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To cite this article: Hülya Gülay Ogelman, Vuslat Oğuz, Özlem Körükçü & Aysel Köksal Akyol (2016): Examination of the effect of perspective-taking skills of six-year-old children on their social competences, Early Child Development and Care

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1150274>



Published online: 16 Mar 2016.



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## Examination of the effect of perspective-taking skills of six-year-old children on their social competences

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to reveal the effect of perspective-taking skills of six-year-old children on their social competences. Determined by two independent kindergartens at Yenişehir district in Mersin as study groups, 115 children (59 girls, 56 boys) in the age group of 6, constituted the study group of the study. In order to reveal the predictor effect of perspective-taking skill on level of social competence, the technique of simple linear regression analysis was used in the data analysis. According to the results, the cognitive perspective-taking skill of six-year-old children predicted variables of entering a peer group, reaction to provocation, teacher expectations, and reactive aggression in a statistically significant manner. However, the cognitive perspective-taking skill of six-year-old children did not predict variables of reaction to failure, reaction to success, social expectations, and proactive aggression in a statistically significant manner. In addition, perceptual and affective perspective-taking skills did not predict the variables of entering a peer group, reaction to provocation, reaction to failure, reaction to success, social expectations, teacher expectations, reactive aggression, and proactive aggression in a statistically significant manner.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 January 2016  
Accepted 1 February 2016

### KEYWORDS

Perspective-taking skills;  
social competences;  
preschool period

### Introduction

Children are not independent from their environment; indeed, they are active and natural-born social organisms in a large system of powers interacting in the past, present and the future. The actions of children realize within the context of the actions of others. Children actively seek and react to various social and physical contexts (Miller, 2008). Newborns do not recognize that they are a different being when they are born. They perceive their mothers as their extension. However, they begin to recognize that they are a different being in parallel with the cognitive development. In the course of time, they perceive that they are protected by the objects and the people around even if they are not in sight. They get rid of an egocentric approach and begin to put themselves into another's place (Köksal-Akyol & Körükçü, 2004).

The ever-increasing self-awareness of young children depends on their ability of feeling the emotions from a widening spectrum. Emotional developments in early childhood enable them to endeavour to understand the emotional reactions of other people and control their emotions (Santrock, 2012). In the preschool period, children learn numerous skills in emotional and social aspects (Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004). Among these skills, perspective-taking and social competences

attract the attention due to their short- and long-term effects and the fact that they affect a significant amount of development areas. Perspective-taking skill is expressed as the process in which a person thinks and feels like another person by placing themselves into the other person's position. It is also defined as ability to understand what another person sees and thinks and the emotional reactions shared in the child's life towards their emotional reactions (Eisenberg, 1995; Köksal, 2000; Köksal-Akyol & Körükçü, 2004). The perspective-taking skill consists of three sub-skills: the perceptual perspective-taking skill signifies understanding what others see and hear. The cognitive perspective-taking skill involves understanding the intentions, behaviours, and thoughts of others. The affective perspective-taking skill, on the other hand, signifies understanding the emotional states of others (Eisenberg, 1986). The perspective-taking skill is evaluated as one of the basic skills in the social-cognitive development (Moll, Meltzoff, Merzsch, & Tomasello, 2013). When the perspective-taking skill in childhood is analysed socially, it is seen that the child is in need of healthy parental attitudes and educator attitudes and it is important to create an emphatic environment for the child (Dökmen, 2004). The fact children have skill of recognizing and identifying the emotions of their own and of other people in early childhood and make arrangements in accordance with negative or positive emotions could be defined as an important duty of development expected from children (Wiedebusch & Petermann, 2008). In the model developed by Flavell regarding the development of the perspective-taking skill in the preschool period, it is explained as follows: in the first stage, especially children in the age range of 2–3 years realize that individuals are able to see different things. The second stage in perspective taking involves children's exploration of both seeing different things and seeing the same things in a different way. This stage is reported to be generally reached at age 4 (Moll et al., 2013).

