the situational determinants of happy, scared, sad, and angry feelings, with the emotions of happiness and fear being understood earlier than anger and sadness (Harris, Olthof, Meerum Terwogt, & Hardman, 1987; Mood, Johnson, & Shantz, 1978; Reichenbach & Masters, 1983). Older children also were shown to have knowledge of situations that evoke more complex emotions, such as pride, shame, guilt, gratitude, jealousy, and worry (Harris et al., 1987; Russell & Ridgeway, 1983; Schwartz & Trabasso, 1984).

Stein and her colleagues (Stein & Jewett, 1986; Stein & Levine, 1987) advanced a theory of the conceptual linkage between children’s emotions and the situations that elicit them. Obviously, this is a difficult task for children because different situations can elicit the same emotion and similar situations can elicit different emotions in different people or even in the same person at different times. Stein proposed that children conceptualize emotions as the outcome of particular relationships between desires or goals and reality. Thus, children view happiness as resulting from the attainment of a desired goal and fear as resulting from a perception that goal loss is likely to occur. Children view both sadness and anger as occurring when a desired goal is lost or not attained. In the case of sadness, the goal is construed as unattainable whereas in the case of anger, the goal is perceived as attainable were some obstacle to be removed. Stein and Trabasso (1989) demonstrated that kindergartners were capable of following complex story plots in which the relationship between desire and reality shifted over the course of the story and could provide the appropriate emotional labels for each story shift.

Weiner, Graham, Stern, and Lawson (1982) offered the following modification of Stein’s theory: Children first associate simple emotions with various goal-based outcomes. As they get older, children begin to understand emotions as resulting not just from positive or negative goal achievements, but from the causal attribution that is assigned to the goal status; they become better able to understand more complex emotions because of their use of casual attributions when analyzing emotion-evoking situations. Thus, children are not just happy at goal attainment; they may feel pride if a goal was reached through ability or effort, or they may feel gratitude if a goal was reached through the help of another. Similarly, children may feel anger if goal attainment is obstructed by the intervention of another and shame or guilt if a goal is not achieved because of one’s own lack of effort or ability. In
a series of studies, children’s developmental progression from outcome-dependent to attribution-dependent analyses of emotion has been documented (Graham & Weiner, 1986; Thompson, 1989; Weiner et al., 1982).

Gnepp further refined the study of children’s understanding of the situational determinants of emotion in a series of studies that demonstrated children’s increasing ability to use personalized information when predicting an individual’s emotional response to a particular situation (Gnepp & Gould, 1985; Gnepp, Klayman, & Trabasso, 1982). Gnepp (1989) discussed the importance during childhood of acquiring an understanding that all people do not respond with similar emotional reactions to various situations and that their differences are based on demographic factors, personality traits, abilities, preferences, and past experience. In Gnepp’s studies, she found that preschool children were able to take into account only individual preferences when predicting emotions, that children in the 5- to 8-year age range were aware of a broader array of personalized information but were unable to use it effectively in predicting emotional responses, and that older children were able to use personalized information of all sorts effectively in their predictions of an individual’s emotional response.

Several researchers have demonstrated that social status is related to an understanding of emotion. Rubin and Maioni (1975) and Goldman, Corsini, and DeUrioste (1980) found that children of higher social status performed better than other children on a task requiring children to match emotional expressions with hypothetical social situations. Gnepp (1989) measured children’s ability to use personalized information about others when inferring emotional reactions to emotion-evoking situations; she found that social status was related to the ability to use such information. A study by Field and Walden (1982) of preschool children’s ability to imitate and produce basic emotional facial expressions revealed that this ability was related to sociometric ratings. Cassidy also found that children’s understanding of emotion across a broad range of dimensions (including the identification, experience, and expression of emotion and knowledge of its antecedents) was related to their social acceptance (Cassidy, Parke, Butkovsky, & Braungart, 1992). Popular children, Dodge, Murphy, and Buchsbaum (1984) found, are better able to detect the social intentions of their peers than are other children. Denham (1986) studied the relationship between preschoolers’ emotional understanding and their prosocial behavior when interacting with peers; although she did not measure social status, she found that children with higher levels of emotional understanding behaved more prosocially toward their peers.

