

Family Functioning and Socioaffective Competencies of Children in the Beginning of Schooling

Patricia Simone Hammes¹, Maria Aparecida Crepaldi², and Marc Bigras¹

¹Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada)

²Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (Brazil)

The aim of this short term longitudinal study, based on the system theory, was to test the association between different aspects of family functioning of preschoolers and their socioaffective competencies at the end of the first grade. The total sample included 278 children (137 boys and 141 girls) and their families. The analysis of variance results regarding the aspects of family cohesion and harmony showed that preschoolers from more cohesive families display more social skills, while those from more conflicting families display more externalizing behavior problems (aggression and irritability). With respect to the family's ability to resolve problems, it was observed that, especially for middle and upper class families, this aspect is associated with better social skills and fewer internalized behavior problems. Overall, results of the present study suggest that the family functioning at early stage might influence children's abilities to regulate their emotions and to establish/maintain important relationships with peers and teachers in their early school years.

Keywords: family functioning, socioaffective competences, behavior problems, early school adjustment.

El objetivo de este estudio longitudinal a corto plazo, basado en la teoría de sistemas, era poner a prueba la relación entre los diferentes aspectos del funcionamiento familiar de los niños en edad preescolar y sus competencias socioafectivas al final del primer curso de educación infantil. La muestra total se compone de 278 niños (137 niños y 141 niñas) y sus familias. Los resultados del análisis de la variación con respecto a los aspectos de la cohesión y la armonía familiar indican que los niños preescolares de familias más cohesionadas muestran más habilidades sociales, mientras que los de familias más conflictivas muestran mayor externalización de problemas de comportamiento (agresividad e irritabilidad). Con respecto a la capacidad de la familia para resolver los problemas, se observó que, sobre todo para las familias de clase media y alta, este aspecto se asocia con mejores habilidades sociales y menos problemas de comportamiento interiorizados. En general, los resultados del presente estudio sugieren que el funcionamiento de la familia en la etapa temprana pueden influir en la capacidad de los niños de regular sus emociones y de establecer/mantener relaciones importantes con compañeros y maestros en sus primeros años escolares.

Palabras clave: funcionamiento de la familia, competencias socioafectivas, problemas de conducta, adaptación escolar temprana.

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The transition from preschool to elementary school is a period marked by many changes in a child's life. In addition to the differences in the classroom's physical environment, the objectives of learning become more specific, as well as the expectations regarding children's behavior. It is expected, for instance, that the student becomes more independent, respects the school's rules and routines and pays attention in class for longer periods of time and knows how to establish good relationships with peers and teachers. The adaptation of the child to this new context may be influenced by many factors, such as his/her cognitive and socioaffective competencies (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Though the lack of cognitive competencies may result in learning disabilities, the lack of socioaffective competencies also presents important consequences to the success of children's education, as it may affect their learning skills and the quality of their relationships at school (Ladd & Burgess, 1999; Miles & Stipek, 2006). For example, in a North American study of 250 elementary school students, researchers observed that children who presented with anti-social behaviors (e.g., threatening, playing alone, avoiding contact with other children, arguing) were less accepted by their peers and more likely to have a conflictual teacher/child relationship (Ladd & Burgess, 1999). According to Perrenoud (2002), the socioaffective and relational abilities are as important as the cognitive abilities in the process of school learning. Indeed, researchers have shown a significant association between the socioaffective competencies and the school performance of children (Dobbs, Doctoroff, Fisher, & Arnold, 2006; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007). In addition, children who have socioaffective abilities and good school scores at the beginning of their schooling have a greater chance of having success in school afterwards (Agostin & Bain, 1997; Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, Hennon, & Jooper, 2006; Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1996; Duncan et al., 2007; Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Ou & Reynolds, 2008).

