

## Situational Approach to the Assessment of Social Competence in Children

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The present study attempted to generate and evaluate a taxonomy of the situations and tasks most likely to lead deviant children to experience social difficulties. In Study 1, elementary school teachers and clinicians were asked to notice such situations as they occurred. The outcome was a 44-item Taxonomy of Problematic Social Situations for Children. This survey was administered to teachers of 45 socially rejected children and 39 adaptive children. The survey was found to have high internal consistency and high test-retest reliability. Six situation types emerged as factors in analyses: Peer Group Entry; Response to Peer Provocations; Response to Failure; Response to Success; Social Expectations; and Teacher Expectations. Teachers rated the rejected group as having more problems than the adaptive group in each situation, but particularly in Response to Peer Provocations and Teacher Expectations. In Study 2, 15 items within the six factors were presented in hypothetical format to 39 clinic-referred rejected aggressive children and 34 adaptive children, who were asked to role-play their responses. The items, in particular the provocation items, again differentiated the two groups. Sex and age differences were also found. The usefulness of this taxonomy in a three-step model of clinical assessment is proposed.

Research on the assessment of social competence in elementary school children has proliferated recently (Rubin, 1983), in part because of its potential utility in the design of preventive interventions for socially incompetent children. A number of assessment procedures have become available (Asher & Hymel, 1981), including peer sociometric interviews and teacher rating instruments (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Connolly & Doyle, 1981; Gesten, 1976; Kohn & Rosman, 1972; Rubin & Clark, 1983). These assessments have proven useful in identifying children who are socially incompetent and at risk for later maladaptive outcomes (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Trost, 1973). However, these assessments have not contributed a great deal to the planning of treatments for each identified

child, because they identify neither the social contexts that present problems for a particular child nor the component process skills in which the child is deficient.

Recently theorists of social skills intervention planning (Dodge & Murphy, 1984; McFall & Dodge, 1982) have argued that a three-step assessment process must precede any effective treatment plan for a socially incompetent child. The first step is to identify the incompetent child (which previous assessment procedures seem to be able to do). The second step is to identify the particular social contexts, tasks, or situations in which the incompetent child displays deviant behavior. The third step is to identify the source of the incompetence by assessing the child's component skills in each of the problematic social situations. The goals of the present study were (a) to identify the situational contexts that lead incompetent children to experience social difficulties and (b) to design an assessment instrument for use in the second step (situational assessment) of treatment planning for socially incompetent children.

The importance of assessing social competence in specific situations (rather than through global ratings) has been emphasized

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by the behavior-analytic approach of Goldfried and d'Zurilla (1969). They conducted an empirically based situational analysis and found it useful in assessing social incompetence in college men and in planning treatments for this population. McFall and his colleagues have used a similar approach to identify situation-specific social skills deficits in delinquent adolescent boys (Freedman, Rosenthal, Donahoe, Schlundt, & McFall, 1978) and girls (Gaffney & McFall, 1981). In conducting assessments, these researchers first generated a taxonomy of problematic social situations for their targeted populations and then evaluated competence within each situation.

In the past, child clinicians have sometimes arbitrarily or intuitively determined the situational contexts (e.g., peer group entry or conflict resolution) in which they then train component process skills such as problem solving (Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976). The present study attempted to generate and evaluate systematically a taxonomy of those situations most likely to lead deviant elementary school children (Grades 2-4) to experience social difficulties. Consistent with recent conceptualizations of the peer context (Hartup, *in press*), the problematic situations examined in the present study were viewed as social tasks for the child, in which the child's response to the task is assessed as either competent or incompetent. This taxonomy is clearly not a taxonomy of all social situations encountered by children; rather, it lists only those that possibly lead to peer conflicts.

## Study 1

### *Method*

#### *Construction of the Taxonomy*

The first step was to generate a taxonomy of specific problematic social situations. Toward this end, 50 elementary school teachers (Grades 1-5) in a small midwestern county school district and 6 child clinical psychologists (university faculty and graduate students) were asked to identify frequently occurring social situations that they thought were likely to eventuate in peer relationship problems among school children.