The ability to understand emotions in others is reflected in studies of peer functioning that have been tied directly to peer status. The ability
to observe a group of peers and determine the type of entry behavior that is considered relevant requires that children be able to recognize emotions accurately in others. This ability to enter both familiar and unfamiliar peer groups by determining the frame of reference of the group and then making relevant comments and engaging in group-oriented behavior has been found to be positively related to peer social status (Dodge, Schlundt, Schocken, & Delugach, 1983; Putallaz, 1983; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). Peer social status also is related to the ability to engage successfully in cooperative play for sustained periods of time (Ladd, 1983; Ladd & Mars, 1986; Rubin & Daniels-Beirness, 1983). The coordination of mutual play activity is another task that requires children to read others’ emotions accurately.

CHILDREN’S IDENTIFICATION OF THEIR OWN EMOTIONS

Much of what has just been described could be more easily construed as an account of social-cognitive development rather than emotional development, because emotions were studied as the content of children’s social-cognitive processes (Casey, 1993). That is, children’s understanding of emotion, rather than their actual experience or expression of emotion, was the focus of these studies. In fact, investigators of emotional functioning in children often employ paradigms in which children are questioned about their own emotions or the emotions of others, rather than measures of actual emotionality.

How do children identify their own actual emotional states? It is conceivable that a child could reach these determinations by the same cognitive processes of matching emotions to situations discussed earlier. However, for children to identify their own emotions, the process is more likely one of deciphering the internal physiological and cognitive signals that accompany various emotional reactions (Carroll & Steward, 1984; Shields & Stern, 1979).

Early investigators (Lewis, Wolman, & King, 1972; Plutchik, 1962) found that the number of emotions children are able to describe and the details of their descriptions increase with age. More recently, Casey (1993) assessed children’s ability to monitor and understand their own emotional experiences in circumstances of positive or negative feedback from a peer. Following this feedback, children’s emotional expressions were recorded, and they were questioned about their feelings and their understanding of the reason for these emotions. Casey found that children’s emotional expression, self-report, and understanding were more coherently related following positive peer feedback than negative peer
feedback. She also found that girls were more accurate reporters of their facial expressions than boys. Unfortunately, there is no direct evidence that being able to identify one’s own emotions has an impact on social functioning with peers, although it follows logically that the ability to alter one’s emotional responses requires the capacity to recognize these emotions.

EMOTION REGULATION IN CHILDREN

The ability to alter one’s emotional response to provocative situations is generally referred to as emotion regulation. In an initial study of children’s emotion regulation ability, Harris, Olthof, and Meerum Terwogt (1981) demonstrated that both 6- and 10-year-old children showed they understood that it is possible to change their feelings. When asked how these emotions could be changed, younger children suggested leaving the situation or changing it, whereas older children also indicated that they could change how they feel by thinking different thoughts.

In a second study, Meerum Terwogt, Koops, Oosterhoff, and Olthof (1986) asked children to regulate their emotional response to stories. They were asked to make themselves feel either sad or not sad in response to identical stories. After hearing the story, children performed a cognitive task. Children who had been asked to make themselves feel sad performed more poorly on the task than did those who had not. The authors inferred that the children actually had been able to manipulate their experience of sadness upon request, because of corresponding shifts in the levels of their cognitive performance (Easterbrook, 1969). After the story, children were asked what they had done to comply with the instructions. To increase their sadness, children reported they expanded the story in a negative way, related the story to a similar incident in their own lives that had an even worse outcome, or attempted to identify with the story character. Those who were asked to avoid feeling sad reported that they either expanded the story in a positive way, related the story to a personal incident with a more positive outcome, or reminded themselves that is was “just a story.” These two studies provide some evidence that children can engage in a self-conscious process of emotion regulation.