Given the importance of socioaffective competencies at the beginning of schooling and their influence on children's future school performance, this article aims to contribute to the study of the factors involved in the development of these competencies. The notion of socioaffective competencies adopted in this article refers to children's capability of regulating their emotions and of behaving in order to establish and maintain satisfactory relationships with others (Dirks, Treat, & Weersing, 2007; Raver & Zigler, 1997). The socioaffective competencies include the child's capability to communicate, to empathize, and to inhibit any of their own aggressive behaviors. The development of these competencies is influenced by a variety of factors that are present in the social contexts in which children live, such as at school and home (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], Early Child Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2004). At the beginning of children's schooling, socioaffective competencies seem to be particularly influenced by the family context (Burchinal

et al., 2006; NICHD ECCRN, 2003; Schickedanz, 1995). Family has an important role in the socioaffective development of children because in addition to presenting other genetic and environmental influences, it is the first social environment to provide them with affective experiences (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). It is within their families where children begin to develop their self esteem and identity in addition to learning how to communicate, to relate to and interact with others and to control their emotions.

Many aspects of children's early experiences in their family environment have been reported as predictors of social competencies and behavior problems in school (Burchinal et al., 2006; Foster, Lambert, Abbott-Shim, McCarty, & Franze, 2005; King et al., 2005; Orme & Buehler, 2001). Among the family factors that are typically good predictors of children's development in school, are those variables associated with socio-economic level, such as family income and level of parental education (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; McLoyd, 1998). Studies show that children who come from low-income families often have behavior and attention problems, as well as low self esteem (Gershoff, 2003; Raver, 2004). Families who have low incomes are more likely to have marital crises, demonstrate less sensitivity to their children's needs, and show an authoritarian parenting style (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Evans, 2004; Grant et al., 2003). This association between the socio-economic level and the socioaffective and behavioral competencies of children can be explained in part by the authoritarian and uninvolved parenting styles as well as by the low level of affective support of parents of economically disfavored families (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; McLoyd, 1998; Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997). In fact, the parenting style and affective support of parents, as well as parental practices and maternal sensitivity, have been found to be good predictors of the social competencies and behavior of children (Gadeyne, Ghesquière, & Onghena, 2004; Smith, Prinz, Dumas, & Laughlin, 2001; NICHD ECCRN, 2004). For example, highly controlling parenting practices have been reported to be significantly related to the presence of more externalizing problematic behavior and attention problems in children in school (Gadeyne et al., 2004). Another North American study, by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD ECCRN, 2004), reported that those children who were considered as socially competent by teachers and presented with less behavior problems in the classroom, were those whose mothers believed that parental practices should be child-centered (favoring the development of autonomy) and those who had parents who were more sensitive to their children's needs and interests. In addition, researchers have shown that maternal sensitivity and the quality of mother-child interactions are related to children's socioaffective competencies and behavior problems in school (Clark & Ladd, 2000; Morrison, Rimm-Kauffman, & Pianta, 2003).

Although certain behaviors and characteristics of parental practices have been associated with the quality of children's social adaptation at school, another line of research has focused on studying how the family unit may also contribute to the child's success. According to the systemic theory, the family unit is a system in constant transformation, that passes through changes that demand constant adaptations to ensure the unity of family and, at the same time, to promote the distinction among the members (Andolfi, Angelo, Menghi, & Nicolo, 1985; Minuchin, 1998). Family cohesion refers to this balance between the proximity and the independence of family members. Good family cohesion implies, for instance, that the members are assertive in their communication, are explicit in the division of roles, have democratic leadership and flexible rules. In the family system, parents and their children are active and interconnected participants, influencing the system either directly or indirectly. Thus, disagreements and conflicts among two or more family members influence the psychosocial development of each individual, which may affect the socioaffective development of children. In fact, one of the few studies that verifies the association between family functioning and social/academic competencies in African American children indicates that the *cohesion* and the *communication* between family members are positively related to children's social competencies, as evaluated by parents; whereas the family *structure* – as well defined rules and responsibilities, and emotional support – is positively related to the social competencies and negatively related to behavior problems in children as evaluated by parents and teachers (Smith et al., 2001).