Sixty-four nonredundant situations were generated and then transcribed into a uniform format, so that each was worded as a conditional premise, for example, when one child tries to join in with a group of peers who are already playing a game, and they tell him or her to wait

until they are ready. Each situation was then classified by another clinical psychologist into one of the following eight mutually exclusive categories (examples in parentheses): (a) responding to peer group norms (when this child is working on a class project that requires sharing or cooperation); (b) being identified as different from one's peers (when peers notice that this child is somehow different, such as walking funny or wearing peculiar clothes); (c) attempting to initiate entry into the peer play group (when this child wants to play with a group of peers and they tell him or her to wait); (d) responding to an ambiguous provocation by a peer (when a peer takes this child's turn in a game); (e) being excluded or rejected by the peer group (when peers have started a club and not included this child); (f) being identified as superior to the peer group (when this child has won a game against a peer); (g) responding to failure (when this child loses a game against peers); and (h) responding to negative statements about oneself made by peers (when peers call this child a bad name). These categories were chosen on the bases of their importance in previous literature on children's peer relations (e.g., Higgins & Parsons, 1983) and inspection of the items themselves. The situations were then presented to 50 male and 50 female undergraduates, who read each situation and sorted it into one of the eight categories. The undergraduates were able to classify 68% of the 64 situations into a generally agreed on category (by a consensus of more than 60% of the raters). The unclassified situations were dropped. The resulting Taxonomy of Problematic Social Situations for Children (TOPS) contained 44 items in eight categories.<sup>1</sup>

The next step in the present study was to identify two groups of children, one socially rejected, the other socially adaptive, and to administer the TOPS to their teachers, in order to determine the factor structure, reliability, and validity of this instrument when used as a teacher rating device.

#### *Child Group Selection*

Sociometric interviews were conducted in the fall in 23 classrooms containing 620 boys and girls in Grades 2, 3, and 4 of 10 public elementary schools in a largely white, midsize, midwestern community. Interviews were conducted in classroom groups under the direction of an adult female experimenter, with two other adults helping individual children as needed. The positive nomination and roster and rating procedures suggested by Asher and Dodge (1984) were used, as were the procedures suggested by Asher and Hymel (1981) to minimize the impact of the procedures on respondents.<sup>2</sup> Children were given a roster of all the other children in their classroom and asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5, from *not at all* to *very much*, how much they liked each peer. Next, children were asked to circle the names of three peers whom they liked most.

<sup>1</sup> A copy of the TOPS instrument is available from the first author.

<sup>2</sup> Because this instrument was administered to all of the children in a classroom and contained no negative nomination procedures, parental permission was not required for children to participate.

On the basis of these interviews, groups of socially rejected and socially adaptive children were selected. Acceptance scores were computed for each child as the standardized frequency of liking nominations (population  $M$  of zero,  $SD$  of one), and rejection scores were computed as the standardized frequency of low ratings (number 1 on the scale). Liking rating scores were computed as the standardized mean rating from all peers. Socially rejected children were identified as those whose acceptance score and liking rating score were each less than zero, and whose rejection score was greater than zero.<sup>3</sup> From this large pool, the 45 most extremely rejected children who also received permission from their parents to participate in a treatment program for social behavior problems were selected as targets for assessment (7% of the population). This group had mean standardized sociometric scores as follows: acceptance scores,  $M = -.66$ ,  $SD = .52$ ; liking ratings,  $M = -1.06$ ,  $SD = .79$ ; and rejection scores,  $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = .90$ . Of this group, 79% were boys, and 56% were second-graders. The third- and fourth-graders were grouped together in subsequent analyses.

A group of socially adaptive children was selected on the basis of opposite sociometric criteria, with the goal of finding children who were matched to the rejected children in sex and classroom of origin. This adaptive group of 39 children had mean standardized sociometric scores as follows: acceptance scores,  $M = .77$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ; liking ratings,  $M = .83$ ,  $SD = .50$ , and rejection scores,  $M = -.79$ ,  $SD = .50$ . Written parental permission was provided for the 84 children in this study.

