



# Parents as Teachers and Guides of Their Children's Social Skills

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**ABSTRACT:** This study addressed the effects of parental support on children's social competence and focussed on parents' assessments of their children's social skills. It analysed the methods parents use to teach these skills and their direct influence on social-emotional competence. The data for this study were collected from interviews with 55 parents living in Finland. Assessments of social skills and social skills teaching methods by parents of children with peer relationship issues were compared to those of parents of children with no such issues. The results showed differences in perceptions of children's social abilities, as well as parental teaching and guidance methods, between parent groups. All parents indicated that their children's prosocial and emotional skills should be developed more, but children with peer relationship issues also had wider social skill deficits. However, these children's social skills were guided less by their caregivers than children without peer relationship issues. Also, the quality of parental patterns and childrearing practices in teaching social skills varied between the parent groups. Parents of children with peer issues used ineffective teaching methods. These findings highlight the need for carefully planned social skills interventions that involve parents.

**Keywords:** *social-emotional competence, social skills, parental influence, peer relationships*

## Introduction

In recent decades, comprehensive developmental research has provided strong evidence of the link between effective mastery of social-emotional competence and higher well-being and academic achievement (see e.g., Cillessen & Bellmore, 2014; Kupersmidt & DeRosier, 2004; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). For instance, Denham, Bassett, Zinsler and Wyatt (2014) found that social-emotional competence has significant direct and indirect effects on school adjustment and the academic achievements of children in kindergarten. Deficits in social-emotional competence can negatively affect the progress of positive interpersonal relationships and acceptable social behaviour (Gresham & Elliott, 2008); hinder learning outcomes and academic achievement (Ladd, 2005); and lead to exclusion and marginalisation (e.g., Kupersmidt & DeRosier, 2004; Ladd, 2005; Laine, Neitola, Auremaa, & Laakkonen, 2010). Social-emotional competence, defined as effectiveness in interaction, cover e.g., the social abilities that children need to achieve their own objectives in a social interaction and to act positively with other children. These skills help individuals form and maintain positive social and promote the acceptance of others (e.g., Cillessen & Bellmore, 2014). Social skills also play an important role in academic learning (Denham, Bassett, et al., 2014). According to Elliott, Frey and Davis (2015, p. 301), “...without them, learning suffers, school is less satisfying, and many students fail to graduate”.

Social skills are defined as socially acceptable functions and learned behaviours that empower positive approaches towards and effective interactions with others in situations that call for cooperation (Cillessen & Bellmore, 2014; Elliott et al., 2015). They manifest in children’s social behaviour that is appropriate to a given situation and context and leads to affirmative results for the child (Poikkeus, 2011), such as gaining entry to play, earning membership in a team, gaining acceptance in a peer group or establishing a friendship (Ladd, 2005). Children who face difficulties in forming social relationships are reported to have limited social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills (Bukowski, Buhrmester, & Underwood, 2011; Denham, Bassett, et al., 2014; Eisenberg, Vaughan, & Hofer, 2009; Hay, Caplan, & Nash, 2009), which have been identified to underlie individual differences in social-emotional competence (see Eisenberg et al., 2009; Hay et al., 2009).

Social-emotional competence can be perceived as a part of the broader concept of socialisation, which refers to the processes through which children learn skills, behavioural patterns, values and motivation needed for competent functioning in the culture in which they live (Maccoby, 2015). She affirms that the family is the first and most enduring socialising institution, followed by peers, schools and other agents.

Families and parents bear the primary responsibility for meeting children's needs and for socialising them. Parents play key roles in this socialisation process as their children's first teachers and providers of their first social relationships, values and intellectual stimulation (Grusec & Davidov, 2015; Laible, Thompson, & Froimson, 2015). Laible et al. (2015) have highlighted the significance of close relationships between children and their parents. Such relationships, which include warmth, security, sensitivity and mutual reciprocity, are essential for the development of social-emotional competence.

### **Significance of family and parents in the development of children's social skills**

For most children, parents, as primary caregivers, are the most important individuals who scaffold and encourage social interaction and learning (Tomlin, 2007), and whom they like to imitate (Laible et al., 2015). Laible et al. (2015) consider sensitive caregiving to be a central contributor to social-emotional competence because it instils in children a sense of control over their social environment and provides them with a sense of themselves as competent interaction partners. They also state that positive close relationships between family members are not always self-evident. Poor parent-child relationships may limit the effectiveness of parental modelling, and parents may not practice childrearing that supports children's social-emotional competence (Tomlin, 2007). Furthermore, a child's characteristics and behaviour may challenge parents and their parenting patterns (Laible et al., 2015). Children who have behavioural problems tend to experience harsh and controlling parenting, which increases social problems. Very often these children are unaccepted and rejected within their peer groups (Ladd, 2005). Research exploring social competence and peer relations (e.g., Ladd 2005; Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Ladd & Sechler, 2013; O'Neil & Parke, 2000; Parke et al., 2004) has suggested various family processes that affect the development of children's social-emotional competence. Ladd and Pettit (2002) further categorised these processes as indirect and direct influences.

