

# Social Problem-Solving Skills in Children: An Exploratory Study

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## Abstract –

**Background:** Social problem-solving skills have been identified as being crucial to social competency which is related to successful life adjustment. Researcher supported the idea that knowledge and use of social problem-solving skills are important aspects of mental health and behavioural adjustment. Therefore the need to explore social problem-solving skills arises as it has psychological and behavioural concern for the children well-being.

**Aim:** The objective of the present study is to explore social problem-solving skills in children while they face real-life problem situations. In addition, it explored the problem-solving styles followed by the children.

**Method:** The study employed an exploratory research design to explore social problem-solving skills in children. Data was collected with the help of interview method. The region selected for the study belongs to government schools of Mohali, Punjab. Seventh-grade children remained the subject under study.

**Results:** Results revealed that children are impulsive and reactive to the problem situations which indicated poor problem-solving skills in children. Children believed to follow impulsive and avoidance approach to the real-life problems rather than employing a rational approach and finding the best solutions to the problem.

**Conclusion:** The qualitative data analysis revealed children are very impulsive and aggressive in their approach while facing any problematic situation in school and at home.

**Keywords:** social problem-solving skills, real-life problematic situations, impulsive and rational approach, mental well-being

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*“Since the earliest period of our life was preverbal, everything depended on emotional interaction. Without someone to reflect our emotions, we had no way of knowing who we were.”*

— John Bradshaw

As Bradshaw (1988) mentioned the importance of emotional interaction human being are prior to the needs of social and emotional connections. For physical fitness, we need to maintain our daily diet and bodily movements. Like this for our mental well-being, we need to establish our human interactions with others as it is one of necessity to live a happy life. Our ability to establish and maintain positive social relationships is largely dependent on factors

such as being able to interpret social situations, care about others, regulate our anger and aggression, and being able to resolve conflicts in a constructive way. Children and adolescents who can master and apply these skills well are generally described as having good social competence, while those who cannot do so, are often characterized as children and young people with behavioural problems (Gundersen & Moynahan, 2006). Social competence in children depends upon various social skills which facilitate good social relations and better mental health. In social skills there is various kind of skills came under the subheading of basic social skills, advanced social skills, and skills dealing with emotions. The present study deals with the social problem-solving skills of children. Social problem-solving skills refer to the

cognitive and behavioural activities by which a person attempts to understand problems and find effective solutions or ways of coping with them. Children must be fully embodied in these skills. The efficient use of social problem-solving skills is a sign of emotional and social well-being. To what extent a person is good at applying his/her social problem-solving skills reflect the kind of interpersonal relations they have.

Researchers always concerned with the implications of social problem solving and its relation to the psychological well-being of children. Problem-solving skills have been defined by Yigiter (2013) as a cognitive-affective behavioural process in which an individual or group attempts to identify or discover effective solutions or means of coping for problems encountered in everyday life. In Malaysia, thinking skills and problem-solving skills were also emphasized in all the subjects taught in schools to prepare students to face challenges in their daily life and in the future. Kanekar and Sharma (2012) emphasized the role of social problem-solving skills for the mental well-being of children. Based on previous research with children, it was found that children who do not acquire problem-solving skills during early childhood years tend to be more aggressive towards other people and finally tend to deal with social problems such as, peer rejection, involved in criminal behaviour and having a mental health problem in adulthood.

When the concern for social problem solving came, the role of parents, peers and teachers need to be discussed. In social learning theory, Bandura and Walters (1977) agree with the behaviourist learning theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning. However, he adds two important ideas: a) Mediating processes occur between stimuli & responses b) behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning. The second point can be linked here when we talk about the development of social problem-solving skills. Parents and teachers act as a model for the children as what they observe and justify behaviour, they make it part of their personality. However, deficits in social problem-solving skills are also related to social information processing theory. Dodge (1986) described a social information processing model according to which children when faced with a situational cue, engage in four mental steps before enacting competent social behaviours:

1. Encoding of situational cues;
2. Representation and interpretation of these cues;
3. Mental search for possible responses to the situation;
4. Evaluation and selection of a response.