Socialization is the process where socially successful individuals are raised. However, this process is required to also involve a mutual relationship between the environmental factors including the inherent biological potential of individuals as well as ecology and society (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1998). Social competence implies certain social, emotional, cognitive skills and behaviours needed by children to adapt to their society successfully (Çorbacı-Oruç, 2008). Social competence starts to develop as from the age 1–2 in company with various prosocial behaviours like solidarity and sharing (Patterson-Mallin, 2003). In the preschool period, a prosocial behaviour repertoire and consequently a social competence develop in company with a number of factors such as maturation, taking as model, temperament, positive communication with parents, language skills, and secure attachment with increasing age (Parke & Ladd, 1992; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). One of the variables that affect social competence is emotional skills (Denham, 2007). There is a mutual interaction between the emotional competence and social competence (Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990). Some researchers (Bengtsson & Johnson, 1992; Roberts & Strayer, 1996) expressed that social competence involves the skills regarding different development areas and the perspective-taking skill might be more dominant within these skills, compared to many other skills. Perspective-taking skill, involved within social skills as well as emotional skills, can make contributions to the fact that individuals are able to interpret their own feelings and others' feelings and give reactions appropriate to such interpretations (Trentacosta, 2006). Perspective-taking skill enables the social behaviours, comprehension of processes, and accurate interpretation. It may support the development of prosocial behaviours (Cho, 1992). It has been determined that emotional and social skills in preschool period are related to many variables particularly being loved by peers and adaptation to school (Bierman, 2005).

Upon the literature review, there has been an increase in the number of studies approaching the perspective-taking skills of preschool children in Turkey (Gülay-Ogelman, Seçer, & Önder, 2013; Köksal-Akyol & Körükçü, 2004; Şener, 1996) and examining their social competence (Altay & Güre, 2012; Aral, Gürsoy, Yıldız-Bıçakçı, & Körükçü, 2006; Çorbacı-Oruç, 2008; Durmuşoğlu-Saltalı & Arslan, 2012) in recent years. However, there has been no study examining the perspective-taking skill and the social competence together. Studies examining these concepts which are very important for the development of young children are required.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the effect of perspective-taking skills of six-year-old children on their social competences. The sub-goals of the study are as follows:

- Does the cognitive perspective-taking skill of six-year-old children predict the variables of peer group entry, reaction to provocation, reaction to failure, reaction to success, social expectations, teacher expectations, reactive aggression, and proactive aggression in a statistically significant way?
- Does the perceptual perspective-taking skill of six-year-old children predict the variables of peer group entry, reaction to provocation, reaction to failure, reaction to success, social expectations, teacher expectations, reactive aggression, and proactive aggression in a statistically significant way?
- Does the affective perspective-taking skill of six-year-old children predict the variables of peer group entry, reaction to provocation, reaction to failure, reaction to success, social expectations, teacher expectations, reactive aggression, and proactive aggression in a statistically significant way?

## Method

Relational survey method was used in the study.

## Participants

Determined by two independent kindergartens at Yenişehir district in Mersin as study groups, 115 children (59 girls, 56 boys) in the age group of 6, who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, constituted the study group of the study.

## Measures

Personal Information Form, Perspective-Taking Test, and Problem Classification Scale for Children in Preschool Period (PCSCPP) were used as the data collection tools of the study.

PCSCPP is an assessment instrument used for revealing the social competences of children. PCSCPP involves 8 subscales (peer group entry, reaction to provocation, reaction to failure, reaction to success, social expectations, teacher expectations, reactive aggression, and proactive aggression) and 60 items. The scale is a five-point Likert-type scale that aims to evaluate the reactions given by children in cases of problems. Every item has multiple answers with different scores; no problem (1), rarely a problem (2), sometimes a problem (3), frequently a problem (4), and always a problem (5). A subscale with high score indicates how frequently a child suffers from that particular problem. A low score indicates the rarity of a problem. The scale addresses the behaviour of children from a social point of view. This assessment instrument was developed by Blankemeyer, Culp, Hubbs-Tait and Culp in 2002 (Akt. Çorbacı-Oruç, 2008, p. 64) and was adapted to Turkish by Çorbacı-Oruç in 2008. In the Turkish adaptation study, the internal consistency coefficients of the subscales were determined as follows: peer group entry: .88; reaction to provocation: .93; reaction to failure: .89; reaction to success: .91; social expectations: .91; teacher expectations: .92; reactive aggression: .94; and proactive aggression: .95 (Çorbacı-Oruç, 2008).

