

## Relationships between Family Background and Family Strengths with Children's Social Competence

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the relationships between family background (parental age, parental education, number of children, family monthly income) and family strengths with children's social competence. A sample of 200 parents completed parent and child measures in a structured questionnaire. The results showed that all the variables for the family background were not significantly related to children's social competence. Families who had higher levels of togetherness and utilized more respectful communication had children who displayed higher levels of social competence. The findings imply that children with higher levels of social competence come from families with higher level of family strengths.

**Keywords:** Social competence, family background, family strengths

### INTRODUCTION

Social competence refers to the composite of social and communicative abilities that children utilize to cultivate relationships with adults and other children to succeed in an environment (Hart, Olsen, Robinson and Mandelco, 1997; Mendez, McDermott and Fantuzzo, 2002). Socially competent children are able to elicit positive responses from others and are therefore skilful in forming close and supportive relationships (Mendez *et al.*, 2002). On the contrary, children with deficiencies in social competence tend to be less adroit socially and often display high levels of negative emotionality and impulsive behaviour (Snyder, Prichard, Schrepferman, Patrick and Stoolmiller, 2004). Meanwhile, negative emotionality, such as anger, frustration, and hostility, has been linked to delinquency and aggressive behaviour in several studies

(e.g. Eisenberg *et al.*, 1997; Stice and Gonzales, 1998). In short, social competence is a valuable individual skill and resource, and is therefore an indicator of positive mental health. Thus, numerous interventions (L'Abate and Millan, 1985) have targeted social competence to assist children in overcoming adjustments difficulties and preventing serious emotional and behavioural problems later in life (Garnezy, 1991; Hoglund and Leadbeater, 2004).

The present study is guided by an ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which suggests that children's development is influenced by resources and proximal processes in the immediate environment. In particular, resources (such as parental age, level of education, family monthly income, and number of children) and proximal processes (such as family strengths) are likely to influence the child's functioning

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in social relationship in later life (e.g. Larsson and Frisk, 1999; Lau and Kwok, 2003; Høglund and Leadbeater, 2004; Laible, Torquati and Ontai, 2004; Anthony *et al.*, 2005). There are relatively few studies in the literature which have examined family background and the construct of family strengths in relation to children's social competence, especially in Malaysia. The purpose of the present study was to fill in this research gap by determining the relationship between family background (namely parental age, level of education, family monthly income, and the number of children) and family strengths with children's social competence.

#### *Family Background and Children's Social Competence*

Previous studies have unveiled mixed findings pertinent to the relationship between family background and children's social competence. A study in a western country indicated that children from middle socio-economic status (SES) families were often regarded as more socially competent than children in lower SES families (Larsson and Frisk, 1999). Meanwhile, parents with higher education levels tend to have children with greater social competence (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn and Klebanov, 1994). Highly educated parents are more likely to use positive communication with their children in solving problems, arranging peer experiences, and fostering friendships which enhance children's social competence (Duncan *et al.*, 1994; Coughlin and Vuchinich, 1996). However, there is also evidence which suggests that mothers' education is not significantly correlated to children's social competence (Høglund and Leadbeater, 2004). In Malaysia, a study by Anjli Panalal (2004) showed that the level of children's social competence is not affected by mothers' education and age, but it is influenced by the number of children.

Earlier studies showed that families with fewer children and lower economic strain were more likely to have children with higher level of social competence (Anjli Panalal, 2004). A research by Mistry, Biesanz, Taylor, Burchinal

and Cox (2004) found that family income had a greater impact on the social competence of children living in poverty than on those not living in poverty. Another study by Brody, Stoneman and Flor (1996) found that family financial resources were directly linked to youths' social competence. Furthermore, the relationship between family income and child's social competence diminishes as income moves further away from the poverty line (Costello, Compton, Keeler and Angold, 2003; Dearing, McCartney and Taylor, 2001). On average, low-income parents (or those facing economic loss), are less child-centred and nurturant in interactions with their children and are more parent-centred, rejecting, and inconsistent when disciplining their children compared to more affluent parents (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo and Garcia Coll, 2001; McLoyd, 1990; 1998). This may in turn decrease the level of children's social competence.

