

Socialization Skills in Home Schooled Children Versus Conventionally Schooled Children

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ABSTRACT

Occupational Therapists serve the needs of children by providing activities to enhance development and decrease the impact of disability. They study how children interact with their environment and the importance of the sociocultural sphere to their everyday occupation. For this reason, knowledge about social skills in children in different environments is important. Since school is one of the environments in which children spend the most time, it can be assumed that the school environment as a social context would impact the development and social interactions of children. Studies investigating the social skills of home schooled children and conventionally schooled children have been conducted showing conflicting results. Because the population of home-schooled children is growing at approximately 15-20%, and because the present information regarding social skills is conflicting and/or possibly biased, a more in depth study of this area would be beneficial. This study uses the Social Skills Rating Scale to compare the social skills of twenty-three children, seven of which have been home-schooled, and sixteen of which have been publicly educated. Differences and similarities between the two groups were examined in relation to social skills. Results of the study indicate that home schooled children scored above average in relation to overall social skills while public schooled children scored average, as reported by parents in both groups. However, due to various limitations of the study, the results of the study cannot be generalized to the public as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Socialization is defined as “the process whereby people acquire the rules of behavior and systems of beliefs and attitudes that equip a person to function effectively as a member of a particular society” (Medlin, 2000). Developing social skills “to enable successful relationships is one of the most important accomplishments of childhood” (Gresham, 1990). This statement is further supported by a study done by Cooney who found that “Overall there was a strong and direct influence of children’s work-related social skills and their literacy capabilities at school entry” (Cooney, 1998). In addition, according to a study completed by Griffin “Children who begin school with a repertoire of behaviors that are appropriate to the classroom (such as ability to sit quietly during lessons and to independently follow instructions) above and beyond other important factors like IQ and mother’s education, may be more “ready” to succeed in those school subjects receiving more emphasis in the early years” (Griffin, 1998). Unfortunately not all children acquire adequate social skills. This lack of the

acquisition of social skills can be a detriment. Untreated social skills problems are relatively persistent, are related to poor academic performance, and may result in later social adjustment problems or serious psychopathology” (Gresham, 1990). Consequently, such children often experience negative relationships with adults and peers.

One of the biggest areas where socialization of children occurs is in the school setting. However, the practice of home schooling is one of the most significant social trends of the past half-century. The home schooling population is growing at approximately 15-20% per year (Lines, 2000). Currently, little research has been done to explore the effect of home schooling on the social development of the children involved. Present studies investigating the social skills of home schooled children and conventionally schooled children show conflicting results. One study done explored the attitudes and self-assessed knowledge of Wisconsin and Maryland Pediatricians regarding home schooling. Fifty-one percent of the pediatricians surveyed, felt that home schooled children were less mature/sophisticated than their peers, 40% felt home-schooled children were equal to their peers, and 9% felt that home-schooled children were more mature/sophisticated than their peers (Klugewicz, 1999). A second study done by Thomas C. Smedley used the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales to assess socialization skills in home educated and conventionally educated children. This study found that children schooled at home are more mature and better socialized than those who are sent to school (Smedley, 1992).

While there was not an abundance of information on this topic in peer-reviewed journals, a large majority of information was available on home schooling web pages. This information supported the idea that home-schoolers were equally if not better prepared socially than their peers who were educated in the public schools. “Mona Delahooke (1986) found that the home educated are well adjusted socially and emotionally like those in a private school comparison group. However, the home educated are less peer-oriented and less peer-dependent than the private school students in the study” (MACHE, 1998). “A University of Florida doctoral dissertation by Larry Shyers found what home schooling parents already knew. They are cooperative and friendly. Shyers theorized that home-schooled children learn how to behave toward others by modeling their parents, not their peers. Being with friends is a special treat, not a daily dread” (Home School Association, 2000). Rakestraw, Reynolds, Schemmer, and Wartes have each studied the social activities and emotional characteristics of home-schooled children. The data from their research suggests that home schoolers are not being socially isolated nor are they emotionally maladjusted (Home School Legal Defense Association, 1999). While it is recognized that this research has been done, it was not possible to examine the research directly, as much of it was from unpublished dissertations. In addition, it must be recognized that the research cited on the home schooling web pages may be biased due to a vested interest in home schooling.

Occupational therapists serve the needs of children in a variety of ways and settings, one of which is schools. “As we evaluate a child’s performance it would greatly enrich our knowledge to examine the child’s daily interactions” (O’Brien, 1996). In looking at these interactions and their accompanying social skills, occupational therapists try to “understand where and how the child maneuvers within his or her sociocultural sphere and the importance of that system with his or her everyday activity” (O’Brien, 1996). According to Florey, “What is surprising and distressing is that concerns for the social and emotional realm of all children may be slipping from pediatric practice. We must not lose our commitment to ordinary activities nor to the interpersonal context in which they occur” (as cited in Zemke &

Clark, 1996). For this reason, knowledge about social skills in children in different environments is important.

Because the population of home-schooled children is growing, and because the present information regarding social skills in home-schooled children versus publicly schooled children is conflicting and/or possibly biased, we feel that a more in depth study of this area would be beneficial. Most importantly, from our perspective, it would add to the present body of occupational therapy knowledge in relation to the social skills of children, and would help to maintain the concerns for the "social and emotional realm of all children," as stated by Florey. In addition, it may provide information for the home and/or public education of children in relation to the development of social skills. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate differences and similarities in the social skills of home schooled versus publicly educated children in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades, as assessed by their parents. The researchers hypothesize that upon further research there will be no differences in the social skills of home schooled versus publicly educated children.