#### *Respondents and Procedures*

The procedure consisted of having each of 23 teachers (3 of whom were male; none of whom had participated in the generation of the TOPS) complete the 44-item TOPS for each of the target children in his or her classroom, once in the fall (October) and once again 6 months later (April). Teachers were not aware of the outcome of the sociometric screening. For each item, teachers were asked to rate on a 1-5 scale how much of a problem this situation was for the target child and how likely the child would be to respond in an inappropriate manner in this situation. The scale was as follows: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *usually*, and 5 = *almost always*. Teachers were paid \$5 each for their participation.

### *Results*

#### *Factor Analyses*

Factor analyses by a principal components method with varimax rotation of factors were conducted for the fall item scores. These analyses yielded a six-factor solution with eigenvalues each greater than 1. Even though the majority of the variance was accounted for by the first factor (possibly because extreme subject groups were used), the six factors roughly conformed to several of the eight a priori categories, with the following

factors emerging, based on items with loadings greater than .30: (a) Peer Group Entry, in which the child's task is to initiate inclusion into the peer group (items from the original group entry factor as well as the "being excluded from the peer group" factor); (b) Response to Peer Provocations, in which the task is to preserve self-integrity while maintaining peer status (items from the original provocation factor, the "being identified by peers as being different" factor, and the negative peer statements factor); (c) Response to Failure (items from the original factor of the same name); (d) Response to Success (items from the original factor of responses to being identified as superior); (e) Social Expectations, in which clear social norms exist for the child's behavior (some of the items from the original peer group norms factor); and (f) Teacher Expectations, in which the teacher has established clear norms for child behavior (also some of the items from the peer group norms factor). The number of items in each factor is listed in Table 1. Scores on these items were summed to yield factor scores.

#### *Internal Consistency of Factor Scores*

The six factors were each found to be highly internally consistent, as assessed by Cronbach's coefficient alphas (see Table 1). The alphas ranged from .89 to .97 (all  $ps < .001$ ), and the alpha for the 44-item total score was .98. Because these alphas may be inflated by the use of extreme subject groups, alphas were also calculated separately for each status group. Even with these restricted groups, all the alphas were high, ranging from .81 to .94. The alphas for the 44-item total scores were .96 for each status group.

#### *Stability of Responses Over Time and Replicability of Factors*

The test-retest Pearson correlations for each item and each factor score were calcu-

<sup>3</sup> Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli (1982) have suggested the use of negative nominations in selecting socially rejected children. Asher and Dodge (1984) found that the standardized frequency of low ratings could be substituted for the negative nomination score without significant alteration of the sample selected, so this less aversive procedure was used in this study.

Table 1  
TOPS Factors: Group Differences and Reliability Group Means and Standard Deviations

Factor (and no. of items)	Group												F score for status main effect									
	Alpha						Rejected							Adaptive								
	All children			Rejected children			Adaptive children			Boys				Girls			Boys			Girls		
	M	SD	SD	M	SD	SD	M	SD	SD	M	SD	SD		M	SD	SD	M	SD	SD			
1. Peer Group Entry (5)	.95	.88	.89	3.46	0.82	0.82	3.33	1.0	1.0	1.72	0.46	0.46	1.86	0.61	0.61	1.86	0.61	0.61	99.07			
2. Response to Provocation (10)	.97	.94	.89	3.87	0.85	0.85	3.43	0.94	0.94	1.92	0.51	0.51	2.06	0.53	0.53	2.06	0.53	0.53	111.77			
3. Response to Failure (9)	.95	.91	.81	3.12	0.94	0.94	2.67	0.68	0.68	1.66	0.45	0.45	1.83	0.45	0.45	1.83	0.45	0.45	52.49			
4. Response to Success (3)	.89	.84	.87	2.61	0.91	0.91	1.78	0.50	0.50	1.40	0.40	0.40	1.57	0.43	0.43	1.57	0.43	0.43	28.71			
5. Social Expectations (11)	.94	.89	.90	2.77	0.80	0.80	2.45	0.46	0.46	1.45	0.40	0.40	1.57	0.43	0.43	1.57	0.43	0.43	74.62			
6. Teacher Expectations (6)	.95	.82	.91	3.73	0.76	0.76	2.73	0.45	0.45	1.64	0.58	0.58	1.36	0.44	0.44	1.36	0.44	0.44	174.10			
Total (44)	.98	.96	.96	3.29	0.71	0.71	2.81	0.43	0.43	1.68	0.37	0.37	1.75	0.40	0.40	1.75	0.40	0.40	125.70			

Note: TOPS = Taxonomy of Problematic Social Situations for Children. All F scores are significant at the .001 level.

lated using the fall and spring data sets. All correlations were significant (each  $p < .02$ ), with  $r$ s ranging from .31 to .73 for item scores, from .57 to .72 for factor scores, and .79 for the total score.