Social information processing involves engaging in these given four steps. Deficient information-processing resulting in aggressive behaviour might be learned through observation, reinforcement, and personal experience in various situations (Huesmann, 1988; Huesmann & Eron, 1989). This process starts early in life, usually within the children's family. Parents may serve as behavioural models and reinforcers. Parents' aggressiveness and the indifference or punitiveness of their child-rearing practices serves as models for children to observe and as opportunities to incorporate aggressiveness into their own behavioural repertoires (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Huesmann & Eron, 1989; Parke & Slaby, 1983). Thus parents have early influences on social problem-solving skills of children and it affects their social information processing.

## SOCIAL PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

Life is complex and dynamic, filled with many enriching experiences. These experiences are what make life meaningful. When some experiences become bothersome and troubling, a person may feel uncertain about how to deal with them, or a person may try to cope but nothing seems to work. That is when experiences become problems. But experiencing problems and finding ways to deal with them effectively also serve to make life meaningful and promote growth and development (Chang, D'Zurilla & Sanna, 2004). The term social problem solving refers to the process of problem-solving as it occurs in the natural environment or "real world" (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 1982). Alternatively, it may be conceptualized as a goal-directed sequence of cognitive and affective operations as well as behavioural responses for the purpose of adapting to internal or external demands or challenges (Heppner & Krauskopf, 1987). Therefore sometimes the term social problem solving and coping becomes interchangeable. Previous research supports this idea that problem-solving involves coping with the situations but it is not necessary that coping always involve problem-solving. The adjective social here in the social problem solving does not limit to the study of problems in any particular area, it involves problem-solving that demands adaptive functioning in real life situations. Thus social problem-solving deals with all type of problems that affect our cognitive behavioural functioning, involves impersonal problems, interpersonal problems, intrapersonal problems as well as community and societal problems (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). In the original model given by D'Zurilla and Goldfried (1971) which is further expanded by D'Zurilla and Nezu (1982, 1999), social problem solving consisted of two general, and partially independent components i.e. a) social problem-solving orientation (SPSO) b) social problem-solving skills (SPSS). In problem orientation, the focus remained on the metacognitive process which reflects a person's general beliefs, appraisals and feelings about problems in living as well as his or her own problem-solving ability. As concerned the

second component social problem-solving skills involves cognitive and behavioural activities by which a person attempts to solve a problem. It consists of four problem-solving skills a) problem definition and formulation b) generation of alternative solutions c) decision-making d) solution implementation (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). The further problem-solving model involves two elements one is a "problem" that demands an adaptive response from the individual but no effective response immediately apparent. The second element is a "solution" which referred to the situation-specific coping response and it is an outcome of the problem process (D'Zurilla and Goldfried, 1971).

Therefore problem-solving orientation and problem-solving skills both play a significant role in the effective social problem-solving ability. A person who is good in problem orientation and problem-solving skills will be good in their social relations and probably accepted by his/her social circle. When we talk about children especially the preadolescents they are in the developmental phase of their physical, mental and social development. In this age, the more prominent contributing factor to their growth and development is social acceptance and affection. The children who are socially accepted and get affection from their parents, teachers, and peers, good in their social skills and rich in social relations as compared to the children who are socially rejected. Early social experiences contributed to the development of the social problem-solving ability of children. Efficient problem-solving skills are a prediction of children's social and mental development. Generally speaking, deficits in social problem-solving ability are related to higher levels of psychological distress (D'Zurilla, Nezu, & Maydeu-Olivares, 2002). Some of these include Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and conduct disorder (CD) (Matthys, Cuperus, & van Engeland, 1999), depressive symptomatology (Nezu, 1985, 1986a, 1987), heroin abuse (Platt, Scura, & Hannon, 1973) and anxiety (Nezu, 1985, 1986b; Nezu & Carnevale, 1987). More specifically, social problem-solving skill deficits have been linked to aggression in several populations including children, adolescents, and adults. D'Zurilla, Chang, and Sanna (2003) showed that several dimensions of social problem-solving were associated with aggression, juvenile delinquency, and other risk-taking behaviours. Working respectively with college students and with a non-offending adult sample, D'Zurilla, Chang, and Sanna (2004) and McMurran, Blair, and Egan (2002) found that poorer problem-solving skills mediated the links between other variables such as self-esteem, anger, hostility, heavy drinking, and aggression. Empirical findings from earlier research had shown that aggressive children and adolescents are deficient while employing their problem-solving strategies. They do not detect intention cues accurately: rather, they are likely to see situations as hostile, to interpret other people's intentions in a hostile way, to consider few facts and to select inappropriate behavioural goals

