

Social Skills Valued among Young Nigerian Children

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to identify the social skills that Nigerian parents value in their young children's development with a view towards ensuring that pre-service early childhood educators are trained to foster the social skills that are valued in this cultural context. This can ensure appropriate psychological adjustment of young children through early childhood education. A descriptive research design was used to collect information from 32 participants about the social skills that are valued amongst Nigerian children aged 2 to 8. A modified Q-sort presented 42 different social skills to participants, who selected the top five most valued social skills. Results found that the top five valued social skills were obedience, faith, gratitude, discipline, and forgiveness. Therefore, pre-service early childhood educators should be trained to foster these social skills in the classroom.

### **Introduction**

Social skills are an important factor in school success (Dodge, Heroman, Colker, & Bickart, 2010). Social skills are defined as the abilities needed to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with others (Administration for Children & Families, 2015). Empirical research has found that the level of a child's social skills as they enter primary school influences their engagement in learning activities and, as a result, their academic performance (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). Additionally, strong social skills in early childhood predict mental health and happiness later in life (Trawick-Smith, 2014). As such, one of the primary goals of early childhood education is to foster social development (Epstein, 2014). Indeed, the importance of

social skills has led to the rise of school-based educational interventions in Western countries that promote social and emotional learning (SEL). A meta-analysis of research studies examining the effectiveness of SEL programs found significant positive effects on social and emotional skills, prosocial behaviors, and academic performance, as well as a reduction of behavioral problems (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011).

Early childhood educators play a key role in socializing young children (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012). In their pre-service training, early childhood educators learn about the nature of child development, including the social skills that are important at each level of development. The social skills that are taught in classes on child development to pre-service early childhood educators will determine the types of social skills that these educators will then teach when they enter the classroom. However, valued social behaviors may be different across cultures (Trawick-Smith, 2014).

Most developmental textbooks are published by Western authors and their description of social development tends to reflect their individualistic culture. One of the most common approaches to describing cross-cultural differences is the individualism-collectivist dimension (Gardiner, 2018). Individualist cultures consist of individuals who tend to be responsible for themselves and whose individual achievement is most important. In contrast, collectivist cultures consist of individuals who tend to consider the group as most important and thus emphasize cooperation and sharing of common goals and values.

The nature of social skills that are developed in childhood as described by most developmental textbooks are social skills that are important in individualistic cultures. For example, Berk (2009) listed the following social skills for young children: emergence of self, self-concept, self-esteem, identity, thinking about other people, and social problem solving. Note

the frequent use of the word “self” in this list of “social” skills. Boyd and Bee (2009) list the following social skills that are developed in early childhood: self-concept, gender development, family relationships, and peer relationships. In contrast to these social skills, the indigenous Canadian Inuit culture, which is a collectivist culture like Nigeria’s, value the following social skills: respect/caring attitude for others, welcoming of others, cooperation, consensus decision making, serving, and harmony (Nunavut Department of Education, 2007). Valued social skills among Yoruba children include responsibility, respect, obedience, and helpfulness (Ogunnaiki, & Houser, 2002). However, as Ogunnaiki and Houser (2002) point out, these social skills are not widely acknowledged in child development research.

The social skills that pre-service early childhood educators learn will be the social skills that they foster in their classrooms with young pupils. Therefore, it is important to identify the social skills that Nigerian parents value so these social skills can be deliberately fostered in early childhood education programs. Once valued social skills among young Nigerian children are identified, then the nature of these social skills can be taught in child development classes to pre-service early childhood educators in Nigeria, who can then implement educational practices in their classroom to foster these valued social skills. This will ensure the psychological adjustment of young Nigerian children.

Early childhood education programs need to incorporate indigenous practices and values (Abubakar, 2011; Nsamenang, 2009), including valued social skills. Alienating African children from their cultures through an education that emphasizes sociocultural practices that are not reflective of their culture is harmful to young children (Gwanfogbe, 2011). Furthermore, the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* declares that children’s education should preserve and strengthen positive African morals, traditional values, and cultures (Organization of

African Unity, 1999). Valued social skills in traditional values should be incorporated into young children's education rather than the social skills identified by developmental experts in other cultural contexts.

### **Purpose of Study**

Psychological adjustment of young children in early childhood education requires accurate identification of social skills that are necessary for psychological adjustment within the Nigerian context. Only then can early childhood educators foster these social skills for positive psychological adjustment. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the social skills that Nigerian parents value in their young children's development.

### **Research Question**

This research study sought to answer the specific research question below.