Indirect influences comprise facets of family life and everyday interactions, such as parent-child interactions, parental resources, childrearing practices and the parental social network (Ladd & Pettit 2002; Ladd, 2005; Ladd & Sechler, 2013). Direct influences consist of parents' target-oriented actions to promote a child's social development. These can be defined as parents' attempts to manage and direct children's social functioning and interactions to assist and prepare them to act competently in a social environment. Such efforts include designing children's social environments; guiding, mediating and monitoring their relationships with others; and teaching them acceptable

social behaviours, socially desirable interactions and appropriate social skills by providing advice, coaching and support and by modelling and scaffolding social intercourse (Ladd, 2005; Lollis, Ross, & Tate, 1992; Tomlin, 2007).

Getting along with others requires several different social skills, such as initiating social contact (Cillessen & Bellmore, 2014), socio-cognitive abilities, communication skills (Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2008; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009), self-regulation, social problem solving (Cillessen & Bellmore, 2014), prosocial abilities and emotional knowledge (Denham, Warren et al., 2014; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley and Weissberg (2017) suggest that social-emotional competence can be divided into intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. Intrapersonal skills are important for effective social functioning. These skills, like self-awareness, involve the ability to assess one's own strengths, feelings, interests and values (Denham, 2015). Interpersonal skills are needed to interact successfully with others. The interpersonal domain, which includes maintaining and forming satisfying social relationships with others, requires relationship skills (Denham, Bassett et al., 2014; see Weissberg et al., 2015). These may comprise joining others in play, initiating and maintaining conversation, developing friendships, asserting oneself, cooperating, listening, taking turns, resolving conflicts and addressing others' needs through negotiations; these are essential during early childhood (Denham, 2015; Denham, Bassett, et al., 2014).

More complex social interactions with peers require children to comprehend more emotionally difficult social situations, set prosocial goals and determine effective ways to solve differences with peers. Within responsible decision making, Denham (2015; Denham, Bassett, et al., 2014) includes abilities such as complying with group rules, resisting peer pressure and controlling disruptive behaviour. The interpersonal domain also involves the sphere of social awareness, which includes component skills like understanding another person's perspective, empathising with others, understanding norms and emotional knowledge (see also Weissberg et al., 2015). The area of self-management requires emotional skills, including the ability to handle one's own emotions and suitable and positive attention and behaviour (Denham, 2015).

Children adopt and absorb these skills via family interactions (Grusec & Davidov, 2015); parental practices and modelling (O'Neil & Parke, 2000; Parke et al., 2004); parent-child attachment and warm relationships with parents (McDowell & Parke, 2009; Reich & Vandell, 2014); and the experiences and opportunities to practise different social skills offered and organised by parents (O'Neil & Parke, 2000; Reich & Vandell, 2014). Emotional skills crucially contribute to social-emotional competence (Denham, Warren et al., 2014; Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2015). At their best, parents serve as models and

teachers of emotional learning (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Denham et al., 2015; Denham, Warren et al., 2014), but a negative broader emotional climate in the family, e.g., maternal distress, can lead to less parental sensitivity (Yoo, Popp, & Robinson, 2014). The means and qualities of caregiver reactions to children's negative emotions, caregivers' own regulatory strategies, acceptance (and not suppression) of all kinds of emotions and the expression of one's own emotions are linked to children's social-emotional competence, both directly and indirectly (Denham, Warren et al., 2014; Denham et al., 2015; Frenkel & Fox, 2015).

Exposure to mainly positive parental emotions supports children's learning about emotions (Denham et al., 2015; Denham, Warren et al., 2014), as do sensitive parental responses to children's negative emotions (Laible et al., 2015). Sensitive parenting helps children learn self-regulation and empathy and also reinforces confidence in their abilities to control their emotions, in turn hindering behavioural problems. Children can also expect their parents' assistance when needed. Parents' intense negative emotions hinder the development of children's social-emotional competence, while supportive reactions to children's emotional displays promote children's emotional expressiveness, emotional knowledge and emotional regulation. Non-supportive parenting patterns, either punitive or dismissive, lead to diminished emotional regulation, less emotional expressiveness and poorer emotional knowledge (Denham et al., 2015; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001).