#### *Family Strengths and Children's Social Competence*

Family strength is a broad term that refers to family behaviour, processes, and relationship characteristics (Otto, 1975; Williams, Lingren, Rowe, Van Zandt and Stinnett, 1985; Schlesinger, 1998; Moore, Chalk, Scarpa and Vandivere, 2002). Otto (1975) conceptualized family strengths as "those forces and dynamic factors... which encourage the development of the personal resources and potentials of members of the family and which make family life deeply satisfying and fulfilling to family members." There are six main characteristics of family strength, and these are commitment, appreciation, communication, time together, shared values and beliefs, and coping with stress (Stinnet and Sauer, 1977; Stinnet, 1979; Stinnett, Sanders, DeFrain and Parkhurst, 1982; Casas, Stinnett, Williams, DeFrain and Lee, 1984; Geggie, DeFarin, Hitchcock and Silberberg, 2000; Yuen and He, 2004).

The strengths in families help family members to face challenges in their daily life, particularly during times of adversities. Related

literature has consistently showed that several aspects of family strength (such as demonstration of unconditional love, cohesion, encouragement of individuality, and adequate social support) may help children to acquire a sense of social competence, learn appropriate social skills, respond to rules, as well as limit and control their anger and aggression (Schoenrock, Bell, Sun and Avery, 1999; Zou *et al.*, 2002; Bates, Luster and Vandenbelt, 2003). Meanwhile, Lau and Kwok (2003) found three domains of family environment (namely relationship, personal growth, and system maintenance) as significantly correlated with children's social, appearance, and academic.

Several other studies also found that greater involvement in family routines among members might lead to greater family strength and more cooperative behaviour among urban African-American pre-schoolers (Keltner, 1990; Koblinsky, Kuvalanka and Randolph, 2006) and greater social competence and self-regulation among rural African-American school-age children (Brody and Flor, 1997; Brody, Flor and Gibson, 1999). Similarly, family routines such as having dinner together, reading stories to children, and visiting family relatives are consistent with African-American traditions involving the extended family (Billingsley, 1992). Family routines may foster secure, predictable, and organized home environments, enable mothers to exert positive control over their pre-schoolers' time, activities, and friends/acquaintances, and reduce the potential for negative social competence such as impulsive, aggressive behaviours that stem from boredom and idleness (Koblinsky *et al.*, 2006).

## METHODS

### *Sample and Procedure*

The sample consisted of 200 (97 mothers and 103 fathers) parents who came from the second generation of Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) with a focal child aged between 7 and 12 years. The purpose of FELDA is to help the government to carry out rural land development schemes and improve

the economic status as well as the living standard of the poor rural community. There are over 500,000 second generation settlers in Malaysia who are still actively involved in the development of FELDA schemes. A lot of aids and facilities have continually been provided to the second generation of settlers, and these include education, spiritual, and physical development. All the respondents were Malays and residing in FELDA schemes located in the states of Negeri Sembilan and Pahang. In this study, both Negeri Sembilan and Pahang were purposively selected as the location based on the following considerations: (i) the availability of the second generation FELDA families which would facilitate the selection of the respondents based on the discussion with the FELDA's Director of Community Development in Kuala Lumpur; (ii) the availability of the study resources (finance, manpower); and (iii) the accessibility of the respondents.

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from FELDA's Director of Community Development at the headquarter in Kuala Lumpur, the Directors of FELDA in Negeri Sembilan and Wilayah Mempaga, Pahang. Only ten out of twenty one FELDA schemes given by FELDA's headquarter with a high probability of obtaining the respondents who fulfilled the criteria were selected using a simple random sampling. The ten selected schemes included four FELDA schemes in Negeri Sembilan (Felda Bukit Jalor, Felda Bukit Rokan, Felda Pasir Besar, and Felda Sg. Kelamah) and six FELDA schemes in Pahang (Felda Bukit Kepayang, Felda Bukit Mendi, Felda Lurah Bilut, Felda Bukit Puchong, Felda Mayam, and Felda Cemomoi).

The respondents were identified using a simple random sampling and face-to-face interviews were conducted by the researchers and trained assistants at their homes. This method permits the collection of the most extensive data on each person questioned (Tan, 2004; Brenner, Brown and Canter, 1985). The respondents' permissions to participate were sought prior to the interviews using structured questionnaires. The respondents were given a

token of appreciation upon the completion of the questionnaire.

### *Data Analysis*

Firstly, a descriptive analysis was conducted to provide a clearer picture of the data distribution. Secondly, the factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed to define the underlying dimension of family strengths and this was then used in the subsequent analysis. Thirdly, the magnitude and strength of the relationship of the studied variables were quantitatively measured using Pearson product-moment correlations. Finally, the multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the best set of predictors of the children's social competence.

### *Measurements*

All the measurements used in this study were either translated from English into or designed in Bahasa Malaysia. The back-to-back translation was used for this purpose. Moreover, Bahasa Malaysia is the native language for the Malaysian Malays and also the national language of Malaysia.

