

SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT: PUTTING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER

Social skills form the basis of human interactions. The development and maintenance of social skills depend on a myriad of interconnected factors in individuals and their environment.

"There are a very large number of factors that will contribute to a child's social competence and ability to interact with his or her social environment; we need to be taking into account as many of those factors as possible," says Miriam H. Beauchamp, a neuropsychologist and researcher at the Sainte-Justine Hospital Research Centre and assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the Université de Montréal.

Dr. Beauchamp is co-author of a paper that brings together, in an integrated framework, the multitude of factors that influence the emergence and expression of social skills: internal and external factors, brain development and integrity, and cognitive functions, comprising attention-executive, communications and socio-emotional skills.

Internal factors refer to components of an individual's self, such as temperament, personality, or even physical attributes. External factors refer to components of an individual's environment, such as family environment, socioeconomic status and culture. Brain development and integrity refer to the neural underpinnings of social skills, which can be disrupted by genetic disorders, developmental anomalies or brain injuries.

Executive function is an umbrella term for the skills that allow us to plan, organize, and reach goals. This includes attention control, which refers to the processes involved in self-monitoring, response inhibition, and self-regulation. *"We have often made a big distinction between cognitive development and social development, but the two interact: if you don't have the skills to inhibit inappropriate behaviours or to communicate adequately, then that will have an impact on the way you socialize,"* says Dr. Beauchamp. Examples might be a child who cannot wait for his or her turn while playing a game, or an impulsive child who is unable to inhibit verbally or physically aggressive reactions.



FROM BABY'S FIRST SMILE

Manifestations of social skills begin early, from baby's very first smile. *"This comes from watching their mother smile at them, and it is one of the first cues in understanding and recognizing social emotions,"* says Dr. Beauchamp. One of the next milestones in social communication is joint attention, when baby can focus on something and realize that a second person is looking at the same thing: baby looks at a toy, then looks at Mommy, who is looking at the toy, and gets a reaction from her.

Socio-emotional skills include the perception and processing of socio-emotional cues, from basic aspects of face and emotion perception to complex cognitive processes that involve understanding mental states. A sense of intended actions or goals is apparent from early infancy; by about eight years of age, children have a sense that others may have feelings or thoughts different from their own.

Sophie Parent, director of the School of Psychoeducation at the Université de Montréal,

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says this paper brings together all the pieces in a very large and complex puzzle, providing a deeper understanding of how social skills develop.

"This model can help in developing preventive interventions, or in planning interventions in the early stages when problems appear," she notes. It can help people working with very young children to understand the milestones or indicators of normal social skills development — and to recognize when something is not right. *"It also offers clinicians a broader range of avenues to explore when problems arise,"* says Parent. 🦋

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