The everyday family context, with its routines and rituals, is a natural learning context. Parents can convey to their children moral and conventional standards, including sharing, manners and appropriate conduct, which children adopt in their own social intercourse (Laible et al., 2015). Additionally, communication and linguistic skills are generally developed during shared play and interests between parents and children (Reich & Vandell, 2014). Daily conversations about different social experiences are another avenue through which children learn social-emotional skills. Emotional communication in different daily situations, e.g., social referencing and communication, influence children's emotional expression and regulation, social expectations and well-being. Research indicates that maternal depression, anxiety and high criticality lessen parental responsiveness and increase emotional negativity and thus result in children adopting similar dysfunctional styles of communication (e.g., Field, Diego, & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Friedman, Beebe, Jaffe, Ross, & Triggs, 2010).

Laible et al. (2015) suggest that conversations related to discipline may not foster children's social-emotional outcomes if they are not detailed. By asking open-ended questions and providing rich details about children's experiences, parents help their

children better understand the causes and consequences of their actions and feelings and give insight into their reasons for certain expectations. Through different conversations, parents can help their children to orientate future events, support their understanding of feelings and the intentions of other persons and show how to solve conflicts constructively. Discussion styles are central to teaching and guiding social skills. For example, using a neutral rather than a demanding tone, as well as questions and suggestions to provoke thoughts and observe a child's emotional stage, is linked with positive social competence (Ladd & Pettit, 2002; McDowell & Parke, 2009; Russell & Finnie, 1990). Mothers of rejected or neglected children have been found to give inadequate and passive advice on peer interactions (Russell & Finnie, 1990), while children who are competent in social interactions are more likely to receive high-quality coaching and support from their parents (McDowell & Parke, 2009; Mize & Pettit 1997).

Hastings, Miller and Troxel (2015) suggest that authoritative parenting—in contrast to authoritarian parenting—attracts children's attention towards other people and promotes prosocial skills and behaviour (helping, sharing, taking turns, cooperating, empathising, etc.). These scholars emphasise that children must be the object of parents' prosocial behaviour because experiences of parents' empathic attitudes and action, as well as parental warmth and attachment, contribute to prosocial skills. Fair and respectful parenting practices together with close and trustworthy relationships increase the probability that children will internalise the prosocial lessons their parents have taught to them. A reproaching and accusing parenting style is associated with children exhibiting, for example, withdrawn behaviour (Proffitt & Ladd, 1994). Recent research indicates that parents who resort to punitive control have less empathic children (Garner, 2012).

Hastings et al. (2015) state that punitive control is linked with psychological control, and it reflects, for instance, parents' manipulative efforts to regulate their children's behaviour, love withdrawal and guilt induction. Psychologically controlling parents are often overprotective and smothering. This kind of control undermines children's independence, security within the parent-child relationship and self-esteem. It has been found that early rejection from mothers can lead to less empathic and prosocial behaviour years later (Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2010). Thus, when parents' actions model a low regard of others' feelings and evoke a lack of confidence and resentment they undermine empathy across relationships. Parents who establish norms and rules in a warm but firm way using inductive reasoning, highlighting the needs of other persons and monitoring and advising their children consistently without making them feel guilty, are utilising behavioural control. This low-power control has been found to effectively foster young children's prosocial development (Hastings et al., 2015).

Research has also proven that cooperative co-parenting promotes children's prosocial abilities, like empathy. Proactive parenting, especially from fathers, has been found to be effective in children's learning of prosocial skills and behaviours. A proactive parenting style concentrates on anticipating actions, for instance, by supplying children with strategies prior to events occurring (Hastings et al., 2015). Further, Grusec and Sherman (2011) state that guided learning involves teaching social skills and parental knowledge within the children's zone of proximal development. This means that learning must be scaffolded so that it is appropriate to the child's level of understanding and mastery of the task being taught. In sum, an authoritative parenting style with positive attitudes, including warmth, sensitivity and responsiveness, as well as firm, child-oriented guidance and the teaching of trust through cognitive problem-solving methods that take into account children's personal characteristics (like temperament), has been proven to produce the best outcomes for children's social skills and overall social competence.