Another important factor to be considered in the study of the development of socioaffective competencies in children is the difference between the child's gender. Researches indicate that girls demonstrate more social competencies in the classroom than boys (Ladd & Burgess, 1999; LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). The research also indicates that the incidence of aggressive behavior is more frequent in boys (Gardinal & Marturano, 2007; Hammarberg & Hagekull, 2006). Additionally, boys seem to be more affected by unfavorable conditions of their environment than girls (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2007; Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2005). These results show the importance of considering the student's gender when studying the existing association between family functioning and the socioaffective adaptation of the child at school.

In sum, the studies previously listed suggest that the family system has a crucial role in the socioaffective development of children, taking into consideration that it represents the first means of socialization and learning in which children learn to regulate their emotions, to develop social roles and to respect rules and responsibilities. Based on the systemic theory, this article aims to increase the knowledge of the influence of family functioning, going beyond the strictly centered analysis of parental practices.

The objective is to investigate the association between family functioning data collected in the preschool period and the socioaffective competencies of children at the end of first grade, in a determinant development period that is the transition from preschool to elementary school. The presence of interrelations between children's gender and the socio-economic level will be equally investigated. Considering the importance of early identification of children who may show adaptation problems in the first schooling years, the results of this research may serve as a guide for intervention that aims to promote the development of socioaffective competencies of preschool children.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and seventy eight francophone children (137 boys and 141 girls) and their families were recruited in the Estrie region, in the province of Québec, Canada, to participate in the study. The exclusion criterion was the presence of any intellectual, physical or sensorial disability. In the first step of the data collection, the children had an average of 5 years and 6 months old and were at the beginning of preschool. The participants were evaluated a second time by their teachers (79 teachers at 49 schools), at the end of the first year of elementary school, when they were an average of 7 years old. Most of families were biparental (90%) and the average age was 32 years old for the mothers and 35 years old for the fathers. Around one third of the families had an annual income considered modest (less than 30 thousand Canadian dollars), the other third represented the middle class (with an annual income between 30 thousands and 50 thousand Canadian dollars), and the last third had high incomes (more than 50 thousand Canadian dollars). Regarding the parental level of education, 60% of mothers and 70% of fathers had education levels equal or inferior to high school (usually acquired at 16/17 years old), 25% of mothers and 15% of fathers had a college degree (usually acquired in their 18/19 years old), and 15% of mothers and fathers had an Undergraduate Diploma.

Instruments of Data Collection

The children's socioaffective competencies were evaluated by their teachers using the Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation Scale (SCBE; LaFreniere, Dumas, Capuano, & Dubeau, 1992). This standardized questionnaire allows the teacher to evaluate children's social competencies and behavior problems. It is composed of 80 items reporting different kinds of children's behavior that can be observed by teachers, whose responses are shown in a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never observed) to 6 (always observed). The instrument provides three main scales: 1) *social*

competency, calculated from the average of answers for the items related to the 8 positive poles (joyful, secure, tolerant, integrated, calm, pro-social, cooperative, autonomous); 2) *internal behavior problems*, calculated from the items related to the 4 negative poles (depressed, anxious, isolated and dependent); and 3) *external behavior problems*, calculated from the items related to the other 4 negative poles (angry, aggressive, oppositional and egotistical). The analyses of SCBE scales variation show a good internal consistency (.79 to .81), a good inter-judges fidelity (.72 to .89) and an elevated temporal stability (.74 to .87) (LaFreniere, Dumas, Capuano, & Dubeau, 1992).