Although there is some research on adult individual differences in psychophysiological recovery from strong feelings like anger (Katz & Gottman, 1991), most of what is known about children’s recovery from angry emotions has been discussed in the context of anger-control training techniques. For example, Lochman, White, and Wayland (1991)
described an anger coping program that includes a self-control component. In this program, aggressive children are taught to recognize the behavioral, environmental, and physiological cues of anger and to use self-talk strategies to control angry feelings. Anger control interventions such as Lochman’s have been shown to be successful in teaching children to control angry feelings (Kazdin, Esvaldt-Dawson, French, & Unis, 1987; Kendall, Ronan, & Epps, in press; Lochman, Burch, Curry, & Lampron, 1984). Although the aggressive children in these studies have been taught to alter their emotional reactions, it is reasonable to infer that more socially competent children engage in comparable emotion regulation without such instruction. Gottman and Mettetal (1986) proposed that children acquire emotional self-control as a result of the increasingly complex demands placed on them by peer interactions and social play. As children get older, the extent to which successful play requires the negotiation of conflict and the deesclation of excitement increases. Children who meet these emotional play demands effectively, Gottman and Mettetal suggested, will be perceived as attractive play partners by their peers and thus will be more well-liked.

More direct evidence for the role of emotion regulation skills in peer social success comes from a recent study of Eisenberg, Fabes, Bernzweig, Karbon, Poulin, and Hanish (in press). They found that teachers’ ratings of boys’ ability to cope constructively with negative emotions were positively related to the boys’ social status, whereas teachers’ ratings of boys’ use of acting out as a coping mechanism were negatively related to their social status.

Additional inferences about the role of emotion regulation in determining childhood social status can be drawn from behavioral studies of popular, average, and rejected status children. Rejected children, especially rejected boys, consistently have been reported to be more aggressive than average status children, whereas popular children are less aggressive than other children (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990). These findings suggest that peer social status is positively related to the control of angry feelings, although it is possible that children who are more overtly aggressive also are more prone to experience anger. In one study (Coie & Dodge, 1988), peers did describe rejected children as being angry more often than average or popular children. More direct evidence on this issue comes from an observational study of preschool children by Fabes and Eisenberg (1992). Although their measure of sociometric status only involved positive rating scales of likability, they found that social popularity was inversely related to overt anger incidents. Furthermore, more popular boys were more likely to actively resist other children who provoked them. It may be that this active resistance takes the place of anger. Thus, rather than having to deal with anger to the
extent that less competent children do, more competent children may preempt the need to regulate angry feelings by taking assertive social action toward provocateurs.

Further evidence of the ability of socially competent children to regulate their emotions comes from observations of 9-year-old boys of popular and average social status meeting in play groups of unfamiliar peers for the first time (Hubbard, Coie, & Dodge, 1993). In this study, play groups were sorted into high- versus low-aggressiveness groups, based on the frequency of aggression displayed by all group members. Thus, in a between-groups design, popular and average boys were exposed to either a high-aggression or a low-aggression group context. Popular boys were much less influenced by the level of group aggressiveness than were average boys; that is, popular boys displayed more similar levels of aggressive behavior in both high- and low-aggressiveness contexts, whereas average status boys showed more aggression when they were members of more aggressive groups. (Mean number of aggressive acts: popular boys in high-aggression groups = 1.6, popular boys in low-aggression groups = 0.5, average in high-aggression groups = 3.8, average boys in low-aggression groups = 0.1). These findings suggest that popular boys are better able to modulate their internal response to anger-arousing situations; these boys did not display more aggression in the high-aggressiveness groups, although it would be expected that they experience more provocation in these groups.

A second finding from this same study (Hubbard et. al, 1993) supports the contention of Gottman and Mettetal (1986) that competent children are those who are able to regulate their affect during emotionally arousing play. When transitions between play states were contrasted for these same popular and average status boys, popular boys were better able to make the transition from rough and tumble play to less arousing but still quite interactive play states such as conversation and constructive play. In contrast, average boys were more likely than popular boys to shift to a socially isolated state from rough and tumble play. It is such highly arousing play activities that Gottman and Mettetal noted cause children the most difficulty when trying to sustain interactive play. Besides being highly active, rough and tumble play has the potential to produce both feelings of excitement and feelings of anger in children. Popular boys apparently are better able to regulate their angry and excited emotions in these situations and sustain play with their play partners.