Factor analyses of the spring data revealed a six-factor solution again, with more than 90% of items loading on the same factors as in the fall. Coefficient alphas of the spring data were computed on the six factors derived from the fall factor analyses, as a test of the replicable coherence of factors. All alphas were significant and ranged from .88 to .96. Alphas calculated separately for each status group ranged from .83 to .97.

Group Differences in TOPS Scores

Multivariate and follow-up univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAS) were conducted in which the independent variables included the subject's status (rejected vs. adaptive), sex, and grade level (Grade 2 vs. Grades 3 and 4), and the dependent variables included the six factor scores.

A significant multivariate main effect of status,  $F(6, 56) = 34.80, p < .001$ , and significant univariate effects (see Table 1; all  $p$ s < .001) indicated that teachers consistently rated the situations as being more problematic for rejected than for adaptive children. The mean item scores across the 44 items were 3.18 for the rejected group and 1.70 for the adaptive group. By far, the largest differences in scores between the two status groups occurred in Responses to Peer Provocations (mean difference of 1.8) and Teacher Expectations (mean difference of 1.9). A discriminant function analysis yielded a highly significant prediction of a child's social status from the six factor scores, Wilks's lambda = .26,  $\chi^2(6, N = 84) = 90.59, p < .001$ . Correct classifications were made for 94.7% of the rejected children and 100% of the adaptive children. Inspection of the standard deviations of responses for each status group revealed that in every case, the variation in response was greater among the rejected group than among the adaptive group.

A significant multivariate main effect of gender was found,  $F(6, 56) = 3.18, p < .01$ . One univariate effect was also significant, which indicated that teachers rated boys as

experiencing more problems with situations involving teacher expectations than they did girls,  $F(1, 64) = 14.32, p < .001$ . No other multivariate effects were significant.

### Discussion

This study demonstrates the feasibility of generating a taxonomy of problematic social situations for elementary school-aged children. Teachers and clinicians were clearly able to generate specific situations that lead individual children to experience problems in relating to peers. When these situations were presented to other teachers, who were asked to rate the degree to which each situation presented problems for a particular child, this task made sense to them and they responded reliably and sensibly.

The responses of teachers clustered into six coherent factors. These factors were internally consistent and were replicated in a second test administration. Certainly, the factors and situations generated here are not the only ones that confront children daily at school, but they are the ones spontaneously named by teachers as being most problematic. Responding to a provocation by a peer emerged as the most problematic of all situation types, consistent with observational research (Dodge, 1983). Initiating peer group entry, responding to failure, and complying with the teacher's expectations also appeared as particularly problematic situations. These also have been recognized in previous research (Dodge, Schlundt, Schocken, & Dejugach, 1983; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). Thus, the problematic situations generated in this study provide a rich description of the contexts in which children experience peer conflicts and contribute to our understanding of children's social ecology.

The clinical value of identifying these contexts is also great. All 44 situations successfully distinguished a socially rejected group of children from an average, adaptive group. There is enough variation across situations, sexes, and children (especially among rejected children) to suggest, however, that the most detailed profile of problematic situations is child-specific. In this way, TOPS is useful in the second step of Dodge and Murphy's

(1984) model of clinical assessment, namely, the identification of social situations that are particularly problematic for a child.

### Study 2

Following Goldfried and d'Zurilla's (1969) recommendation, the next step in our situational assessment of children's social competence was the gathering of more direct measures of children's behavioral responses in key situations. This was the goal of Study 2. In order to maintain experimental control of the situational stimuli, we asked children in this study to imagine themselves in particular situations and to role-play their responses. These responses are important information for Step 3 of the model of assessment proposed by Dodge and Murphy (1984), namely, the identification of specific component skill deficits in a child within situations. Component skills may include accurate encoding and interpretation of social cues, generation and evaluation of response alternatives, and enactments of chosen responses (Dodge, in press; Ladd & Mize, 1983; McFall, 1982). Children's role-played responses in this study constituted assessments of their skills at generating and enacting behavioral responses.