aimed at aggressiveness (Lochman & Dodge, 1994; Quiggle, Garber, Panak, & Dodge, 1992; Richard & Dodge, 1982; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). They produce fewer problem-solving solutions. These solutions are qualitatively poor or ineffective, usually aggressive and at least not pro-social (Evans & Short, 1991; Lochman & Dodge, 1994; Mize & Cox, 1990; Quiggle et al., 1992; Slaby & Guerra, 1988).

For this reason, an exploratory study was conducted to analyze social problem-solving skills in children. In addition to this, social problem-solving strategies followed by children during their preadolescent phase have also been discussed. Thus an insight can be developed to find the ways children dealing with their interpersonal problems. Moreover, it makes the researchers think about developing interventions to remediate social problem-solving skills in children.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In behavioural sciences when researchers talk about individual traits and behaviour it becomes very difficult to be objective and specific. Even some questions like how individual deal with their social problems, what cognitive and behavioural process is involved in solving a social problem and what kind of strategies children use and what works behind their strategies and what factors affect their social skills etc., questions like this remained unanswered. When questions like this came in front of the researcher, here the exploratory method of research gives direction to the researcher to uncover the behaviour related inquiries in qualitative terms. Exploratory research provides a greater understanding of the problem and moreover, it is initial research conducted to clarify and define the nature of the problem occurred in the natural environment.

In the present study, the researcher implied exploratory research method to analyze social problem-solving skills in children along with their strategies to deal with their real-life problem situations. The draft of a plan layout was prepared by the researcher. It consists of steps to frame interview questions and develop a "Think Sheet" which focus on identifying the kind of social problem-solving skills, how children deal with their problems, where they face most of the conflict and how they feel about their behaviour in the given conflict situation. These concerns were kept in mind while framing the think sheet for children. Only those questions were kept in the think sheet that children can respond and understand easily. The most important issue remained in the research design was to identify the problem situations in children. Here the role of the researcher remained prominent and scaffolding played its role. Researcher prompted the children by giving examples of real-life problem situations faced by children.

## Method

Qualitative research provides direction to the researcher to explore various unanswered questions about social problem-solving skills. Qualitative research is a form of interpretative inquiry in which researchers make interpretations of what they see, hear, and understand (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative researchers tend to employ interviews that are less structured and which offer interviewees the opportunity to expand their answers and give complex accounts of their experiences. Such semi-structured interviews (typically referred to as either semi-structured or open/unstructured) often have distinct theoretical frameworks underpinning them. This means that they have a theory-informed view of the person and the experiences they are trying to understand, and they typically employ the use of a specific approach to data analysis (Hopf, 2004). Thus in the present study researcher followed the interview method to analyse the responses and problems situations of children.

Interviews were conducted to explore social problem-solving skills in children. Interview questions were asked with the objective of finding children's real-life problem situations, what strategies they used in those particular situations and their feelings during the situation and after the situation. Moreover how they think about their behaviour in that situation was also explored.

## Research questions

Research questions are like a door to the research field under study (Flick, 2014). It is important when you start your research to decide what problems need to be addressed. In qualitative research, different research questions are formulated on the basis of the type of study or different qualitative approaches. In the present study following research questions were formulated-

1. What kind of problematic situations do children face in their daily life?
2. How children respond or behave in various real-life problematic situations?