Within the scope of this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient was determined as .87 for the subscale of peer group entry; .94 for the subscale of reaction to provocation; .93 for the subscale of reaction to failure; .75 for the subscale of reaction to success; .93 for the subscale of social expectations; .93 for the subscale of teacher expectations; .96 for the subscale of reactive aggression, and .94 for the subscale of proactive aggression.

*Perspective-Taking Test* is an assessment instrument that aims to measure three different aspects of perspective-taking skill. Perspective-Taking Test includes three subscales: Perceptual Perspective-

Taking Test, Cognitive Perspective-Taking Test, and Affective Perspective-Taking Test. This assessment instrument was developed by Şener (1996) and its validity and reliability study was conducted by Akin (2002). Şener (1996) developed the test by making use of the study conducted by Kurdek and Rodgon (1975). The test consists of three subtests: first, Perceptual Perspective-Taking Test, second Cognitive Perspective-Taking Test, third Affective Perspective-Taking Test. Each test has special materials and it is required to receive a special training in order to apply the tests. The tests are applied by turns and individually to children at a desk. The Perceptual Perspective-Taking Test is applied with instructions given to children by the researcher according to two pillows with Mickey Mouse pictures. The Cognitive Perspective-Taking Test is applied with questions asked to children by the researcher according to a story consisting of seven picture cards. The Affective Perspective-Taking Test, on the other hand, is applied with cards involving various facial expressions. The tests last approximately 10–15 minutes. Explanations are made for children before each test. Each test is scored on specific scoring papers during the application. While the highest score to be obtained from the Perceptual Perspective-Taking Test is 4, the lowest score is 0. While the highest score to be obtained from the Cognitive Perspective-Taking Test is 3, the lowest score is 0. And while the highest score to be obtained from the Affective Perspective-Taking Test is 4, the lowest score is 0. High scores signify the empathetic point of view. Total score in the scale is obtained by summing up the scores of three tests. As a result of the adaptation study, the internal consistency coefficient was determined as .77 for the Perceptual Perspective-Taking Test, .85 for the Cognitive Perspective-Taking Test, and .77 for the Affective Perspective-Taking Test (Şener, 1996).

Within the scope of this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient was determined as .61 in the subscale of perceptual perspective, .81 in the subscale of cognitive perspective, and .69 in the subscale of affective perspective.

### Procedure

Personal Information Form and PCSCPP were filled in by preschool teachers for each child. The Perspective-Taking Test was applied by researchers on children individually and by turns (Perceptual Perspective-Taking Test, Cognitive Perspective-Taking Test, and Affective Perspective-Taking Test). While conducting the study, no break was taken between the three tests in order not to let the child get distracted and pull away from the study. The application lasted approximately three months.

### Data analysis

In order to reveal the predictor effect of perspective-taking skill on level of social competence, the technique of simple linear regression analysis was used in the data analysis. Simple linear regression analysis is used in case of requesting to explain the correlation between two variables in experimental and screening studies by using a regression equation aimed at estimating the  $Y$  based  $X$  through defining one of the variables as the dependent variable ( $Y$ ) and the other as the independent variable ( $X$ ) (Büyükoztürk, 2004).