EMOTION DISPLAY RULES

The use of display rules for emotional expression introduces a different aspect of self-regulation to the concept of emotional functioning.
When children attempt to regulate their internal experiences of emotion, the purpose often is to reduce painful feelings or levels of excitement. In contrast, the concept of display rules essentially is interpersonal in nature. Here the goal of the child is to alter the expression of emotion for social purposes: to spare another person hurt feelings, to mislead others about the extent to which they have been injured or are distressed, or to avoid embarrassing themselves by displaying an emotion that others would view as inappropriate to the situation. These is an element of dissembling in the use of display rules, even though the act of altering emotional display also may achieve the secondary purpose of reducing the internal experience of the original emotion.

Display rules is a term that describes children’s recognition that there are times when it is not appropriate or adaptive to express the emotions one is feeling; that is, there are rules for what emotion should be displayed under particular social circumstances. Children as young as 6 years of age have been found to understand that facial expressions of emotion do not necessarily correspond to internal emotional experiences (Gardner, Harris, Ohmoto, & Hamazaki, 1988; Harris, Donnelly, Guz, & Pitt-Watson, 1986; Harris & Gross, 1988; Saarni, 1979). In an interview study in which she asked children about parental reactions to emotional displays, Saarni (1987) found that children think their parents are less accepting of emotional displays that hurt other people and more accepting of displays that do not hurt others. In another study, Saarni (1979) asked children to discuss reasons for hiding their emotions. Children stated that they would mask their affect to avoid embarrassment, to get attention, to make others feel sorry for them, and to get help. Children thought it was acceptable to show genuine emotion when their feelings were very intense, when they were sick, or when they were with trusted others.

The use of display rules changes with age in children. Saarni (1979), using a story paradigm, found that older children report using display rules for sadness and disappointment more than younger children. Similarly, Gnepp and Hess (1986) demonstrated an increase in knowledge about the use of display rules for shame and disappointment across first, third, and fifth grades. In contrast to these two studies in which children were asked about their use of display rules, Saarni (1984) experimentally studied actual display rule use by inducing disappointment in a laboratory situation. She found that younger children (boys especially) showed more negative emotion upon receiving an unappealing prize than older children; that is, older children were more likely to use display rules than younger children.

The use of display rules appears to be more complicated for anger, however. Underwood, Coie, and Herbsman (1992) found that children
increasingly mask anger toward teachers as they get older, but do not report doing so toward peers. In fact, girls were more likely to express anger directly toward peers as they entered adolescence. These findings do not contradict the results of earlier display rules studies; in fact, they illustrate what is meant by the term. Display rules for emotion define what is considered socially appropriate in a given situation. Thus, although it may be most adaptive to mask one’s emotions in some situations, in other contexts it may be more adaptive to give these emotions full expression. The fact that older children learn to mask their disappointment over the receipt of an unappealing gift does not mean that they should learn to mask all emotions in all circumstances as they get older. For girls, it may be a developmental achievement of sorts to recognize that it is adaptive for them to let peers know they are angry with them. For this reason, they would show more anger to peers as they grow older but less anger or disappointment with adults. The former reaction might lead to better treatment by peers, whereas the latter might lead to better responses from adults.

Thus, although greater social competence might be associated with greater use of display rules, it would not necessarily be associated with greater masking of emotion. In order to determine whether some children are using display rules more than others, it is necessary to know how these rules are defined for specific situations, and this adds a major element of complexity and ambiguity to the research task. Whereas the rules for child-adult interaction may be relatively easy to identify, display rules for peer situations may be more complex or less well defined, as the Underwood et al. (1992) findings suggest.

