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## **Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate and Classroom Management**

Georgia State University

### ***Promoting Social Skills in Young Children***

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Sharing with others, comforting a friend in distress and cooperative play are all important activities of early childhood that require the ability to perspective-take about the psychological states of self and others. Psychological states include perceptions, emotions, desires, thoughts, and beliefs. The ability to understand psychological states is a skill that emerges in early childhood and is a key motivator of prosocial behavior (Hoffman, 2000). A number of studies have linked the development of psychological understanding to both social competence and positive social behaviors in young children (Iannotti, 1985; Miller, Eisenberg, Fabes, & Shell, 1996; Ginsberg, Ogletree, Silakowski, Bartels, Burk, & Turner, 2003). Facilitating the development of psychological understanding, therefore, should be a primary focus of social skills training efforts in preschool and early elementary school. Doing so may prevent multiple problems resulting from maladaptive social interactions including peer rejection, aggression, and social inhibition.

### ***How Does Psychological Understanding Develop in Young Children?***

A growing body of literature, including cross-cultural studies, suggests that young children follow a uniform pattern of development in their understanding of psychological states (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Tardif & Wellman, 2002). By the age of two, toddlers

have the capacity to role-take and can differentiate between their own desires, perceptions, and emotions and those of another person (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999). By the age of four, young children gain the capacity to understand the representational mental states of others, like beliefs and thoughts. In their analysis of young children's everyday discourse with parents and friends, Bartsch and Wellman (1995) found that children younger than 4-years of age do not conceive of people as having mental states that are separate from the real world. Instead, they are guided by a simple intentional view of mental states, such that 3-year-olds typically think that people's beliefs reflect reality in the external world. While 3-year-olds often appeal to desires in order to explain people's actions and emotions, 4- and 5-year-olds increasingly refer to thoughts and beliefs as central to explaining behavior.

### ***Psychological Understanding and the Importance of Everyday Discourse***

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that all psychological functions originate in social interactions and that mental processes begin as culturally supported external activities, which are ultimately internalized through the course of development. Hence, development takes place in the context of social interactions between more and less expert individuals (Dunn, 1996). With regard to the development of perspective-taking skills, conversation about psychological states with others, especially parents, siblings, friends, has been shown to be especially important. A number of studies have shown that young children's participation in discussions about psychological states and how these states affect behavior positively influences their ability to perspective-take (Ruffman, Slade, & Crowe, 2002; Hughes & Dunn, 1998; Peterson, 2000). This research supports a socio-cultural view of the development of psychological understanding, whereby

language in the context of social interactions helps children to not only understand psychological states, but also to differentiate between their own states and those of others.

### ***Psychological Understanding in the Context of the School Environment***

Studies of psychological understanding in the context of the school environment have shown that children with more advanced perspective-taking skills are more likely than their peers to be viewed by teachers as socially competent (Lalond & Chandler, 1995; Watson, Nixon, Wilson & Capage, 1999; Cassidy, Werner, Rourke, & Zubernis, 2003). Moreover, perspective-taking skills have been shown to be predictive of social preference by peers (Slaughter, Dennis, & Pritchard, 2002). In their study of psychological understanding and peer rejection in a sample of early elementary school-aged children, Badenes, Estevan, and Bacete (2000) found that unpopular children were more likely than their peers to show limitations in their perspective-taking skills as they got older. Chronic peer rejection may reduce opportunities for children to engage in the quality and frequency of social interactions necessary for the development of mature psychological understanding.

### ***Promoting Social Skills by Facilitating Psychological Understanding***

As the research literature reviewed here suggests, the ability to perspective-take about psychological states is not an isolated cognitive ability, but a social tool that allows children to ascribe thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and intentions to others. Although a number of social skills programs targeted toward young children (Shure, 2001) incorporate empathy training into their curriculum, future prevention efforts should strive

to focus on perspective-taking skills more broadly by teaching children about what psychological states are; how people's thoughts, feelings, desires, and beliefs can differ and even be in conflict; and by increasing opportunities for young children to participate in discussions about psychological states. By helping children to gain insight into the psychological workings of their own minds and the minds of others, they will be better able to engage in positive social interactions in both the home and school environments.

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