This study aims to explore parental assessments, views and experiences regarding children's social skills management, how parents teach and guide their children and the teaching methods they apply at home. I compare the estimations and views of parents whose children have no peer relation issues to those of parents whose children have peer relationship issues.

### **The objectives of this study**

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. *to examine parents' assessments of their children's mastered and developing social skills and possible differences between these assessments;*
2. *to identify which social skills parents teach their children and to compare the conceptions of these taught skills between parents of children with and without peer relationship issues; and*
3. *to explore the teaching and guidance methods parent apply to promote social skills and identify divergences between those used by parents of children with and without peer relationship issues.*

### **Data and methodology**

This study was conducted during a longitudinal research project titled 'Origins of Exclusion in Early Childhood' (see Laine et al., 2010) in which a total of 179 children participated, with parental consent. Parents were recruited to participate in the present

study based on the results previously obtained from the data on children's peer relationships (see Laine et al., 2010; Neitola, 2011), and these parents represented a total of 38 children of the original sample of 179 children of the abovementioned study (see Laine et al., 2010). I gathered qualitative research data through thematic interviews with 55 parents (N = 55, n = 37 mothers/grandmothers, n = 18 fathers) on topics such as children's social skills, the social skills parents taught their children and parental teaching methods. The term 'parent' includes here also the relatives who act as guardians of the children (e.g., grandmothers). I obtained data from parents of children with and without peer relationship issues. At the time of the interviews, the parents' children were in the first grade (seven or eight years old).

I interviewed each parent separately, even if two parents of the same child participated in the study. This study satisfied all ethical requirements by ensuring parents' anonymity and acquiring their informed consent. Because of the sensitive themes in this study, the protection of both the parents' and children's identity is necessary. The children's anonymity has been guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms. For ethical reasons I have selected quotations that represent different families. Thus, parents of the same child cannot recognise each other's responses from the extracts. Every parent was interviewed by flexibly following the structure of a planned thematic interview guide. Interviewees could choose the location of the interview. Some parents wanted me to come their home, and others wanted to be interviewed at the university. Although conducting interviews in the home can include many challenges (see Kallinen, Pirskanen, & Rautio, 2015; MacDonald & Greggans, 2008), I wanted to respect the parents' wishes, and they ensured there were no disruptions during the interviews.

Sensitivity in my study concerns my subject: parents and their activities in teaching and guiding children's social skills. When one is focussed on describing only sunny sides of family life and child rearing practices we can talk about happiness wall, as interviewees aim to hang on to images of a happy life and easy parenting (see Kallinen et al., 2015). I did not observe that wall during my interviews very often, but some parents distinctively avoided deeper conversations with me. I felt I was told about their parenting methods and experience in only a general way, and the provided information was limited. My aim was to find out what kinds of issues in families and parenting lead to poor social and emotional outcomes for children. Recognising these issues helps parents improve their childrearing practices and professionals promote cooperation between parents because children with poor social-emotional competence need support from all adults living with them. An unfavourable social-emotional development trajectory and its causes must be made visible so we can change it, as this hazardous development costs too much for both the individual and society. The researcher should

not only aim to avoid harm, but “discover how to make positive difference” (Munford, Sanders, Mirfin, Conder, & Conder, 2008, p. 64).

Data on the interviewed parents' sociodemographic information was gathered from a family questionnaire sent to the families when the children participating into the longitudinal research project were six years old. A majority of the parents (n=55) reported intact families (26 out of 38 families) and two children per family (24 out of 38 families). Other families were either divorced families (1) or single-parent families (11). Six families had only one child, and five families had more than two children. Eighteen families had incomes of more than 1,500 euros per month, and nearly the same number of families (17) had incomes below that amount. Seven families' incomes were under the poverty line (net income of 1190 euros per month). Three families provided no information on family structure, net income or family size.

For a start of the interviews, parents evaluated how important they thought social skills were for individuals in general. I asked the parents to assess the general importance of social skills by rating them on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not important, 5 = very important). After that, parents were asked to evaluate their children's social skills. To facilitate this assessment, they were first asked to list the social skills that their child already mastered and the ones they were still developing. We then discussed them in more detail. If they needed to, parents could refer to a memory list of social skills given by me. I then aimed to identify the social skills the parents wanted to teach their children. Finally, to gain further insight into the methods and measures the parents utilised, I asked them to describe their teaching and guidance approaches.