According to Table 1, the cognitive perspective-taking skill predicted the skill of peer group entry [ $F(1,113) = 4.134, p < .05$ ] which is one of the subscales of social competence as well as the skill of reaction to provocation [ $F(1,113) = 5.519, p < .05$ ], the skill of teacher expectations [ $F(1,113) = 6.875, p < .05$ ], and the reactive aggression [ $F(1,113) = 5.210, p < .05$ ] in a statistically significant manner. Accordingly, the cognitive perspective-taking skill predicted variance of 3% of the skill of peer group entry, 4% of the skill of reaction to provocation, 5% of the skill of teacher expectations, and 4% of the reactive aggression. The cognitive perspective-taking skill did not predict the variables of reaction to failure [ $F(1,113) = 2.184, p > .05$ ], reaction to success [ $F(1,113) = 0.663, p > .05$ ], social expectations [ $F(1,113) = 2.509, p > .05$ ], and proactive aggression [ $F(1,113) = 1.573, p > .05$ ] in a statistically significant manner.

**Table 1.** Simple linear regression analysis regarding the prediction of social competence by the perspective-taking skill.

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	Standard error	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Peer group entry/perceptual	.131	.017	1.980	.162	11,093	1.026	−0.131	10,811	.000
Peer group entry/cognitive	.188	.035	4.134	.044*	12,336	1.326	−0.188	9301	.000*
Peer group entry/affective	.118	.014	1.605	.208	10,824	0.928	−0.118	11,658	.000
Response to provocation/perceptual	.121	.015	1.680	.198	21,653	1.976	−0.121	10,959	.000
Response to provocation/cognitive	.216	.047	5.519	.021*	24,974	2.536	−0.216	9848	.000*
Response to provocation/affective	.101	.010	1.169	.282	21,040	1.789	−0.101	11,760	.000
Response to failure/perceptual	.153	.023	2.718	.102	19,533	1.745	−0.153	11,193	.000
Response to failure/cognitive	.138	.019	2.184	.142	20,109	2.282	−0.138	8811	.000
Response to failure/affective	.151	.023	2.619	.108	19,184	1.577	−0.151	12,163	.000
Response to success/perceptual	.113	.013	1.463	.229	5302	0.502	−0.113	10,571	.000
Response to success/cognitive	.076	.006	0.663	.417	5256	0.657	−0.076	8003	.000
Response to success/affective	.159	.025	2.913	.091	5434	0.450	−0.159	12,067	.000
Social expectations/perceptual	.169	.029	3.327	.071	20,909	1.793	−0.169	11,662	.000
Social expectations/cognitive	.147	.022	2.509	.116	21,455	2.348	−0.147	9139	.000
Social expectations/affective	.180	.033	3.805	.054	20,737	1.617	−0.180	12,828	.000
Teacher expectations/perceptual	.142	.020	2.327	.130	12,774	1.280	−0.142	9984	.000
Teacher expectations/cognitive	.239	.057	6.875	.010*	15,071	1.637	−0.239	9204	.000*
Teacher expectations/affective	.122	.015	1.715	.193	12,347	1.159	−0.122	10,652	.000
Reactive aggression/perceptual	.090	.008	0.924	.338	15,660	1.652	−0.090	9478	.000
Reactive aggression/cognitive	.210	.044	5.210	.024*	18,799	2.116	−0.210	8883	.000*
Reactive aggression/affective	.137	.019	2.163	.144	16,158	1.485	−0.137	10,883	.000
Proactive aggression/perceptual	.070	.005	0.560	.456	13,802	1.491	−0.070	9258	.000
Proactive aggression/cognitive	.117	.014	1.573	.212	15,090	1.936	−0.117	7793	.000
Proactive aggression/affective	.077	.006	0.676	.413	13,771	1.346	−0.077	10,250	.000

\* $p < .05$ .