## Sample

In this study, the researcher purposefully selected sites and individuals that serve to understand the problem and research questions. As Miles and Huberman (1994) referred a discussion about participants and sites might include four identified aspects: the setting (where the research will take place), the actor (who will be observed or interviewed), the events (what the actions will be observed or interviewed doing), and the process (the evolving nature of events undertaken by the actors within the setting). Accordingly, this study also involved these four identified aspects as seventh-

grade students of purposefully selected government schools of Mohali District, Punjab was taken to analyze their social problem-solving skills with the help of unstructured interviews. Three schools remained the sites for data collection. Total 70 children participated in the study. Prior permission from the school principals was taken.

## Tools and Techniques

In qualitative interviews, the researcher conducted face to face interviews with participants. Interviews here involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants. In this study interviews with the students were conducted on the basis of a "*think sheet*" i.e. a kind of interview schedule developed by the researcher. In this "*think sheet*," open-ended questions were kept related to the different kind of problematic situations and children behaviour or approach towards them. Interview method remained the primary source of data collection. To analyze the interview responses of the participants, qualitative data analysis has been used. Content analysis is one of the classical procedures for analyzing textual material no matter where this method comes from- ranging from media products to interview data (Flick, 2014). One of its essential features is the use of categories, which are often derived from theoretical models: categories are brought up to empirical material and not necessarily developed from it, although they are repeatedly assessed against it and modified if necessary. Above all the goal here is to reduce the material (Flick, 2014). The content analysis here serves the purpose of the categorization of verbal or behavioural data for the purpose of classification, summarization, and tabulation. It was interpretative in nature.

## Procedure

The researcher made the children comfortable and builds rapport with them. Then the researcher asked about some of their particulars that have been kept confidential. As children were feeling comfortable then they were asked to think about a real-life problem situation where they feel very difficult to make a rational decision or where they were not able to handle the situation and it became worse. The problem situation can be at home, school or anywhere in the playground and park. They were asked to think about only one problem situation. As children now able to visualize that particular situation, the interviewer asked questions about the problem situation. Every child came with a particular problem. Some children were not able to visualize any problem so they were not included as participants. Some children visualize two or more problems they confronted. On the basis of the problem they visualize, the interviewer asked questions related to the problem-solving skills they used in that particular situation.



Some of the interview questions were based on the second component of problem-solving model i.e. social problem-solving skills (SPSS) involve cognitive and behavioural activities involved in solving a real-life problem situation and find an effective response to the situation. The SPSS consist of a) problem definition and formulation b) generation of alternative solutions c) decision-making d) solution implementation (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). Each question in the interview was based on each particular skill of the SPSS.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed manually. The observed responses of the participants were noted down. The responses of the participants were given a thorough reading by the investigator so that any idea or thought can't be missed here. After providing an insightful reading of the data, a summary of responses had been prepared. Each subject's responses were summarized on a response sheet. Moreover, a keyword list on the basis of the summarized responses was also prepared. With the help of summarized response sheet and keyword list, analyses had been done. To develop insight into the social problem-solving skills in children various response sheets were kept together and analyzed. On the basis of analysis different categories of responses were developed. Categories were named on the ground of common responses given by the participants. The developed categories were named peer problems, problems with siblings, problems with parents and teachers.

The furthermore common behaviour shown by the children also analyzed with the help of prepared response sheet. Most of the times, children responded to the situation in an impulsive and hostile manner. The keyword list helps to conclude the problem-solving approach followed by the children.

## RESULTS

With the analysis of data findings of the study, it was found that children hardly use any social problem-solving skills in their real-life problem situations. Children are immediately reacting and impulsive while dealing with the problem situations. They believe in taking revenge and react in the same manner as the other person did. They did not follow even a single step of social problem-solving skills which reflects poor problem-solving skills in children. The social problem-solving strategies children would prefer to use is hitting, kicking, bullying, shouting by parents and teachers, use of abusive language by someone and hostile behaviour by friends. Most of the children mentioned playground problems where they were intentionally and unintentionally harmed by someone and they react aggressively over there. Moreover, many social dilemmas also came into the light where the situation demands an effective

response from the participant which favoured both the parties.