## **Analysis**

First, I divided the interviewed parents and the data into two groups for the analysis: parents of children with peer relationship issues (n = 34) and parents of children with no such issues (n = 21). Then, I coded the data in accordance with the research questions. The unit of the analysis was a word, a sentence or a larger part of the interview. The data were subjected to content analysis and quantification. In analysing the data, I mainly followed the principles of data-driven inductive analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schreier, 2012; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). After organising the data, I formed main categories and subcategories for each research question. The main category for the first research question, *the assessments of the children's mastered and developing social skills*, included following subcategories: Prosocial skills, emotional skills, co-operation and conflict resolution, self-confidence and self-esteem skills, entering peer groups, facing failures, communication skills, noticing, perceiving,

detecting other people, feelings of security, taking advantage of others' feelings and mood, and the category of nothing to develop. The main category for the second research question was *social skills taught and guided by parents* which contained seven subcategories termed prosocial skills, cooperation and conflict resolution, facing failures, emotional skills, noticing and perceiving other people, closeness and feelings of security, and communication skills. The main category of the last research question, *methods adopted by parents*, comprised subcategories: Discussions with their children, utilisation of daily occasions, parents as role models, cooperation with professionals, physical contact and closeness, discussions with other children and parents, confidential relationships between the parent and child, and no conscious teaching and guidance.

In addition to verbal data, quantitative results were also produced (see Silverman, 2006). By quantifying the data, I determined how many times the same item or theme occurred in interviewees' assessments and descriptions and how many parents expressed the same issue (see Schreier, 2012). Quantification facilitated the identification of differences in the views and actions of the two parent groups, as the size of the parent group of children with peer relationship issues was bigger (see Patton, 2015). Thus, the percentage values provide more meaningful information about the data. Finally, I compared parental assessments, methods and their frequency between the two groups to identify similarities and differences, as suggested by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018). The results are presented through the qualitative analysis of interview extracts (translated in English by non-native speaker), along with quantitative analysis of frequencies and percentages to achieve a more holistic understanding of the research subject. Percentage values were tested statistically.

## Results

### Parents' ratings of their children's social skills

First, the interviewees were asked to rate the general importance of social skills on a scale of 1–5 (1 = least important and 5 = most important). The majority of the parents (52) considered social skills to be the most important ability needed for everyday communication and interaction. The lowest rating for social skills was three. The participants realised the importance of these skills and understood that providing support to their children required hard work: *"I rate them as four [out of five]. Thinking of Atso, he won't ever become the captain of the football team – not everybody will be that type. I accept that he has few good friends or peers, but when he is a scientist, he will be a*

*part of a community, surrounded by likeminded colleagues*". (mother of Atso, a child with peer relationship issues).

During the interviews, most parents deeply considered their children's developing and mastered social skills, but some—mostly parents of children with peer relationship issues—simply offered a brief response: *"Every skill is satisfactorily mastered"*. Table 1 presents the results of the parents' assessments of their children's social skills. All parents identified the four skills most in need of development as follows: prosocial skills, emotional skills, cooperation and conflict resolution, and facing failures.

TABLE 1 Interviewed parents' assessments of their children's mastered and developing social skills (f, %)

SOCIAL SKILLS NEEDING DEVELOPMENT	PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH PEER RELATION ISSUES (n = 34)		PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH NO PEER RELATIONS ISSUES (n = 21)		ALL PARENTS (N = 55)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Prosocial skills	22	64.7	8	38.1	30	54.5
Emotional skills	16	47.1	6	28.6	22	40.0
Co-operation and conflict resolution	9	26.5	3	14.3	12	21.8
Self-confidence and self-esteem skills	9	26.5	0	0	9	16.4
Entering peer groups	7	20.6	0	0	7	12.7
Facing failures, e.g. losing a contest	7	20.6	3	14.3	10	18.2
Communication skills	4	11.8	1	4.8	5	9.1
Noticing, perceiving, detecting other people	2	5.9	2	9.5	4	7.3
Feelings of security	2	5.9	0	0	2	3.6
Taking advantage of others' feelings and mood	1	2.9	0	0	1	1.8
Nothing to develop	5	14.7	1	4.8	6	10.9

Parents of children with peer relationship issues (almost one third of them) rated their children's self-confidence and self-esteem low along with the skills of entering a peer group, while no parent of a child with no peer relationship issues assessed these skills as not mastered. Compared to the parents of children with no peer relationship issues, the parents of children with peer relationship issues more often indicated that their children's prosocial skills should be improved. Two thirds of the parents of children with peer relationship issues assessed their children as more incompetent in prosocial skills,

while slightly over one third of the parents of children with no peer relationship issues made similar evaluations. A problem often acknowledged by the parents was their children's limited ability to wait their turn: *"Lauri needs practice in waiting his turn. He succeeds with the help of his parents; he can do it with his peers, but not at home. It requires some pushing"* (father of Lauri, a child with peer relationship issues).

