**Factors That Can Determine the Social-Emotional Development of Children**

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As defined by the APA (American Psychological Association) Dictionary of Psychology, social development is “the gradual acquisition of certain skills, attitude, relationships, and behavior that enable the individual to interact with others and to function as a member of society” (APA, 2023). Emotional development is defined as, “a gradual increase in the capacity to experience, express, and interpret the full range of emotions and in the ability to cope with them appropriately” (APA, 2023). For children, these two types of development have great importance in their lifelong abilities in many different areas of life, such as personal interactions with others and general behavior. A healthy social/emotional development in children can lead to a better standard of living later in life, therefore it is important to be aware of what different factors affect this.

Factors that affect SED (Social-emotional development) can range from family background/economic standing, the type of environment the child grows up in, the child’s relationship with their parents, marital problems, and what has been discovered more recently to have an effect- the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic, having begun in the early months of 2020, remains too recent of an event for it to be studied very well. Therefore, it is more difficult to determine the link between SED and the online learning that began as a result of the pandemic. Online learning was a period of time in which all students were required to stay and study from home, missing out on more than a year’s worth of in person schooling. For the younger children that learn important processes of development during school time, in an environment of socialization with other children and adults, the loss of crucial beginning school years may have lasting effects on their development.

Research on SED has been considerably done, with papers on the subject documenting studies on several different factors. In relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, there is not as many resources available, due to its recentness. The study that has been done take place through a short period of time. The research papers that will be presented are ones that provide important findings on a range of different factors that may affect the SED of a developing child. These papers will highlight the importance of a healthy social and emotional development, and how the alternative can lead to negative effects on other important aspects of a growing child’s life, such as education, behavior, and relationships with others.

The type of environment a child grows up in may determine the future social and emotional development. As presented in “Inequality in skills for learning: do gaps in children’s socio-emotional development widen over time according to family background?” the economic and familial aspects in a child’s life during early stages of development goes hand in hand with SED at an older age. van Poortvliet asserts that “This study assesses differences in children's socio-emotional development according to family background, and whether early gaps in these skills widen across childhood…” (van Poortvliet, 2021, p.1). The results of this study found that there is a vast difference in the social-emotional development depending on the child’s socio-economic status (SES), starting from an early age. The gap in the SED of these children continue into adolescence, with low-income children facing more difficulties compared to their higher income peers. This study was carried out with participants starting at the age of 3 until they reach 14. It is established by van Poortvliet (2021, p. 17) that a high SED, means “a child who can sustain attention, regulate emotions, inhibit impulsive behavior, and relate appropriately to adults and peers is able to take advantage of learning opportunities in the classroom, and beyond.” A gap in the SED of children in the same age range can translate to educational inequalities in the classroom and an overall negative effect on several different aspects in life.

The role of a father is another factor that has an influence on developing social-emotional abilities in a child. Saerom Park and Boram No delve into different types of father-child interactions, and how the SED of a child is affected by the type of interaction they may have with their father. There was an analysis of 1,469 families, in which they were organized into three different groups of father-child interaction, “based on the quantitative level of daily interaction” (Park et. al, 2021, p.1). 7.85% of the relationships were classified as high-interaction, 51.73% as medium-interaction, and 40.42% as low-interaction. The results of the study proved that the children from the high-interaction group presented a higher self-esteem compared to the other groups, as well as a higher subjective happiness in comparison to the low-interaction group. Park et. al state “The higher the father’s happiness, the higher the father-child interaction…the more positively a father perceived the work-family balance, the higher the probability of belonging to a higher-level interaction group.” (Park et. al, 2021, p.15). Positive emotions on the part of the father are more significant toward the type of interaction, as opposed to more negative emotions.

In addition to parent-child interaction, the mental state plays a part in the SED of a child. According to Prady et. al (2021), “Maternal psychological distress in primary care and association with child behavioral outcomes at age three”, researchers tested if a mother with or without a common mental disorder (both treated and untreated) can cause an increased risk of SED difficulties. 1078 women were a part of the research project, from pregnancy to the child at 3 years of age. The women were classified as not having a mental disorder through pregnancy and 2 years after delivery (70.1%), having a treated mental disorder (6.2%), and an untreated mental disorder (23.7%). The work of Prady et. al (p.11) indicates that “In this multi-ethnic city-based birth cohort the 3-year-old offspring of women who potentially have untreated anxiety and depression are at higher risk for socio-emotional and behavioral problems than the children of unaffected women, and have an equally elevated risk compared to children of mothers treated for their disorder.”. The study provides further insight on the very diverse and distinct factors that go into a healthy social-emotional development. Not only is the level of interaction, and type of relationship, between a parent and child important, but the mental state of the parent can be equally as important.

As could be assumed, family life is one of the greatest determining factors for SED. The two studies, “The influence of perceived parenting styles on socio-emotional development from pre-puberty into puberty.” and “Family Disruption and Social, Emotional and Behavioral Functioning in Middle Childhood” delve into the various environments that may be created at home that will in turn have a negative effect on the development of a child. An optimal parenting style, characterized by high warmth and low control, is better than any other parenting style, as it produces a healthier social-emotional development. Ong et. al state “Perceived optimal parental care resulted in less internalizing and externalizing problems in early adulthood in comparison to non-optimal parental care styles.” (Ong et. al, 2018, p.1). Additionally, a disruption in the family, such as a divorce or separation, can lead to disruptions in SED and behavioral problems. Eriksen et. al determine “Results from ordinary least squares (OLS) models showed that relative to children from intact families, children from disrupted families had higher problem scores on BASC-2 subscales Externalizing Problems, Study Skills and School Problems…” (Eriksen et. al, 2017, p.1). In regard to developing social and emotional skills and behavior, it is always better for a child to grow up in a secure family environment, as well as be parented in a healthy and non-authoritarian way.

Due to the more recent situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is also a necessity to discover how more than a year away from socializing and a school environment may affect a child’s SED, as much of their development comes from interacting with other children and their teachers. Due to the recentness of the pandemic, research on the subject is not as extensive as other factors relating to SED. The study “Missing Early Education and Care During the Pandemic: The Socio-Emotional Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Young Children.” is one that researched the negative effects on emotion that come with prolonged periods of time at home. Due to the closure of early childhood education and care (ECEC), most children “missed their friends, playing with other children, and the routine and structure of ECEC and school settings.” (Egan et. al, 2021, p.1). The study was made up of a survey of 506 parents with children ranging from 1-10 years old. The loss of educational settings and the opportunity to interact and play with other children their age, resulted in “tantrums, anxiety, clinginess, boredom, and under-stimulation.” (Egan et. al, 2021, p.1). It is too early to tell what the long-term effects going into adolescence would be, and further research is required to provide a more in-depth study of this topic.

The studies that have been discussed give an overview and general look into the topic of SED in children, which has been well researched in itself. The topic of Covid-19 and its effect on the SED of children is not as well researched, due to the recency of the situation. From the research and published papers available, it can be determined that the development of a child’s social and emotional skills is a long and complex process that spans all of childhood and well into adolescence. The ability for a person to regulate and process emotions, interact with others, and understand the emotions of others, is an important skill that may go on to affect and determine other parts of a child’s life, including education. Therefore, it is important to have an accurate and complete understanding of the topic as well as the many factors that affect it and relate to it.

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