### **Family background**

Information of the respondents' family background was obtained by asking them to report on their age, the educational level, the number of children, and their family monthly income.

### **Family strength**

The family strength was assessed using an adapted version of the Australian Inventory of Family Strengths (AIFS) (Geggie *et al.*, 2000). For the purpose of this study, the 85-item AIFS was reduced to 79 items to better suit the Malaysian context. The six items were deleted from the original scale due to the issues of contextual and cultural relevance. This study also edited three items in order to make them more appropriate for the participants. Based on the factor analysis using the varimax rotation procedure, three

factors emerged and these explained 38.34% of the variance and labelled as shared values, togetherness, and respectful communication. It is important to note that four items with a factor loading less than .30 were eliminated from the scale. Therefore, only 75 items were included in the subsequent analysis. The overall family strength had an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .89$ . The subscale of shared values had 27 items, and were used to measure whether family members had a sense of greater good or power in life, spirituality or set of values and beliefs that give strength, perspective, purpose, and guidelines for living, and provides the family with a sense of belonging or togetherness (e.g. "In our family, we believe love is powerful force that keeps us together"), and with an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .96$ . The sub-scale of togetherness had 27 items which measured to the 'invisible glue' that bound the family and gave the family members a sense of belonging (e.g. "In our family, a crisis makes us stick closer together"), and showed an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .94$ . The sub-scale of respectful communication comprising of 21 items described family members as open and honest with one another, and were willing to listen to other member's views (e.g. "In our family, we like talking openly with each other"), and showed an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .90$ . The scale responses were found to range from 1=definitely agree to 6=definitely disagree. All the items in the scale were reversed score to ensure higher scores indicated higher levels of family strength.

### **Children's social competence**

The 12-item Social Competence Scale (SCS) (Corrigan, 2002) was used to measure the children's social competence. The SCS assesses a child's pro-social and emotional skills and it was completed by the parents. Each item on the scale states a behaviour that a child may display in a social setting. Some examples of the relevant statements include: 'Can give suggestions and opinions without being bossy' and 'Can calm down when excited or all wound up'. The responses were then coded on a five-

point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (Not at all) to 4 (Very Well). The total of the SCS score was obtained by adding the scores for all the items and this was found to range from 0 to 48. A higher score showed a higher perception of the children's social competence. Dennis, Brotman, Huang and Gouley (2007) reported that the SCS had a good internal consistency (alpha coefficient = 0.87), while the test-retest reliability showed correlations of .52 and .69. The concurrent and construct validity of the scale was also well established (Dennis *et al.*, 2007). For this study, the Cronbach's alpha of the SCS was found to be .80.

## RESULTS

### *Family Background*

As shown in Table 1, the respondents' average age was 36.6 years old indicating that in overall, the respondents were in the middle adulthood stage. As for the level of education, the results revealed that the respondents had moderate educational qualifications, whereby the majority (89.5%) of the respondents obtained at least some secondary qualifications. The average level of education was 10.2 (SD=1.9), and this indicated that on average, the respondents had completed their education until Form Three. A further analysis indicated that the respondents have been married for about 13 years on average.

Generally, the respondents in this study had a moderate family income per month (Mean = RM932.4). Approximately 36.5% of the respondents earned a family monthly income which was lower than the Poverty Line Income (PLI) for that rural area, i.e. RM657 (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010). They seemed to have a considerably large number of children (Mean=3.7, SD=3.7) which exceeded the average size of the Malaysian family of 2.76 (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010).

### *Family Strengths and Children's Social Competence*

Both the means and standard deviation of the family strengths and the children's social competence are shown in Table 1. Family strength was measured on the 6-point Likert-type scales with higher scores representing higher levels of family strength. The midpoint of the scale is 3. The respondents' mean score on the AIFS was 5.06, indicating that the respondents (on average) rated their family strength as high level. A similar pattern was also detected for all the sub-scales of family strength, where the average shared values, togetherness, and respectful communication were 5.24, 4.84, and 5.13, respectively. The children's score on the SCS was 2.22 with a midpoint of 2, indicating that children had a high level of social competence.

TABLE 1  
Means and standard deviations of measures

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Respondents' age	36.6	5.7
Years of education	10.2	1.9
Duration of marriage	13.2	4.4
Family monthly income	932.4	604.0
Number of children	3.7	1.4
Total family strengths	5.06	.36
Shared values	5.24	.40
Togetherness	4.84	.46
Respectful communication	5.13	.41
Children's social competence	2.22	.49



*The Relationships between Family Background, Family Strengths and Children's Social Competence*

The correlation matrix for all the variables included in this study is presented in Table 2. The findings revealed that none of the family background variables was significantly correlated with the children's social competence. Meanwhile, the total family strength was positively correlated with the children's social competence ( $r = .24, p < .01$ ). As for the sub-scales of the family strength, only two of three sub-scales were found to significantly correlate with the children's social competence, and these were togetherness ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ), and respectful communication ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ).