The social demographic characteristics of families were collected through a general information questionnaire, completed by the parents. The family functioning was also reported by parents, through the Self-Report Family Inventory (SFI; Beavers & Hampson, 1990). The SFI is a 36-item questionnaire in which the respondent must indicate the correspondence level with his/her family reality, based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *fits our household very well* to 5 = *doesn't fit our household at all*). Originally, this instrument was comprised of five scales: health/competence, conflict, cohesion, expressiveness and leadership. However, when doing preliminary analysis with data from samples of this study, it was observed that the scales suggested by the authors did not achieve an acceptable internal consistency level (Cronbach's α). As a consequence, our team of researchers trained in systemic theory regrouped the questions from the inventory in order to address the main aspects of the family functioning supported by the literature. This procedure allowed the development of four new scales and the reliability showed a good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients between .70 and .78. The new scales are: 1) *cohesion*: refers to the balance between family unity and differentiation among its members (sample questions: "Family members pay attention to each other and listen to what is said"; "Our family members would rather do things with other people than together"); 2) *affective support*: the presence of a space in which the members share their emotions and experiences and seek comfort and safety (sample question: "Family members easily express warmth and caring towards each other"); 3) *problem solving*: family's ability to identify problems and implement effective strategies (sample question: "Our family solves problems together"); 4) *harmony*: quality of relationships among the family members, ranging from conflicting to harmonious (sample question: "Adults in the family compete and fight with each other").

Procedures and Data Analysis

After being informed about the research and signing the permission form, the parents completed the questionnaire regarding their socio-demographic information and the Self-Report Family Inventory (SFI) about the family functioning.

In the second part of the research, approximately one and a half years later, the teachers were asked to evaluate the socioaffective competencies of the participating children by means of the SCBE.

The data collected was analyzed using the software SPSS (SPSS Inc., 2008) and preliminary analyses were performed with the objective of verifying the presence of presuppositions required to hold variance analysis (normality of distributions, linearity and homoscedasticity). The distribution of each one of the SFI scales regarding family functioning was classified into three levels (low, medium, high). The division level adopted was based on the number of families, in order to have approximately the same amount (33%) in each one of the three levels. In each of the four scales, one third of the families were classified in the group that showed a high level of, for example, family cohesion; one third of the families were classified at the medium level, and the last third were classified in the low level group. After the creation of these groups for each scale, analyses of variance were performed. Children's social competencies and behavior problems (internal and external) were used as dependent variables, and the family's functioning, children's gender and the family income were used as independent variables (factors). Given the collinearity between the variables related to socio-economic level (parental level of education and family income), the parental level of education was not considered in the analyses. Contrast analyses (comparison of averages) were also performed when the factors showed significant main and interaction effects, in order to identify which groups differed significantly.

Results

The results of the variance analyses performed for each one of the family functioning scales will be shown hereinafter. First, it was examined whether the influence of family *cohesion* is related to the socioaffective competencies of the children, and whether this varied according to the family income and the child's gender (interaction effects). The results indicate a modest, yet significant, main effect of family cohesion factor (as evaluated by the parents in the preschool period) on the social competencies of children (as evaluated by the teacher in the end of first grade) $F(1, 260) = 7.43, p < .01$. The contrast analysis showed that the group of children from families with low cohesion level had significantly less social competencies than the children from families with medium or high level of family cohesion (see Figure 1). The variance analyses with behavior problems (internal and external) as dependant variables did not show significant main effects. Additionally, no interaction effects were found among cohesion, child's gender and family income factors. However, the results indicated that the child's gender shows

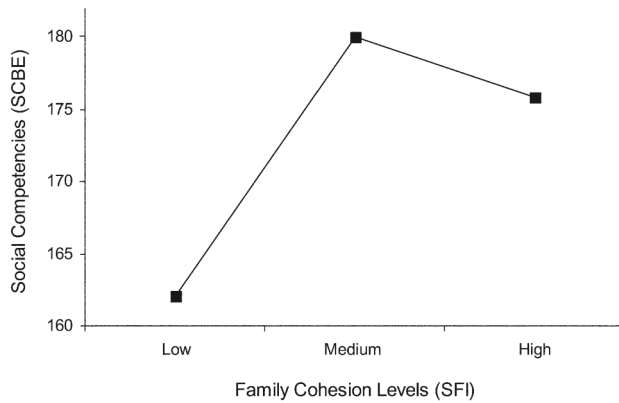


Figure 1. Means of children's social competencies (assessed by SCBE) as related to family cohesion levels (assessed by SFI).