For better understanding, a narrative has been discussed below to get insight into the problem situations that children face. Moreover, it gives a glimpse of the interview questions of a "Think Sheet" which were asked by the children:

Before the interview researcher asked children to think about a problem situation they recently face where adapting response and a social decision was required.

*Interviewer: where were you?*

*Respondent: At school*

*Interviewer: what happened?*

*Respondent: After summer vacations holidays when I came to the school my friends met me in a warm manner. I was very happy. But my close friend did not talk to me and even did not respond to my hello. I feel very bad and feeling helpless to talk to him.*

*Interviewer: what did you do?*

*Respondent: I was observing him till lunch break and didn't take initiative to talk to him. But later he came to me and hugs me. I was very happy at that moment.*

Here the problematic situation arises as the child's friend did not talk to him as he came after summer vacations and this leads to the arousal of the problematic situation for the children. Thus this kind of social problems has been discussed by the children. On the basis of data analysis, the social problems which children face were categorized into three subcategories as playground problems like hitting by the ball, cheating in games and use of abusive language during play, get jealous by someone. The other subcategory is classroom problems like the hostile behaviour of friends, misunderstanding of talks, bullying etc. At home, children mentioned they have argued with parents and physical and verbal fights with siblings. In another way, social problems of children can be categorized into parent-child conflict, teacher-student conflicts, peer conflicts etc. Children mentioned their conflict with parents and siblings as angry behaviour of parents, irritating and arguing approach of siblings and physical fights, the teacher-student conflict involved impulsive behaviour shown of teachers. On the other side, peer conflicts comprised physical fight and verbal abuse.

The problem-solving approach which children preferred to follow during the problematic situation is impulsive and avoidant one. They did not follow the rational approach to solve their problems. The

impulsive and avoidant approach denotes deficits in problem-solving skills in children which have serious consequences for children's behaviour in long term. The research suggested social problem-solving deficits leads to aggression, anxiety, conduct disorder, and other serious behavioural problems (Lochman & Lampron, 1986). Moreover, social problem solving skills have produced positive behaviour and social competence and reduce negative behaviour such as conduct problems, aggressive behaviour, stress etc. (Dubow, Tisak, Hrvshko & Reid, 1991; Biggam & Power, 1999; Pakaslahti, Karjalainen, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2002; Eskin, Savk, Uslu & Kucukaydogan, 2014; Coker et al. 2014; Huang et al. 2014).

Therefore it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to identify and remediate this kind of behaviour in children in time. Moreover, they can help the children by showing the right kind of behaviour in their dealings with them. Parents and teachers can rationalize their behaviour rather than encouraging the impulsive and aggressive responses of children.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Children's problem-solving skills in everyday life are the most important determinant of their emotional well-being (Rubin and Rose-Krosner, 1992). Social problem solving is one of the more sophisticated subcategories of social cognition. When we encounter a difficult social situation, we may utilize one or more of the following processes a) discuss the problem and its constraints, and generate a collection of possible plans of action ('alternative thinking') b) consider the possible consequences that result from each plan of action ('consequential thinking') c) plan a method to achieve the favoured outcome ('means-end thinking') and finally, d) decide whether we have the resources to act accordingly to achieve the favoured outcome (Howells, 1986). The ability to use the given proceedings reflects the efficient use of social problem-solving skills. The findings of the present study revealed that preadolescents are more prone to aggressive and impulsive responses in problem situations. The cognition of the children didn't allow them to think about some rational behaviour. Rather they justify their aggressive strategies in the problem situation. Moreover, researcher submitted there is a significant relationship between aggression, the lack of social problem-solving and problem behaviours, and aggression and behavioural problems often get along with maladjustment or failure in social problem solving (Lochman & Dodge, 1994; Lochman, Wayland, & White, 1993; Mize & Cox, 1990; Quiggle et. al., 1992; Pakaslahti & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2002). In social problem solving it is generally observed that children who use the pro-social methods are successful in establishing and maintaining friendships with their peers and more cooperative at home and school (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). However, the use of the antisocial