The design of this study consisted of presenting each of the 15 prototypical situations generated in Study 1 to socially rejected aggressive children and to adaptive children and asking them to role-play their probable responses. It was hypothesized that socially rejected children would be less competent as a group at responding in these situations than adaptive children would be and that a profile of response deficiencies across situations would provide a powerful prediction of a child's status.

### Method

#### Subjects

From the pool of 620 second-, third-, and fourth-grade boys and girls responding to sociometric interviews in Study 1, a group of rejected aggressive subjects was selected on the bases of several criteria. First, teachers were asked to nominate and refer for clinical intervention the children in their classrooms who experienced the most difficulty relating to peers and who behaved most aggressively. Teachers completed the Teacher Report Form (TRF) of the Child Behavior Checklist (Edelbrock &

Achenbach, 1984) for each nominated child. Only those children receiving Aggression scale *T* scores of 60 or higher were eligible for selection. Of these children, only those who also met criteria as socially rejected according to peer sociometric interview responses (described in Study 1) were selected as subjects. In all, 39 rejected aggressive children (77% were male; 63% were second-graders) participated in this study, which required written parental permission.

A group of 34 nonaggressive, adaptive children was selected by opposite criteria and was matched to the rejected aggressive group according to sex and classroom. Each of these children was nominated by his or her teacher as "a child who gets along favorably in interactions with peers and who does not display aggression in peer interactions," and received an Aggression scale *T* score of 55 (lowest possible) on the TRF. Each of these children also met criteria as adaptive according to the peer sociometric classification described in Study 1. The subjects in this study had also been assessed by the teachers in Study 1.

### Procedure

Each subject was brought to a psychology department laboratory (or a mobile laboratory stationed at the school) by a female experimenter who did not know the subject's status and was asked to respond to 15 questions. For each question, the child was to imagine being in a particular social situation, such as the following:

Let's pretend that I (the experimenter) am one of the kids in your class. I am playing a new video game with some other kids. You can see that it looks like a lot of fun. We are taking turns playing with it. Let's pretend that you come up to us and ask, "Can I have a turn?" Let's pretend that I say, "No. You have to wait until I say you can play."

The experimenter role-played the situation and then asked the child to act out what he or she would do and say in response. Each subject practiced the role-play format at the beginning of the session until the experimenter thought that the subject was prepared to continue. Each child was then presented 15 such hypothetical situations, which were chosen from among the 44 items in the original TOPS in Study 1 and expanded for present use. The situations were distributed across the six category types, but distribution was uneven (range = 1-4) because the analysis of Study 1 and the administration of Study 2 were conducted simultaneously. All children were presented the situations in the same random order. For each situation, the child's response was audiorecorded for later coding. The experimenter then thanked the subject and paid him or her \$4 for participation.

*Coding of responses.* A manual for the coding of the competence of children's audiorecorded responses to each situation was developed according to procedures suggested by Goldfried and d'Zurilla (1969).<sup>4</sup> A scale of 5 possible scores ranging from 0 to 8 was developed for each item. For example, the scores for the situation listed above were as follows:

- 8—Subject minimizes any conflict and waits for turn, or waits and asks again later, or watches and comments on the game while watching. Examples: "I guess I'll wait until you're ready. When will you be done?" "O.K., when do you think my turn will be?"
- 6—Subject asks again immediately or asks for reason for refusal. Examples: "Please can I play?" "Why won't you let me play if you let your friends play?"
- 4—Subject walks away without commenting, or goes to play somewhere else. Example: "I would walk away and not say anything anymore to them."
- 2—Subject questions or comments on child's behavior in a negative way. Examples: "Well, that's not nice of you to say." "I don't want to play, if you're going to be that way." Or, subject threatens peer. Example: "Let me play or I won't give you any candy." Or, subject tells teacher.
- 0—Subject uses physical force, sabotages the game, or makes a highly derogatory comment. Examples: "I'd shove you." "I'd cry, then I'd punch you." "I'd push you out of the way and play anyway." "Aw, shove it!"