Nearly half of all parents believed that there was room for improvement in their children's set of emotional skills. Nearly half of this kind of ratings were given by parents whose children had peer relationship issues, while only about one third of parents of children with no peer relationship issues rated their children's emotional abilities similarly. The mother of Juuso (a child with peer relationship issues) illustrated her son's abilities as follows: *"I think Juuso copes well, but when he has those temper tantrums because something went badly, he throws things, bites himself and defies parents' teaching and guidance..."*. Parents of children with peer relationship issues reported their children had difficulties regulating their emotions and at the same time struggled with expressing their feelings and became *"withdrawn and reticent"* (mother of Viivi, a child with peer relationship issues). Eero's father described his son (a child with peer relationship issues) in the following words: *"He broods over his emotions until the end of the world, alone. For example, finding out the harassment lasted three months"*. Compared to parents of children with no peer relationship issues, parents of children with such issues gave lower ratings on all other assessed social skills, with the exception of noticing, perceiving, detecting other people (see Table 1).

Cooperation and solving conflicts in various situations were reported as challenging for many children with peer relationship problems. According to his mother, Simo (a child with peer relation issues) brooded over and grieved his poor interaction and relationship experiences still at home in the evenings. This could continue for days, which also displayed his low self-confidence. Simo needed considerable encouragement from his parents to resolve bad relationships. Another issue was the high expectations set by the children themselves, which made handling failures more troublesome for them. Facing failures was also challenging for some of the children with no peer relationship problems, as parents reported. Parents further highlighted their children's difficulties in forming and maintaining social relationships; for instance, children with peer relationship issues found it troublesome to enter into peer groups, in contrast to children with no peer relationship issues. A higher number of parents whose children did not have peer issues believed that their children needed to improve their skills of noticing other people. Unlike the parents of children with peer issues, these parents rated their children as feeling secure and never taking advantage of others' feelings and mood.

To summarise, the differences between the two parent groups were larger in the first six components of social skills (Table 1); for all other skills the deviations were minor. It is worth noticing that some parents rated their children's skills highly; the majority of these parents had children with peer relationship issues, although the difference is narrow.

### Social skills taught and guided by parents

Most parents aimed to develop their children's social abilities. The father of Niina (a child with no peer relationship issues) highlighted: *"These all are such issues we want to pay attention to. There is much to learn, but considering her age, she manages well"*. Table 2 presents the social skills taught and guided by parents.

TABLE 2 Children's social skills taught and guided by parents (f, %)

SOCIAL SKILLS TAUGHT AND GUIDED BY PARENTS	PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH PEER RELATIONSHIP ISSUES (n = 34)		PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH NO PEER RELATIONSHIPS ISSUES (n = 21)		ALL PARENTS (N = 55)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Prosocial skills	19	55.9	17	80.1	36	65.5
Cooperation and conflict resolution	6	7.6	3	14.3	9	16.4
Facing failures	3	8.8	2	9.5	5	9.1
Emotional skills	2	5.9	2	9.5	4	7.3
Noticing, perceiving other people	2	5.9	1	4.8	3	5.5
Closeness and feelings of security	1	2.9	1	4.8	2	3.6
Communication skills	2	5.9	0	0	2	3.6

Of all social skills, parents taught and guided prosocial skills most to their children. More than half of all parents tried to influence their children's prosocial skills, while other skills were less of a focus in both groups. Almost all parents of children with no peer relationship issues and approximately two third of parents whose children had peer relationship issues reported that they prioritised prosocial skills. In particular, the parents, especially those of children with peer issues, emphasised teaching good manners: *"...the politeness, I mean, and good manners and the ability to apologise and say thank you"* (parent of Tommi, a child with peer relationship issues).

Nearly a quarter of all parents stated that they taught their children to cooperate and to solve problems with other people. Parents of children with no peer relationship issues

mentioned their efforts to teach these skills twice as much as parents in the other group. Only a few parents in both groups mentioned trying to influence their children's skilfulness in facing failures, as well as noticing and perceiving of other people, closeness and feelings of security or communication skills. Although the parents assessed the emotional skills of their children as needing significant development, only a minority of parents reported trying to support the improvement of these skills. Parents of children with no peer relationship issues reported doing so more often than parents of children with peer relationship issues. They were also more likely to try to create closeness and deep contact with their children compared to the parents of children with peer relationship issues, who focussed more on influencing their children's noticing, perceiving and detecting of others and communication skills.