METHODS

In order to obtain a sample population for this study, a representative from both the home schooled population and the conventionally schooled population was contacted. A local school district representative was contacted regarding the publicly schooled children. We were provided with the names and addresses of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders from two schools that were felt best represented this district. Letters describing the research study were sent out to one hundred and twenty randomly selected publicly schooled children's parents along with an attached consent form, which parents would return if they chose to participate. Upon receipt of the returned consent form, the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) was sent out to the responding parents. The SSRS contains fifty-five questions, which looks at the sub-categories of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control. It takes approximately 15 minutes to complete and has been proven to be a reliable and valid assessment of social skills (Galloway, 1997). For further information regarding the SSRS please refer to the SSRS Manual (Gresham 1990). A home school support group leader was also contacted. Parental consent forms and thirty questionnaires were provided to the contact person, who distributed them to the home school support group members. Eighteen parental consent forms and questionnaires were also given to an additional home schooling contact in an outlying area for distribution due to lack of response from the local home schooling population. Once the SSRS parent questionnaires were received and returned, results were analyzed using an independent two-tailed t-test, as advised by the UWL statistical consultants. Means of overall test scores and individual items were examined. Names were not used in the results to maintain confidentiality, and were deleted once the results of the assessments and research were sent to the parents who requested them. The Institutional Review Board at the UW-LaCrosse and the local school district both approved the research project, deeming it harmless to all subjects.

RESULTS

The SSRS has normative data on the overall scores of social skills and the individual categories of cooperation, assertion, responsibility and self-control. For standard scoring guidelines in each of these areas, please refer to Table 1.

Table 1

Social Skills	Below Average	Average	Above Average
Cooperation	0-8	9-15	16-20
Assertion	0-13	14-19	20
Responsibility	0-10	11-16	17-20
Self-Control	0-8	9-16	17-20
Total Social Skills Scale	0-44	45-62	63-80

When comparing the two groups in reference to standard scoring guidelines, the SSRS indicated that the home schooled population demonstrated above average overall social skills with a mean score of 63.143. The publicly schooled children demonstrated average social skills with a mean score of 55.125. For means in the overall scores and individual subcategories areas, please refer to Table 2.

Table 2

	Mean Score	Rating
Home School (Overall Score)	63.143	Above Average
Cooperation	15.857	Above Average
Assertion	18.143	Average
Responsibility	16.286	Above Average
Self-Control	16.571	Above Average
Public School (Overall Score)	55.125	Average
Cooperation	13	Average
Assertion	17.125	Average
Control	14.188	Average

Further analysis was completed on SSRS overall scores and subcategories using an independent two-tailed *t* test. A statistical difference was found when comparing the means of the two groups in relation to their overall scores at the .01 level, with the home-schooled children scoring higher. In regard to the subcategories, the results were mixed. In the area of responsibility, a statistical significance was found at the .01 level, indicating that the home schooled population scored significantly higher than the publicly schooled population. No statistically significant differences were found in relation to other subcategories. Please see Table 3 for further detail.

Table 3

	T² Scores
Overall Mean	.01
Cooperation	.02
Assertion	.31
Responsibility	.01
Self-Control	.11
Alpha = .01	

DISCUSSION

The results of our study are consistent with previous studies regarding social skills of home schooled and public schooled populations. According to Stough (1992), "it would appear that few home-schooled children are socially deprived, and that there may be sufficient evidence to indicate that some home schooled children have a higher self concept than conventionally schooled children" (as cited in Aiex, 1994). A second study by Smedley, (1992) found that, "home educated children are more mature and socialized than those sent to school." Smedley's study is similar to this study in that both utilized a parental perception form to assess the social skills of children and found similar results.

Although the results of our study are consistent with previous studies conducted in this area, they are contradictory to popular belief. Based on the results of the SSRS, the home schooled children demonstrated above average social skills, while publicly schooled children demonstrated average social skills as reported by parents. Because of the small sample size, inability to randomly sample, and the unequal sample sizes between populations, this study cannot be generalized to the public as a whole. "At this point, more research on home schooling is necessary—what we have is inconclusive about many of its aspects. Although more and deeper studies are certainly called for, the population to be studied is not readily accessible to researchers. And the types of research that can be done are still limited to case studies of families, or to survey, or self-reports by participants" (Aiex, 1994).

LIMITATIONS

There are various recommendations for future studies regarding the social skills of home-schooled children versus publicly schooled children. Due to parental bias, it would be beneficial to use an assessment tool that focuses on observation of the child within their environment instead of relying on parental perception. Secondly, a much larger sample should be obtained to increase the validity of future studies. Lastly, in order to more easily obtain a larger sample from the home schooled population, it would be beneficial for future researchers to have an established relationship with this population.

The first limitation to this study was the small sample size. One hundred and twenty consent information letters were sent out to parents of the local school district, however only fifteen consented to participate in this study. Forty-eight consent information letters were given to the two home schooling contacts to distribute, and six were returned. Secondly, the home-schooled population was not randomly selected. It was a convenience sample due to difficulty in accessing the home schooling population and culture. In addition, due to lack of participation from the local home schooling population, the study used participants from an outlying area. This geographic difference presents concerns regarding the comparisons of the two populations. Thirdly, even though the public schooled population was randomly selected, it was not random across the district even though the two schools used in this study, were suggested as a representative sample of the entire district. Fourthly, privately schooled children were not included in this study. Finally, we chose to use the parental form because it was the least intrusive method of accessing this population. However, parental perception of children may not have been accurate due to bias and inability to observe social skills in the school environment.

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