An adult coder, who did not know the status of the subjects, used this manual to score all responses. Intercoder agreement was assessed by having a second person (who likewise did not know subject status) use the manual to score 10% of the responses (randomly selected). Agreement on the exact score assigned was .92, as assessed by Cohen's (1960) kappa.

### Results and Discussion

#### Internal Consistency of Scores

Scores for each subject on each of the 15 items were grouped according to the six factors defined in Study 1. The internal consistency of each factor, assessed by coefficient alphas, ranged from .25 to .42 for each factor, and the alpha for all 15 items was .73 ( $p < .001$ ). The alphas for aggressive subjects ranged from  $-.06$  to .36, with the alpha for all items being .54. For socially adaptive subjects, the alphas ranged from .37 to .54, and the alpha for all items was .82. In each case, the alpha was greater for adaptive than for aggressive subjects, indicating greater variability in responses across items among aggressive subjects than among adaptive subjects.

<sup>4</sup> The manual for the coding of the children's responses is available from the authors.

Table 2  
*Role-Play Factors: Group Means and Standard Deviations by Grade*

Factor	Aggressive boys		Nonaggressive boys		Aggressive girls		Nonaggressive girls	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Grade 2								
1. Peer Group Entry	4.90	1.25	5.06	1.53	4.89	1.03	3.75	2.72
2. Response to Provocation	4.13	1.53	5.31	1.18	3.63	1.32	5.38	1.93
3. Response to Failure	4.42	2.71	4.31	2.68	1.50	1.91	1.25	1.50
4. Response to Success	2.70	2.45	4.38	2.45	5.00	1.15	2.50	1.91
5. Social Expectations	4.56	1.44	5.54	1.08	4.17	2.20	3.67	2.96
6. Teacher Expectations	4.80	2.93	6.13	2.58	6.00	4.00	3.50	4.12
Total	4.69	1.09	5.38	1.01	4.10	0.91	3.83	2.43
Grades 3 and 4								
1. Peer Group Entry	5.18	1.10	5.75	0.98	6.00	0.61	4.75	0.87
2. Response to Provocation	4.27	1.66	5.65	1.73	4.30	1.92	5.13	2.56
3. Response to Failure	5.18	2.48	6.10	1.91	4.60	0.55	3.25	2.22
4. Response to Success	5.09	2.07	4.80	2.53	2.40	2.19	4.50	3.00
5. Social Expectations	5.58	1.13	5.87	1.40	4.27	1.30	5.17	2.13
6. Teacher Expectations	5.82	3.40	7.20	1.03	7.20	1.10	5.50	3.79
Total	5.25	0.90	5.99	0.97	5.15	0.66	5.00	1.76

### Group Differences

The subject group means and standard deviations for each factor and the total score are presented in Table 2. A Status (aggressive vs. adaptive)  $\times$  Sex  $\times$  Grade (Grade 2 vs. Grades 3 and 4) multivariate ANOVA was conducted to test for differences among the groups; univariate ANOVAs also were conducted. A marginally significant multivariate

main effect of status was found, indicating that the adaptive group performed more competently overall than the aggressive group,  $F(6, 60) = 2.09, p < .07$ . Of the six factors, the aggressive group ( $M = 4.14$ ) performed significantly less competently than the adaptive group ( $M = 5.40$ ) only in the Response to Peer Provocation factor (see Table 3 for summary of effects). Although the aggressive children were deficient (relative to adaptive

Table 3  
*Summary of Group Differences in Competence in Study 2*

Factor	Effect					
	Status		Sex		Age	
	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>F</i>	Sig.
1. Peer Group Entry					3.09	.08
2. Response to Provocation	11.07	.001				
3. Response to Failure			12.16	.001	7.68	.01
4. Response to Success					3.38	.07
5. Social Expectations	2.97	.09	6.56	.02	3.93	.05
6. Teacher Expectations					3.26	.08
Total	3.32	.07	6.06	.02	7.00	.01

Note. *df* = 1, 64; Sig. = significance.

children) in all four of the items in this factor, these children were particularly deficient in responding to the item dealing with teasing by peers (*M*s for aggressive and adaptive children were 2.65 and 5.76, respectively). The aggressive group also performed marginally less competently than the adaptive group on the Social Expectations factor. These findings should focus further research and clinical attention on these two situation types for aggressive children.