*Predictors of the Children's Social Competence*

To determine the factors that best predict the social competence of children, two regression models were conducted. In the first model, the family background variables were included, while the total family strength was added in the second model. In this way, the variance shown by both groups of variables could be compared. The results are summarized in Table 3. Model 1 for children's social competence (which accounted for 4%) did not reach significance,  $F(4,195) = 2.12, p = .08$ . These findings showed that all family background variables did not

contribute significantly and uniquely to the children's social competence. Meanwhile in Model 2, the variance shown in terms of the children's social competence increased when the total family strength was added, and the model became significant with  $F(5,194) = 3.91, p = .002$ , accounting for an additional 9% of the variance. The results illustrated that the children from families with higher levels of family strength tended to demonstrate greater social competence.

**DISCUSSION**

On the contrary to expectation, all the family background variables (parental age, parental education, number of children, family monthly income) were found to have no significant relationships with the children's social competence. The results of this study are in agreement with the findings of Anjli Panalal (2004), who found that there was no relationship between maternal education and age with children's social competence. The findings are also inconsistent with other previous research (e.g. Brody *et al.*, 1996; Larsson and Frisk, 1999; Anjli Panalal, 2004; Mistry *et al.*, 2004) which revealed that family background had influence on the level of children's social competence.

As expected, higher levels of family strength was associated with higher levels of children's social competence. This finding lends a support

TABLE 2  
Correlations among measures

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Respondents' Age	-							
2. Number of years of education	.04	-						
3. Family monthly income	.18*	.34**	-					
4. No. of children	.30**	-.10	.13	-				
5. Total family strength	-.03	.03	.06	.15*	-			
6. Shared values	-.03	-.01	.03	.11	.86**	-		
7. Togetherness	-.01	-.07	.07	.13	.86**	.57**	-	
8. Respectful communication	-.05	.01	.05	.15*	.84**	.68**	.55**	-
9. Social competence	.11	.11	.14	.13	.24**	.10	.26**	.27**

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

TABLE 3  
Predictors of children's social competence

Predictor Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	$\beta$	Beta	p	$\beta$	Beta	p
Respondents' age	.059	.056	.449	.090	.086	.227
Respondents' education	.295	.093	.217	.225	.071	.324
Number of children	.457	.110	.143	.223	.053	.460
Family monthly income	.001	.081	.290	.067	.067	.358
			R <sup>2</sup> = .04, F = 2.12			
Total family strength				.049	.228	.001**
						R <sup>2</sup> = .15, F = 4.74**

\*p <.05, \*\*p<.01

to the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and is congruent with the other studies (e.g. Schoenrock *et al.*, 1999; Bates *et al.*, 2003) which found that healthy family environment played a central role in the development of children's social competence. As for the dimensions of family strength, togetherness was found to be significantly correlated with children's social competence. This particular outcome is consistent with the previous studies which showed that the relationship between family connectedness and support with children's social competence (Schoenrock *et al.*, 1999; Lau and Kwok, 2003).

The present study also revealed that respectful communication was significantly associated with social competence. This result is consistent with the previous studies which found that positive communication was an important factor in increasing social competence, particularly among children (Coughlin and Vuchinich, 1996; Franco and Levitt, 1998; Smith, Prinz, Dumas and Laughlin, 2001). The communication between parents and children, in the effort to resolve problems and issues, will promote children's problem-solving abilities and social competence (Coughlin and Vuchinich, 1996).

Some limitations of the present study should also be noted. First, since the findings of the present study were based only on Malay families and the data were gathered only from the families with at least one child (between the age of 7 to 12 years) residing in FELDA schemes in the states of Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, the generalizability of these findings is therefore limited to the sample assessed. The study needs to be replicated with a more heterogeneous population such as families of various ethnic groups, structures, and social classes, to determine whether the findings hold true in the contexts with different cultural values, lifestyles, occupational variations, and opportunities. Second, the study assessed family strengths only from the parents' perspective. It would be interesting to compare the parents and children's perceptions on the family strength, and these might differ based on the different perspectives. Finally, due to the cross-sectional nature of the data retrieved, the conclusions about the direction of effects regarding the relation between family background and family strengths with children's social competence cannot be done. It would certainly be interesting to include more time points over longer period of time.

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