- What social skills do Nigerian parents value in their young children's development?

### **Methods**

#### **Research Design**

This study used a descriptive design. Descriptive designs are used to develop careful descriptions of educational phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). This research study was designed to carefully identify and describe the social skills that are valued in young children's development.

#### **Participants**

A total of 32 masters students at a seminary in Jos participated in the research study. There were 22 different ethnic groups represented by the sample, covering all three northern geographical zones in Nigeria. The sample was 75% male, with an average age of 45.3 (Standard

Deviation = 11.40). Participants had an average of 2.65 children, ranging from 0 to 7 children.

The ages of the children ranged from 2 months to 47 years.

### **Instrument**

A modified version of a Q-sort technique was used as the instrument. The Q-sort requires the participant to sort a group of statements, which are typically listed on index cards (Cohen & Swerdlik, 1999). For this study, the statements consisted of different social skills and their definitions. The participants' task was to sort the social skills by identifying the five social skills that they value the most.

To develop the modified Q-sort, a list of 42 social skills was compiled from various sources, including developmental textbooks (e.g., Berk, 2009), early childhood education resources (e.g., Ramsey, 2015), and indigenous perspectives (e.g., Nunavut Department of Education, 2007). (See Appendix for the list of social skills.) These social skills were then clarified with a definition. Each social skill, together with its definition, was printed on a small piece of paper. Participants were then given 43 pieces of paper, 42 of which had a different social skill printed, together with its definition. A blank piece of paper was also given for cases in which a participant valued a social skill that was not among the list of 42. Participants were instructed to think of the social skills that they valued most in children aged 2 to 8, and then select their top five most valued social skills.

A separate questionnaire was also given to participants that collected biodata with seven items, including gender, age, ethnic group, state of origin, and number and ages of children.

### **Procedures for Data Collection**

During class, participants were instructed to think about the social skills that they value in young children, particularly between the ages of 2 and 8 years. First, participants were given

three minutes to think about the social skills that they valued in young children. Then, the 43 pieces of paper that included the names and definitions of social skills were distributed, one set to each participant. Participants then took about ten minutes to review the social skills, and select the five social skills that they valued the most. They were also instructed that they could use the blank piece of paper to write a social skill that was not found amongst the others. Once they selected their five most valued social skills, then they dropped the papers with the five social skills into an envelope at the front of the classroom. Then participants collected the biodata questionnaire, completed it, and returned it to the experimenter.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The research question was answered using frequency and percentage to analyse the data.

### **Results**

The research question asked, what social skills did Nigerian parents value in their young children's development. The answer to the research question is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Most Frequently Selected Social Skills Valued in Young Nigerian Children.

S/No	Social Skill	Frequency	Percent
1	Obedience	16	50%
2	Faith	13	41%
3	Gratitude	11	34%
4	Discipline	10	31%
5	Forgiveness	10	31%
6	Hospitality	9	28%
7	Integrity/Honesty	9	28%
8	Respect	9	28%

9	Humility	7	22%
10	Care and compassion	5	16%
11	Contentment	5	16%
12	Emotional expression	4	13%
13	Identity	4	13%
14	Self-awareness	4	13%

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Table 1 presents the social skills that were selected by more than 10% of the sample. The top social skill identified was obedience, selected by half of the participants. Other social skills in the top five include faith, gratitude, discipline, and forgiveness. Furthermore, the social skills of hospitality, integrity/honesty, and respect were selected by at least one out of every four participants.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to identify the social skills that Nigerian parents valued in their young children's development. The top five social skills valued by the participants in this study, who represent a broad range of ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria, included obedience, faith, gratitude, discipline, and forgiveness. Indeed, these social skills were not listed in any resources on child development that this author was aware of. Furthermore, none of the social skills identified in Berk's (2009) child development textbook, namely emergence of self, self-concept, self-esteem, identity, thinking about other people, and social problem solving, were in the list of the top 10 social skills identified by Nigerian parents. This shows a fundamental difference between the social skills that were valued in Western cultures and in Nigeria.

Because early childhood educators play an important role in socializing young children, it is vital that they are socializing young children into the social norms and values of their own culture while also recognizing the impacts that globalization has on the socialization process. If early childhood educators learn about the nature of social development solely from the western culture via child development textbooks, then they will socialize young children into the western culture, which may be at odds with Nigerian culture at some points. Socializing a child into a culture that they are not part of can be disruptive to the developmental process. This can harm interpersonal relationships in the child's family and community (Serpell & Nsamenang, 2015). The concept of socialization ambiguity applies when there are conflicting expectations regarding appropriate social behavior (McDade & Worthman, 2004). Socialization ambiguity may be a substantial source of stress that is harmful for the child, preventing positive psychological adjustment.