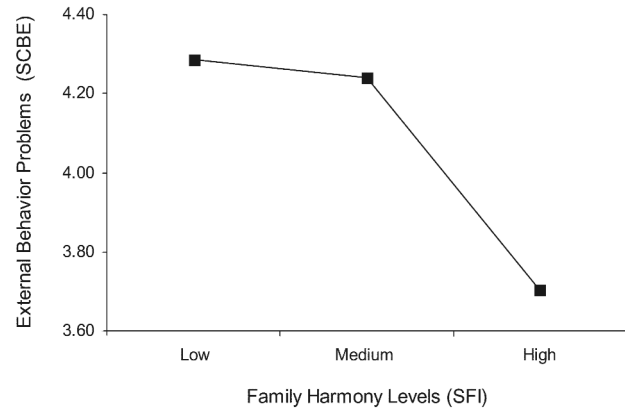


Figure 2. Means of children's external behavior problems (assessed by SCBE) as related to family harmony levels (assessed by SFI).

a significant main effect on children's social competencies and external behavior problems. As expected, girls showed more social competencies $F(1, 260) = 5.69, p < .01$ and less external behavior problems $F(1, 260) = 12.44, p < .01$ than boys. With respect to family income, a significant linear effect on two SCBE scales was observed: as family income increases, children's social competencies rise $F(1, 260) = 5.36, p < .01$ and internalized behavior problems decrease $F(1, 260) = 4.62, p < .05$.

The results achieved in the variance analyses with the *problem solving* factor showed a significant main effect only on children's social competencies $F(1, 260) = 3.28, p < .05$. According to the contrast analyses, the effect is not linear, only being significant in the difference between the groups of children with medium and high levels of the problem solving scale. Thus, children of the group of families with higher problem solving levels (according to the parent's evaluation) show better social competencies (as evaluated by the teacher). The results showed a modest interaction of the scale with family income, which indicates that income has an influence on the relation between the problem solving scale and the social competencies $F(1, 260) = 2.42, p < .05$, and the internal behavior problems $F(1, 260) = 2.91, p < .05$. According to the contrast analyses, children from families with a better problem solving level had better social competencies and less internal behavior problems, but only those in the medium and high family income levels. Therefore, the problem solving scale does not show a significant effect on the socioaffective competencies of children with low family income.

When compared to the other family functioning scales, the *harmony* factor is the only one that shown a significant main effect on the external behavior problems $F(1, 260) = 3.27, p < .05$. The results of the contrast analysis indicated that the group of children with higher harmony level (i.e., with less conflicting family relationships in the preschool period) showed less external behavior problems in first grade than children from families with a medium or low

family harmony level (see Figure 2). No effect of significant interaction was found among harmony scale, child's gender and family income. Additionally, the variance analyses that had as a factor the *affective support* scale, did not indicate any significant main or interaction effect on children's social competencies or behavior problems (internal or external).

Discussion

Considering the importance of children's social competencies in children's adaptation and performance in school, this research aimed to contribute to the study of family factors related to the development of these competencies, taking into account personal and contextual variables such as socio-economic level and child's gender. Family is the social context in which the children learn, in their first years of life, to establish relationships and to regulate their emotions. According to the systemic theory, family members are active and interconnected participants, mutually influencing each other. Thus, certain characteristics of family functioning, such as cohesion, presence of conflicts and the ability to solve problems, as yet not fully explored, would probably influence the socioaffective development of children at the beginning of their schooling. In order to verify this possible influence, the present study analyzed the relation between the family functioning in the preschool period and the children's socioaffective competencies as evaluated at the end of their first year of elementary school.