A significant multivariate main effect of sex was also found, indicating that boys performed more competently overall than did girls,  $F(6, 60) = 2.41, p < .04$ . This main effect also held for scores on two of the six factors, Response to Failure and Social Expectations. Of the five items in these two factors, four yielded significant sex differences. Informal content analyses of responses suggested that boys responded to failure with persistence or attempts to succeed at another task, whereas girls responded to failure with passive withdrawal. This pattern is consistent with previously found sex differences in learned helplessness in response to academic failure (Dweck & Bush, 1976; Dweck & Goetz, 1978).

The multivariate main effect of age was not significant,  $F(6, 60) = 1.32$ . However, it appeared that as children got older, they performed more competently overall, as indicated by a significant main effect of grade for the total score (*M*s = 4.83 and 5.46 for young and old subject groups, respectively). The older group performed significantly more competently than the younger group on two of the six factors and marginally more competently on three others. Only in responding to provocations did the age groups not differ. Because of the nonsignificant multivariate effect, these univariate effects must be interpreted with caution. No other effects were significant.

#### *Prediction of Status Group Membership*

A discriminant function analysis was performed in which status group membership was predicted from all 15 responses. This analysis yielded a significant prediction of status, Wilks's lambda = .64,  $\chi^2(15, N =$

73) = 28.66,  $p < .02$ , and demonstrated that the 15 responses could correctly classify 71.8% of the aggressive group and 79.4% of the adaptive group.

#### *Analyses of Deficiencies in Responding*

In addition to the analysis of subject group mean scores, responses were classified as deficient (a score of 0) or competent (any other score), and the number of deficiencies displayed by children was analyzed. Deficiencies in response were found in all 15 situations. Most of the aggressive children (61%) displayed at least two deficiencies (out of 15 situations), whereas only 35% of the adaptive children did so. This difference was significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 73) = 4.91, p < .03$ , and suggests that profiles of deficiencies in responding to each situation will significantly discriminate between the subject groups.

#### General Discussion

The research reported in this article makes several contributions to the study of social competence in children. The first contribution is conceptual. It has been proposed that children's social behaviors are best understood as responses to specific situations or tasks. When one takes this conceptual approach, one will find that children's responding (and teachers' ratings of children's behavior) in social settings has both an overall coherence as well as marked cross-situational variation. Aggressive, socially rejected children were found to respond less competently overall than nonaggressive, adaptive children. The deficiencies of aggressive children were found to be most evident in particular situations, however. They were deficient as a group in response to being provoked by a peer (such as being teased, hit, or insulted) and in response to social expectations. These findings suggest that clinical and research efforts with aggressive children should focus on these situations.

It is possible that another group of mal-adjusted children (such as a withdrawn or hyperactive group) would display a pattern of deficient responding different from that displayed by the aggressive group. Whereas



an aggressive group may be deficient in responding to provocations, it is possible that a withdrawn group may be deficient in another context, such as peer group entry situations. In fact, the specificity of children's responses may be so great that the most informative level of assessment is the individual child. One child may be deficient in one situation, whereas another child is deficient in a second situation.

The analyses of deficiencies demonstrated that aggressive children are more likely than adaptive children to have at least two deficiencies in responding, but that the situational contexts for these deficiencies vary across children. The fact that the consistency of responding across situations by aggressive children is relatively low (as determined by coefficient alphas for each status group) further supports the need to assess the social competencies of aggressive children separately in each situation. Assessment by a single summary score is not as informative as a profile of assessments in each situation.

One conclusion from these findings is that the clinical assessment of socially maladjusted children could benefit from taking a profile approach to identifying skills and deficits. Such an approach is consistent with the assessment process suggested by Dodge and Murphy (1984). The outcome of this three-step procedure will be a two-dimensional profile, in which the situational contexts of a child's social incompetence are identified along the first axis, and the component skill deficits are identified along the second axis. Such a detailed assessment could provide the clinician with a basis for social skills training of the individual maladjusted child.

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