Research on children’s use of emotional display rules is relatively recent in origin and the connection to peer social status has yet to be made empirically. One would expect that more popular children excel in the use of display rules because doing so calls for an ability to adopt the peer group’s frame of reference in understanding what is appropriate for a particular situation. Display rules also call for an other-centered or relationship-oriented perspective, given that the child must consider how the display of a felt emotion will affect the relationship at hand. In some display rule circumstances, such as Saarni’s experimental gift-giving paradigm, children must balance their own interests with those of the adult whose feelings might be hurt if true feelings of disappointment in the gift were expressed. Finally, the use of display rules requires social perceptiveness for the reason that children must recognize the strategic value of masking certain emotions such as fear in the face of peer bullying. Thus, competence in display rule utilization fits the four principles that characterize popular children in both conflictual and peer
entry situations, as described by Putallaz and Sheppard (1992), who state “competence is a consequence of being able to perceive relevant norms, detect the interests and motives of other children accurately, strike a balance between one’s own preferences and those of other children, while behaving in a relevant manner” (p. 36).

SYMPATHETIC RESPONDING IN CHILDREN

Except for a brief reference to individual differences in spontaneous rates of recovery from strong emotion, most of the preceding discussion of emotional functioning has had a strong cognitive or self-awareness focus. There is another literature on children’s capacity or proclivity for experiencing certain emotions, particularly the emotions occurring in the form of sympathy or empathy for another person. Eisenberg (1986) has made the case for viewing sympathy as a prosocial emotional response that is a form of social competence. Sympathy is defined as an other-oriented emotional reaction to another person’s emotional circumstances. Sympathy is distinguished from empathy, or personal distress arising from a similarly accurate appraisal of another’s emotional condition. Whereas personal distress is self-oriented (e.g., anxiety), sympathy is associated with altruistic motivation and has been related empirically to prosocial behavior (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1991). Ironically, Eisenberg and Fabes (1992) concluded that children who experience personal distress when faced with empathy-inducing events are not likely to respond with sympathy because their emotional distress makes them self-focused. For example, Eisenberg et. al (1989) found that children’s self-report of empathy, when exposed to another person’s distress, was unrelated to their prosocial behavior. Thus, the response of sympathy requires a degree of emotional control to allow children to be other oriented.

Although the ability to experience sympathy might be taken as a good example of social competence in a skills approach to defining this construct, there is no direct empirical evidence for concluding that social status is predicted from sympathetic responding. In contrast to sympathy, Eisenberg has argued that empathic responding would not necessarily be related to social competence. In fact, the overwhelming feelings of personal distress that usually accompany strong empathic responding actually may inhibit socially skillful behavior.

There are other research findings that suggest social status may be related to sympathetic responding. For example, peers and teachers both describe popular children as more cooperative and helpful than average children, whereas rejected children are described as less cooperative and
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helpful than their peers (Coie et al., 1982). Popular children also choose more prosocial and fewer aggressive solutions when faced with social problems than do other children and they evaluate these solutions as being more effective than to other children. Rejected children, however, are more likely both to choose aggressive solutions to social problems and to evaluate prosocial solutions as being less effective than their average peers (Asarnow & Callan, 1985; Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Deluty, 1983; French & Waas, 1987). It can be hypothesized that these differences in prosocial orientation are at least partially the result of varying levels of sympathy in children of popular and rejected sociometric status.

CHILDREN'S MOOD STATES

In the review thus far, we have dealt with characteristic emotional responding only in the context of sympathy and empathy and have not explored data on emotional mood states. However, the peer relations literature does have something to say about mood differences between children of different levels of social status, with children who routinely display more positive affect being more well-liked by their peers. Bonney (1943), Gronlund and Anderson (1957), and Kuhlen and Lee (1943) found that sociometric status was related to peer-nominated cheerfulness or happiness. Stocker and Dunn (1990) found that moody or emotionally negative children experience more peer rejection than other children. In a study of preschool children, Eisenberg and her colleagues (in press) found boys’ negative affect to be negatively related to both social skills and peer status. Sroufe, Schork, Motti, Lawroski, and LaFreniere (1985) found that popularity was related to both direct observations and teacher ratings of positive affect. In all these studies, there is a difficulty in distinguishing the direction of causal effects, however. Because the children in these studies were well acquainted at the time the ratings were established, it is not possible to separate the impact of mood on social status from the consequences of being well liked or disliked. It is easy to understand why children who are well liked would be happier than less well-liked children. However, Dodge, Coie, Pettit, and Price (1990) found that peer popularity in the classroom context was related to lower ratings on sadness made by male peers in new and completely unfamiliar social groups as compared to other boys. Although cheerfulness does not have the same connotation of competence as do the other dimensions of emotional functioning that we have discussed, this characteristic does fit the criteria that Asher and Williams (1987) list for childhood peer success. It is more enjoyable (within limits) to be around someone who is cheerful than someone who is sad.
CONCLUSIONS