Early childhood education programs need to incorporate indigenous practices and values (Nsamenang, 2009). Indeed, school curricula will benefit from traditional African values, which may counteract falling academic standards and the promotion of consumerism (Serpell & Nsamenang, 2015). The design of appropriate and effective early childhood education requires attention to the sociocultural values and practices of the local culture.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study found that the top five social skills valued amongst Nigerian parents include obedience, faith, gratitude, discipline, and forgiveness.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

- This study had a small sample size, and only reflected ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria. Furthermore, only Christian participants were sampled. Therefore, more research should be conducted with larger sample sizes, and in other geo-political zones and religions in Nigeria.
- Educators in teacher education programs should include culturally-relevant social skills, including obedience, faith, gratitude, discipline, and forgiveness, in their teachings on child development.
- Early childhood educators and parents should provide educational opportunities for young children that foster culturally-relevant social skills.
- Educational researchers should conduct research to identify traditional practices in early childhood education that foster the valued social skills in this context.
- Curriculum developers should include developmentally and culturally appropriate activities that foster culturally-relevant social skills.
- Stakeholders in young children's development, including parents, child development professionals, community leaders, and religious leaders, should thoughtfully consider the social skills that they value among young children. Culture is dynamic, and is currently being influenced by global forces. Therefore, there is great need to consider valued social skills from both traditional and global perspectives to identify social skills that are most beneficial for personal and societal well-being. These social skills should be promoted within education and the community.
- Developmental researchers should conduct more research to develop culturally-relevant theories of child development, particularly in regards to social development of young children.

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### **Appendix**

#### **List of Social Skills**

1. **Adaptability:** The ability to adjust to new conditions
2. **Agreeable:** Enjoyable and pleasant to be around
3. **Care and compassion:** Concern for the well-being of others
4. **Confidence:** Self-assurance in one's own abilities or qualities
5. **Conflict resolution skills:** Ability to resolve disagreements peacefully
6. **Consideration:** Thoughtfulness and sensitivity towards others
7. **Contentment:** Satisfaction with one's present situation
8. **Cooperative:** Ability to work with others to achieve common goals
9. **Courage:** Ability to do something that is frightening
10. **Decision-making skills:** Ability to make positive choices about personal behavior and social interactions
11. **Discipline:** Controlled way of behaving/way of working
12. **Emotional expression:** Ability to appropriately communicate one's feelings or thoughts
13. **Emotional understanding:** Understanding and responding to the emotions of others
14. **Empathy:** Ability to understand and share the feelings of others
15. **Cleanliness/Environmental stewardship:** Care for nature, including plants, animals, the land
16. **Fairness/De-tribalized:** Impartial treatment of others without favoritism or discrimination
17. **Faith:** Trust and confidence in God
18. **Forgiveness:** Ability to forgive others for their offenses
19. **Generosity:** Readiness to give others money, resources, time, and/or care
20. **Gratitude:** Being thankful and showing appreciation
21. **Helpful:** Ready and willing to give assistance
22. **Hospitality:** Friendly and generous reception of others
23. **Humility:** Viewing oneself without pride or arrogance
24. **Identity:** Knowing who you are, awareness of self
25. **Integrity/Honesty:** Honest; behaving based on strong moral principles
26. **Leadership:** Ability to lead other people
27. **Mercy:** Giving others a second chance
28. **Modesty:** One's appearance is decent and proper
29. **Obedience:** Compliance with an order or request
30. **Patience:** Capacity to wait without being annoyed

31. **Perseverance:** Persistence in doing something when faced with challenges
32. **Resilience:** Capacity to recover quickly from difficulties
33. **Resourceful:** Ability to find clever ways to overcome difficulties
34. **Responsibility:** Ability to successfully complete assigned duties
35. **Respect:** Giving appropriate regard and deference to others
36. **Self-awareness:** Ability to recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values
37. **Self-efficacy:** Understanding of one's personal abilities and characteristics
38. **Self-Management:** Ability to manage one's impulses, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors
39. **Self-Esteem:** Positive evaluation of one's own worth
40. **Sense of humor:** The ability to bring smiles to others
41. **Social awareness:** Awareness of the motives of others
42. **Wisdom/Good judgment:** Providing wise counsel and good judgments