

Chinese Parents' Developmental Expectations and Preschoolers' Social Competence

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Introduction

Parental expectations are important component of parental belief systems. Parental expectations set the context of early socialization as they may serve as internal guidelines for parents' behavior (Edwards et al., 1996).

Previous research has shown that parental expectations about the timing of developmental skills are associated with child outcomes. Earlier developmental expectations were found to be related to better cognitive development (Hess et al., 1980) and social competence in children (Holloway et al., 1989). However, it is worth noting that parents from higher SES background tended to have earlier overall developmental expectations (Hess et al., 1980).

However, Chinese parents' developmental expectations have not been well explored. China has gone through rapid social and economical changes. What developmental expectations do Chinese parents hold for their young children in today's changing world? How do Chinese parents' expectations relate to their children's development?

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The purpose of the current study is to examine the relationships between parents' expectations for child social-emotional development and preschoolers' social competence among a Chinese sample.

We hypothesize that:

- Parents from higher SES families tend to have earlier expectations for their children; they are likely to attach more importance to child social-emotional development.
- Parents' earlier expectations are related to higher levels of social competence in children.
- Parents' perceived importance of social-emotional development is positively related to children's social competence.

Method

Participants

A total of 161 families from three cities in eastern China participated in the study. Children ranged in age from 3.08 to 6 years (mean age is 4.42 years), and 47.8% of them were girls. A total of 86% of the questionnaires were completed by mothers, while 14% by fathers. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of some parents' variables.

Measurements

Parental expectations were measured using the adapted Parental Expectations Questionnaire. Each item describes a skill that parents might expect their child to master in early childhood. It includes three subscales: Emotional Competence, Relational/Prosocial Skills, and Compliance. Parents rated at what age they expect their child to master each skill (5 response options), as well as how important each skill is for his/her child at preschool stage (5-point Likert Scale).

Parents rated the social competence of their children using the Social Competence subscale of Early School Behavior Rating Scale-Parent which is a 4-point Likert scale (ESBRS-P; Caldwell & Pianta, 1991).

Results

Table 1 below contains information on parents' age, education, and job type.

Table 1. *Parents' Demographic Information*

Variable	Parent	
	Mother	Father
Age (years)	31.93 (24 to 43)	33.83 (27 to 54)
Education:		
Middle school or lower	15.03%	11.26%
High school	18.95%	15.23%
Associate degree	34.64%	29.8%
Bachelor's degree	27.45%	35.76%
Master's degree	3.92%	7.28%
Doctoral degree		0.66%
Job:		
Non-technical or semi-technical worker	38.16%	10.39%
Technical worker	15.79%	18.18%
Semi-professional and public servant	22.37%	25.97%
Professional and officer	20.39%	42.21%
High-level professional and administer	3.29%	3.25%

SES and Parental Expectations

Parents' rated importance of relational/prosocial skills for their children at preschool stage was positively correlated with parental education and occupation (see Table 2). Parents with higher education and higher levels of occupation tend to value relational/prosocial skills more.

Parents' rated importance of emotional competence was positively correlated with maternal education. Parents' rated expected age of relational/prosocial skills was negatively correlated with fathers' education, which suggests when fathers in the families have higher education, parents tend to have earlier developmental expectations for child relational/prosocial skills (see Table 2).

Parental Expectations and Child Social Competence

Parents' rated expected age of emotional competence, relational/prosocial skills, and compliance were all negatively correlated with parent-reported child social competence (see Table 2). The results indicate that if a parent has earlier expectations for his/her child's social-emotional development, the child tends to have better parent-reported social competence.

Parents' rated importance of relational/prosocial skills was positively correlated with child social competence (see Table 2). Specifically, a child tends to have better parent-reported social competence when his/her parent values relational/prosocial skills more.

Table 2. *Correlations among Parental Expectations, Child Social Competence, and Parental Variables*

	Emotional Competence -Age	Emotional Competence -Importance	Relational/Prosocial-Age	Relational/Prosocial-Importance	Compliance -Age	Compliance -Importance
Child Social Competence	-.27***	.13	-.36***	.22**	-.28***	.05
Father's Education	.11	.06	-.003	.22**	.02	.03
Mother's Education	.07	.17**	-.07	.29***	.02	.09
Father's Job	-.08	.06	-.21**	.15*	-.12	.05
Mother's Job	.11	.08	-.03	.17**	.03	-.01

Note: ***. $p < .001$; **. $p < .05$; *. $p < .10$.

Discussion

According to the findings, parental education and occupation were related to parents' perceptions of the importance of child relational/prosocial skills development during preschool stage. The findings are consistent with Melvin Kohn's work revolving around the relationships between social class and psychological functioning in the family (Kohn, 1977). According to Kohn (1959), middle-class parents tend to value children's self-direction more than working-class parents (e.g., valuing children's internal standards for managing the relationships with other people and one's self). However, we did not observe significant relationships between parental education/occupation and parents' expectations for children's compliance, which was inconsistent with Kohn's theory that working-class parents were more likely to value obedience than middle-class parents (Kohn, 1959). It might be due to that most families in this sample were middle-class, and we were unable to detect such relationship due to lack of variability.

The findings showed that earlier expectations for children's social-emotional development were related to better parent-reported child social competence. The findings were consistent with discoveries by Holloway et al (1989). Parents who expect early development in their children's social-emotional development may be more likely to focus attention to this developmental area and reward or punish children's performance (Edwards et al., 1996; Holloway et al., 1989), and as a result, children may perform better in that area. However, we should keep in mind that children's social competence was reported by parents in this study.

To further explore relationships between parental expectations, parenting behaviors, and child outcomes, we will analyze other data we have gathered to gain a more complete picture of these complex relationships. Other data include videotaped observations of parent-child free play with toys and shared book reading, teacher-reported child social competence and child problematic behaviors measured by Child Behavior Checklist, and parent interviews.