We have attempted to provide an outline of the dimensions of emotional functioning that might be related to social competence. Socially competent children presumably ought to be able to recognize affect in others and in themselves more readily and more accurately than less competent children. This ability could be manifest in reading the facial or body cues of others or in matching emotions to social situations. Competent children should be more effective in regulating their own emotional experiences, particularly when these emotions could give rise to maladaptive social behavior. The ability to modulate or recover from strong feelings of anger or excitement, therefore, should be related positively to children’s ability to sustain active play with others or to negotiate conflictual or frustrating situations with peers more effectively. Similarly, being able to recognize how the display of certain feelings will affect others is apt to make it more likely for socially competent children not to give offense to others or portray themselves as vulnerable to intimidation. Finally, the ability to sympathize with the emotions of peers should enable socially competent children to relate more appropriately to peers. With the exception of a modest literature on the relationship between social status and the ability to recognize and understand others’ emotions in social situations, there is very little research that connects social status to the other dimensions of childhood emotional functioning. It is clear that there is much work still to be done.

Although it is plausible that socially competent children are better able to identify their own emotions than are other children, there is no empirical support for this assumption. One compelling reason for this absence of research is that there are no convincing methods for obtaining independent measurement of children’s affective states and thus there is no stable reference point for making comparisons of children’s ability in this area. There are available methods for physiologically assessing emotional arousal, and it may be that these procedures will provide a partial solution to this methodological problem.

Similar methodological limitations hold true for the assessment of emotion regulation in children. We need to know what children are feeling in order to know how well they are managing these feelings. There is, however, indirect support for the contention that more popular children are better at regulating their emotions than are other children; there is ample evidence that popular children do not display as much overt negative emotion or aggression as other children. However, it is uncertain whether socially competent children actually experience negative emotion as frequently and intensely as do other children; this
question is crucial to understanding the way that socially competent children regulate affect. If these children do experience anger to the same degree as their peers, they apparently are able to modulate these feelings more easily than are other children. It is also possible, however, that socially competent children simply do not experience strong negative emotions to the same extent as their peers. We do know that popular children are not provoked by peers as frequently as are other children (Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983), and this fact could account for their reduced display of negative affect. We also know that popular children are more likely to respond with actions that avert the negative behavior of others, and this helps them avoid experiencing increased negative emotion (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992). It is possible, as well, that socially competent children may have higher thresholds for anger arousal than their peers and thus may be able to remain calm even when faced with provocations they cannot avoid. In order to resolve these questions, paradigms need to be developed in which the emotional states of children can be assessed accurately.

Although little is known about peer social status differences in children’s ability to use emotional display rules, this deficit can be very easily addressed. Experimental paradigms exist for the examination of children’s display rules (Saarni, 1984). For the most part, the study of display rules has related to circumstances where a priori decisions could be made about correct display rules for the experimental situation. Less is known about display rules in everyday peer life, and this is what is most important to the study of peer competence. In order to determine whether socially competent children use display rules more effectively than other children, we must know more about the nature of display rules for the significant social and emotional contexts of children’s peer interactions.

The existing research on children’s sympathetic responding provides a compelling paradigm for examining directly the importance of this aspect of emotional functioning for peer social success. If socially competent children could be shown to experience more sympathetic feelings than other children do, these findings could provide one important explanation for the fact that they are perceived by peers as more cooperative and helpful.

In conclusion, substantial methodological advances are needed before some aspects of emotional functioning in peer relationships can be addressed adequately. However, there are several other domains, such as display rules and sympathetic responding, that could be studied immediately.
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