The perceptual perspective-taking skill did not predict the variables of peer group entry [ $F(1,113) = 1.980, p > .05$ ], reaction to provocation [ $F(1,113) = 1.680, p > .05$ ], reaction to failure [ $F(1,113) = 2.718, p > .05$ ], reaction to success [ $F(1,113) = 1.463, p > .05$ ], social expectations [ $F(1,113) = 3.327, p > .05$ ], teacher expectations [ $F(1,113) = 2.327, p > .05$ ], reactive aggression [ $F(1,113) = 0.924, p > .05$ ], and proactive aggression [ $F(1,113) = 0.560, p > .05$ ] in a statistically significant manner. As a result of the study, it was also concluded that the affective perspective-taking skill did not predict the variables of peer group entry [ $F(1,113) = 1.605, p > .05$ ], reaction to provocation [ $F(1,113) = 1.169, p > .05$ ], reaction to failure [ $F(1,113) = 2.619, p > .05$ ], reaction to success [ $F(1,113) = 2.913, p > .05$ ], social expectations [ $F(1,113) = 3.805, p > .05$ ], teacher expectations [ $F(1,113) = 1.715, p > .05$ ], reactive aggression [ $F(1,113) = 2.163, p > .05$ ], and proactive aggression [ $F(1,113) = 0.676, p > .05$ ] in a statistically significant manner.

## Discussion

According to the results, the cognitive perspective-taking skill of six-year-old children predicted variables of peer group entry, reaction to provocation, teacher expectations, and reactive aggression in a statistically significant manner. According to this result, it could be asserted that children with a higher cognitive perspective-taking skill are able to participate in peer groups more easily, show healthy responses towards the provocation of their peers, meet the social expectations of teachers, and have a lower level of reactive aggression. Examining the relevant literature, it is determined that children with a higher perspective-taking skill in the preschool period also have higher levels of prosocial behaviours towards their peers (Ahammer & Murray, 1979; Iannotti, 1985). Children with a perspective-taking skill are more sensitive and careful towards the needs and emotions of their peers. Researchers (Cho, 1992; Fitzgerald & White, 2003) expressed the fact that children are sensitive towards the emotions of others and show convenient reactions will be a considerable determinant for the prosocial behaviours. The relationship between the perspective-taking skill and social competence has also been presented by experimental studies. For instance, Hughes and Cline (2015) applied the Program of Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies-PATHS to 57 children in the age group of 3–4 years. At the end of the programme, they reported that while problematic behaviours

decreased, both perspective-taking skills and social behaviours improved. However, the cognitive perspective-taking skill of six-year-old children did not predict variables of reaction to failure, reaction to success, social expectations, and proactive aggression in a statistically significant manner. Rather than the cognitive perspective-taking skill, different variables could be thought to have an effect on these variables of social competence. In their study, Eisenberg-Berg and Lennon (1980, cited in Lupinetti, 1999, p. 40) determined a negatively significant relationship between the empathic reactions and prosocial behaviours of children aged between 4 and 5 years. Authors interpreted this result as the fact that children focused on giving ideal responses during the empathy test; however, they were unable to reflect this idealist perspective within a social context with their peers in company with personal and developmental characteristics like temperament and egocentrism (cited in Lupinetti, 1999, p. 40).

In addition, perceptual and affective perspective-taking skills did not predict the variables of peer group entry, reaction to provocation, reaction to failure, reaction to success, social expectations, teacher expectations, reactive aggression, and proactive aggression in a statistically significant manner. According to this result, perceptual and affective perspective-taking skills did not have a predictor effect on social competence variables within the scope of the study. In the study, it was observed that the cognitive perspective-taking skill had a greater effect on social competence. Accordingly, as well as perceptual and affective perspective-taking skills, different variables (parental attitudes, socio-economic level, self-worth) could also be thought to be more effective on social competence variables in the study. As a matter of fact, according to some studies (Farver & Branstetter, 1994; Fitzgerald & White, 2003), variables like parental attitudes and socio-economic level may be determining factors for social behaviours and perspective-taking skills. In addition, some studies on perspective (Kurdek & Rodgon, 1975; Rubin, 1978) determined no relationship between perceptual, cognitive, and emotional perspective-taking skills of younger children, which showed that three subscales regarding perspective could develop differently rather than at the same speed (Cho, 1992). In accordance with these knowledge in literature, it could be thought that children in the sample group of the study have a highly developed cognitive perspective-taking skills compared to other perspective-taking skills. Krebs and Russell (1981) stated that among the perspective-taking skills, the cognitive perspective-taking skill had the greatest relation with prosocial behaviours, which was explained by them with the cognitive perspective-taking skill to express more opinions about primarily the intentions, behaviours and cognition-based states of other individuals.