solution methods in fixing social problems and the failure in social problem-solving leads to maladjustment such as the exclusion of the children by their peers, more aggressive behaviors and passive-withdrawals (Rubin & Rose- Krasnor, 1992; Webster-Stratton, 1999). Children's behaviour in the problem situations reflects their way of dealing with the real-life problems. They would like to behave in a socially appropriate manner rather than impulsive behaviour. Yet their cognition and behaviour directed them towards only impulsive response, not a rational one. During the problem situation, they are not able to handle their emotions and just react. Therefore cognitive behaviour interventions need to be implemented to train children's behaviour so that their impulsive approach to the problems can be replaced with the rational one. Moreover, there must be a concern for the parents and teacher's training so that they can be trained to deal with the behavioural problems in children in a right way. The social learning theory proposed children imitate the behaviour what they observe in their environment. Moreover, Children readily imitated behaviour exhibited by an adult model in the presence of the model (Bandura & Huston, 1961). Parents and teachers are a model for the children behaviour so their behaviour must be rational in itself.

Children believed to be impulsive and reactive to the situations and justify them. But the result of the present study has definitely some limits as it involved less number of participants in the study restricted to a specific region. Unstructured interviews remained the source of data collection from the children which involved only the questions related to the identification of problem situations and their response to these situations. Further content analysis of the data was done manually by the researcher following a systematic procedure. Still, researcher incorporates all the means to explore social problem-solving skills in children with the cooperation and sharing spirit of the children during the study.

Even findings also revealed children have more conflict with their peers and school conflicts seriously influence their psychological well-being. Peer acceptance and support remained the key factor while exploring different social problems in children. Children are more affectionate and conscious towards their friends. In different real-life situations related to friends, children prefer to behave rationally and they didn't justify their wrong behaviour. Here school and teachers can help the children to develop good relations with peers. School can initiate this by conducting co-curricular activities like drama, debate, discussions, role play etc which facilitate children's social problem-solving skills and nourish their relations with different children. Moreover, it will help to make them social.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In the Indian education system, the most focused area of research and interest is academic achievement. Less interest has been shown in the area of mental well-being. The emphasis on academic achievement even leads to various kinds of problems in children. Parents and teachers have apprehension only for the academic scores of children. They are not even aware of the children's behavioural problems and even ignore behavioural issues in children. If children have a conflict with their parents, teachers, peers up to a level, there must be a concern for their behaviour. Children who are poor in their social skills leads to problems like aggression, antisocial behaviour and other disorders as mentioned by DSMV i.e. conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. Therefore it is necessary to develop social skills in children specifically social problem-solving skills as it is one of the great predictors of good future relationship with parents, teachers and their life partners. Furthermore, children justify their impulsive and aggressive behaviour. Therefore concern for the children's behaviour arises. Here the role of parents and teachers is most important as they play a very important role in the behavioural learning of children. Even parents and teachers must be fully aware of the behavioural tendencies of children i.e. why they behave like this, what their dealings in real life show, how's their relationship with peers, siblings and with elders. If parents and teachers ignore their wrong behaviour or encourage impulsive behaviour children will make it part of their behaviour. As the psychologist asserts positive reinforcement always make the behavioural response strong. Thus positive reinforcement whether it is negative behaviour or positive it will make the given response more strong. Therefore home and the school must be conscious while dealing with children's behaviour and attentive towards their behaviour.

Social problem-solving skills are essentially a significant predictor of children's social and mental well-being. In India, it is required to be concerned with the children mental health rather than their academic scores. In the education system teacher must be trained the way children of 21<sup>st</sup> century deserve. They must be well equipped with social and life skills so that they can help the children in a real sense to live a better future. Along with effective teaching methods, teachers must be enriched with professional skills to deal with the current demands of children's behaviour. Moreover, the curriculum here also can help to develop social problem-solving skills. Different co-curricular activities serve the purpose of developing social skills in children. In addition, the role of parents can't be skipped while we discuss the development of social skills in children. As the home is the first school of the child and mother is the first teacher thus social values take their way from home and family. Therefore the development of social

problem-solving skills is the mutual responsibility of parents and teachers.

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