In sum, both parent groups aimed to teach their children social skills; parents of children with no peer relationship issues reported doing so marginally more, but all concentrated mostly on prosocial abilities. The differences between parent groups are considerably minimal.

### **Parents' teaching and guidance methods for their children's social skills**

In this section, I discuss the means adopted by parents to promote children's social skills. I first asked parents to describe their teaching and guidance methods and then categorised them into groups, as shown in Table 3. Over two thirds of all parents used discussions with their children to teach and guide children's social skills; the next most common method was the utilisation of daily occasions as examples and episodes.

Clear majority of the parents of reported the application of discussions. Overall, parents mentioned 43 different modes of discussions, including through general conversations, talking about different social occasions, rules, orders, advice, explanations, demands, modelling various situations, finding methods and describing make-believe situations and imagining how other people would feel in each of them. To this effect, one parent mentioned: "*--- the starting point is "what if something happens around you. We always discuss if there is something one can learn from those events. These are not things that you can learn from videos ... they have to happen live"*" (father of Niina, a child with no peer relationship issues).

TABLE 3 Teaching and guiding methods for social skills adopted by parents (f, %)

METHODS ADOPTED BY PARENTS	PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH PEER RELATIONSHIP ISSUES (n = 34)		PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH NO PEER RELATIONSHIP ISSUES (n = 21)		ALL PARENTS (N = 55)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Discussions with their children	29	85.3	14	66.7	43	78.2
Utilisation of daily occasions	9	26.5	3	14.3	12	21.8
Parents as role models	3	8.8	2	9.5	5	9.1
Cooperation with professionals (school, kindergarten)	3	8.8	1	4.8	4	7.3
Physical contact, closeness	3	8.8	0	0	3	5.5
Discussions with other children and parents	1	2.9	1	4.8	2	3.6
Confidential relationships between the parent and child	0	0	2	9.5	2	3.6
No conscious teaching and guidance	3	8.8	1	4.8	4	7.3

However, the quality of the discussions differed between these parent groups. The discussions of the parents of the children with peer relations issues were stressed by orders, denials and concrete advice. For example, the mother of Heikki (a child with peer relationship issues) extract reveals: “--- I have... well, one tries to control and rule the children, ---how to find consensus between two adult---Something must be taught by sharing examples of negative things and explaining why such things happened or why somebody had done those things. It needs to be stated as clearly as possible what you are allowed to do and what you may not do”. Parents reported that teaching and guiding occurred mostly in daily life situations, as the father of Saana (a child with no peer relationship issues) illustrates: “Well, surely the phrases that you've taught to be polite and have good manners, but I've tried to draw attention to them in different situations and give guidance and explain why one should behave in a certain manner”.

A minority of all parents stated that they saw themselves as role models to their children; more parents of children with no peer relationship issues identified themselves as such. A few parents, mostly those of children with peer relationship issues, lent on cooperation with professionals or physical contact and closeness. Some parents, more often parents of children with no peer relationship issues, classified conversations with other children and parents and their own confidential relationships

with their children as their teaching and guiding methods. A small number of parents, more from the group with children with peer relationship issues, reported that they did not teach or guide their children's social skills at all, at least not consciously.

## Discussion

In this study, the first objective was to examine parents' assessments of their children's mastered and developing social skills and to investigate possible differences between the assessments of parents of children with and without peer relationship issues. Social skills were generally highly valued. To a large degree, the parents believed that their children's social skills needed improvement. There were four components of social skills that were assessed as not mastered by all parents: prosocial skills, emotional skills, cooperation and conflict resolution, and facing failures. In particular, the parents of children with peer relationship issues perceived their children's social skills as suboptimal. Social skills were generally highly valued. This finding reflects teacher reports of children's social skills (Laine & Neitola, 2004). They found that according to teachers' ratings, the social skills of children with poor peer relationships were deficient. In this study, prosocial, emotional, cooperation skills and self-esteem together with entering peer groups and facing failures were rated as not mastered by the parents of children with peer relationship issues. Weaknesses in these essential social skills are typical for children with competency problems, as earlier research has demonstrated (Bukowski et al., 2011; Cillessen & Bellmore, 2014; Denham, Bassett et al., 2014; Denham, Warren et al, 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Hay et al., 2009; Ladd, 2005). These weaknesses have been recognised to predict individual differences in social and emotional competencies (see Eisenberg et al., 2009; Gresham & Elliott, 2008; Hay et al., 2009; Kupersmidt & DeRosier, 2004; Ladd, 2005; Laine et al., 2010). Positively, the parents recognised the need for further skills development, which at best can lead to better outcomes if they systematically intervene in this development. However, there were a few parents who thought that their children's social skills did not need any intervention. Unidentified children's needs undermine the development of their social-emotional competence (Grusec & Davidov, 2015; Laible et al., 2015).