The fact that some of the perspective-taking skills did not significantly predict social competence could be associated with the fact that results regarding the variables of perspective-taking and social competence in the study were collected from different sources (children and teachers). It may be thought that preschool teachers failed to clearly define some behaviours regarding social competence. For instance, it was indicated that recognizing the proactive (goal-oriented) aggression among aggression types at preschool institutions and determining the children realizing it may take a greater time than reactive aggression. In reactive aggression, aggressive behaviours (hitting, pushing, shouting, etc.) are more explicit and could be noticed by a higher number of children in a quicker way. Besides, reactive aggression involves the reactions being displayed against verbal or physical aggression of peers. Thus, it is possible to reveal who is the child realizing the reactive aggression in a short time. However, in proactive (goal-oriented) aggression, the aggression is realized without using any element of provocation. Additionally, it is realized in a more conscious, eager and calm approach, compared to reactive aggression. Therefore, the aggression and who realizes it could not be realized in a short time (Runions, 2008; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Barker, 2006). A study with findings having no parallelism with the results of this study involving 80 children from the age group of 4. According to the study results, a positively significant relationship was determined between affective perspective-taking skill and prosocial behaviours (Lupinetti, 1999). As is seen, there have been study examples showing and not showing a parallelism with the study findings. Considering the scarcity of relevant studies in Turkey, the relevant studies may enable to make contribution to approaching the subject with their different results. The study results revealed that the

variable of cognitive perspective-taking skill predicted some of the social competence variables within the scope of the study in a statistically significant manner, whereas the variables of perceptual and affective perspective-taking skills did not predict the social competence variables in a statistically significant manner. The study has a number of limitations. In accordance with these limitations, the following suggestions could be developed for future studies: this study is limited with 115 children in the province of Mersin. Future studies could be conducted with broader sample groups in different cities. In the study, the social competence was determined based on the views of teachers. In future studies, the social competence could be determined based on different sources like observation and peer views. In the study conducted by Iannotti (1985), it was stated that the social competence level determined based on observation was more valid and reliable than the teacher views. It is possible to longitudinally observe the effects of perspective-taking skills in young children on their social competence.

It is also required to extend studies approaching the relationships of perspective-taking skill and social competence with different variables. Studies examining the interaction between cognitive, perceptual, and affective perspective-taking skills should be conducted. Assessment instruments aimed at perspective-taking skill should be developed. Play- and drama-based programmes should be prepared in order to develop the perspective-taking skills and social competence of children and teachers should be informed about this subject. Students receiving undergraduate preschool education should be encouraged to conduct practical studies that would enable them to observe these skills in children. Teachers should guide parents regarding how they could develop these skills in their children. They should prepare family involvement studies regarding this subject. In plans of teachers, activities aimed at developing these skills should be involved regularly. When teachers recognize insufficiencies regarding the perspective-taking skills in their classes and problems in peer relationships, they should be able to take precautions in order to sustain the positive classroom atmosphere. When necessary, they should be able to get in touch with Counselling and Research Centres, school counsellors if available and the academicians of the Departments like Preschool Education and Child Development at universities. In this context, universities, preschool education institutions, and Counselling and Research Centres will cooperate in these subjects, develop projects and training programmes together and, consequently, present efficient examples about the cooperation between the institutions and disciplines.

## Acknowledgements

This research was presented in International Congress on Education for the Future: Issues and Challenges (ICEFIC 2015, 13–15 May 2015, Ankara University) as an oral presentation.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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