In general, the results indicated that some aspects of the family functioning reported by parents in the preschool period were related to the children's socioaffective competencies in school, as evaluated by teachers. According to the results, children from families with more conflicting relationships showed more external behavior problems (aggression and irritability) in school. Similar to the study done by Smith et al. (2001), cohesion was positively related

to children's social competencies. However, this study contributes new evidences on the extent of this association, as the data were collected with a time interval of a year and a half. In addition, the data were collected through questionnaires filled out by independent respondents (parents for the questionnaire of family functioning and teachers for the children's competencies evaluation), thus confirming the importance of the relations between the variables studied. As observed by Smith et al., the associations among the variables collected from different respondents were usually weaker (or even insignificant) than when reported by a single respondent. This is probably the reason why the results of the present study are relatively modest and the analyses between affective support scale and children's competencies were not significant, contrary to other studies (Gadeyne et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2001).

In accordance with previous research (Gardinal & Marturano, 2007; Hammarberg & Hagekull, 2006; LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996), our results indicate that girls present more social competencies and less external behavior problems than boys. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that family background would exert a greater influence on boys' socioaffective competencies was not confirmed, since any interaction effect between child's gender and family functioning was significant. Regarding the influence of the socio-economic status, the results found in this study were similar to those observed in previous research (NICHD ECCRN, 2005; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), showing a significant main effect, i.e., as family income increases, children's social competencies rise and behavior problems decrease. On the other hand, a significant interaction effect between family income and problem solving was also observed, indicating that a better problem solving level is related to social competencies and to internal behavior problems, but only in the families with medium and high average income. This result might be explained by the fact that low income families, as they face more adversities, have more difficulties in efficiently solving their problems such as to significantly influence children's social competencies. However, variance analyses showed that the scales of family functioning did not significantly differ between the levels of family income. Thus, it is possible that other aspects of the family context not measured by the solving problems scale, could be of more importance to the development of social competencies of the children in the low income population, such as the cohesion level and family context level (as observed in this study), the parental stress (Anthony et al., 2005), the maternal sensitivity (NICHD ECCRN, 2005) and the parental practices (Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002).

In summary, this study confirmed results observed by other researchers regarding the influence of family on child's socioaffective competencies at the beginning of their schooling, a determinant period of children's development. It has also contributed to the investigation of family

functioning dimensions that have not yet been widely researched, such as problem solving, cohesion and level of family conflicts. Another important contribution of this research was the study of the association between these family functioning dimensions and children's socioaffective competencies in a longitudinal approach. The fact that we observed significant associations between two variables collected in distinct moments from different respondents, confirms the importance of the family context in children's socioaffective development.

Among the methodological limitations of our study, one major point is the psychometric properties of the Self-related Family Inventory (SFI; Beavers & Hampson, 1990). Due to the low internal consistency level of original scales, the questions of the inventory were regrouped and four new scales were created (*cohesion, affective support, problem solving and harmony*). Despite the fact that these new scales showed a good internal consistency, it is possible that the associations between the variables may not have been strong because of the lack of sensitivity of the instrument to the different aspects of family functioning. On the other hand, the data collection through questionnaires can produce responses influenced by social desirability. An alternative to avoid these limits in the future would be using a multi-method approach that combines the use of a questionnaire and an interview or a direct observation, increasing the inference level and the possibility of identifying other important dimensions of family functioning. Another suggestion for future research would be the investigation of family functioning aspects that may act as protection factors in order to develop social competencies in children from a low socio-economic status. Thus, further studies on family functioning are necessary for a better understanding of the aspects involved in the development of socioaffective competencies, contributing to the development of family intervention programs which aim at the promotion of children's development at the beginning of schooling.

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