

Three-to four-year-old children's socioemotional competencies assessed by kindergarten teachers in general and physical education settings, and by parents at home

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Introduction

Early childhood is a time of rapid and significant social and emotional development (Denham & Weissberg, 2004). Early childcare outside home plays a significant role in supporting children's learning and socialization. The context of physical education (PE) is ideal for enhancing children's socioemotional skills, because it offers opportunities for social interaction (Eldar & Ayvazo, 2009; Telama, 1999; Telama & Polvi, 2007, 88) and for learning self-regulation strategies (Fraser & Robinson, 2013).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was: 1) to validate the socioemotional skills observation scale, 2) to compare kindergarten teachers' ratings of three-to four-year-old children's socioemotional competencies in general kindergarten settings and within PE session, separately by gender, and 3) to compare kindergarten teachers' ratings of three-to four-year-old children's socioemotional competencies in general kindergarten settings and parent-ratings in home environment.

Method

Participants were 59 children (23 girls, 36 boys, $M=50.1$ months, $SD=7.05$) from six communal kindergartens in Northern Finland. Children's socioemotional skills were assessed generally in kindergarten based on a wide range of experiences as well as immediately after one, standardized PE session by the same female kindergarten teachers in both settings.

Results

No differences in teacher-rated socioemotional competencies between general kindergarten settings and PE session appeared. Girls scored higher in self- and social awareness in both contexts. Parent-rated self- and social awareness was significantly higher than teacher-rated in general kindergarten settings, whereas teacher-rated self-management and relationship skills in general kindergarten settings were higher than parent-rated.

Discussion

The confirmatory factor analysis provided a reliable and valid three-factor model of socioemotional competencies (self- and social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills). The national curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland (2004) generally emphasize the development of social and emotional competencies as central goals regardless of content area in day care. It may also be that teachers' perceptions about the children are so constant that they have difficulties in separating their evaluations in different kindergarten contexts. Previous studies have found that girls score higher in various dimensions of empathy (Belacci & Farina, 2012; Merrell, Felver-Gant, & Tom, 2011; Romer et al., 2011) and emotional awareness (Bajgar, Ciarrochi, Lane, & Deane, 2005; Bender, Reinholdt-Dunne, & Pons, 2012), which are included in the self- and social awareness competence. Most likely the parents have deeper and more long-lasting relationship and emotional bond with their children, compared to teachers.