My second objective was to discover which social skills parents considered the most important to teach their children and to compare the perceptions of parents whose children have peer relationship problems to those of parents whose children do not. The results indicated that parents mainly aimed to teach prosocial skills to their children. Other social skills were reportedly taught less by both parent groups. Still, parents of children with no peer relationship issues coached their children slightly more than

parents in the other group. This could be a symptom of their more authoritative childrearing style, which is positively associated with more optimal social outcomes for children (Hastings et al., 2015; Grusec & Sherman, 2011). Contrary to my expectations, the parents rated emotional skills as only the fourth most important social skills to teach despite citing these as the second highest area for improvement. It can be argued that children do not get enough fundamental guidance for their emotional learning and development, especially those with peer relationship issues; this can lead to limited emotional skills (Denham et al., 2012; Denham et al., 2015; Fabes et al., 2001). According to research evidence, skilful social interaction is related to parents' high-quality coaching and support (McDowell & Parke, 2009; Mize & Pettit, 1997).

The third and last objective was to explore the parents' methods of teaching and guiding children's social skills and the divergences between the experiences of the two parent groups. The main methods applied by parents to influence their children's social skills were having discussions with them and utilising daily situations and encounters as both examples of interaction situations, and teaching and guiding contexts. Still, coaching children on social skills tended to be more typical among the parents of children with no peer relationship issues. Discussion falls under the parents' role as a supervisor with direct influence; discussions include advice giving, coaching and teaching (Ladd, 2005; Lollis et al., 1992; Parke et al., 2004; Tomlin, 2007). The two parent groups exhibited differences in their discussion methods and content. Parallel to earlier studies, parents of children with peer relationship issues were more ineffective at advice giving, which has been found to lead to poorer management of social skills (Ladd & Pettit, 2002; McDowell & Parke, 2009; O'Neil & Parke, 2000; Russell & Finnie, 1990). Evidently, their teaching is not adjusted to the child's zone of proximal development (Grusec & Sherman, 2011). Low-power behavioural control with warmth but firmness using inductive reasoning has been suggested to have more positive effects on children's social-emotional learning (Hastings et al., 2015). Several parents in this study taught social skills through daily situations and encounters in the everyday family context, which is a natural and effective method for children's social-emotional learning (Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Laible et al., 2015; Lollis et al., 1992). A minority of parents in both groups identified themselves as models of social skills, although parental practices and modelling have been shown to be effective teaching methods (Denham, et al., 2015; Denham et al., 2012; Denham, et al., 2014; Ladd, 2005; O'Neil & Parke, 2000; Tomlin, 2007). Parents seem to have difficulties in perceiving their importance as role models for socially and emotionally competent intercourse.

Finally, the results indicate that parental patterns and child-rearing practices relating to social-emotional skills vary between the caregivers of children with and without peer relationship issues. However, one should bear in mind that the tested percentage values between the groups were not statistically significant. Thus, the quantitative results must be seen only as suggestive. Furthermore, although some of the interviewed parents represented the same children, their answers were not compared, which could have revealed contrasts between parents of the same child. Dichotomic design can be challenging due to the heterogeneity of parents and children. Methodological triangulation was used to more thoroughly obtain the quality, diversity and dimensions of parents' assessments and activities (see Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008).

## Conclusions

Exploring parental influence on and experience of teaching their children's social skills, as part of their social-emotional competence, revealed several factors related to social-emotional learning. Children with peer relationship issues often have deficits in their social skills; these were also perceived by their parents. Despite these perceptions, caregivers actively teach these skills to their children less and through more ineffective techniques compared to parents of children without problematic peer relationships. This trend hampers the trajectory of social-emotional development. Changing this unfavourable progression requires, first, increasing knowledge of the importance of social-emotional competence amongst parents and professionals working with children and families (e.g., child welfare clinics), and second, using more systematically planned and implemented social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes in early childhood education, schools, and other learning environments. Third, effectively influencing children's social skills and social-emotional competence requires closer multi-professional cooperation with parents and other professionals, as also Bierman and Motamedi (2015) have underlined.

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