A QUESTIONNAIRE TO ASSESS SOCIAL SKILLS OF 3 TO 4 YEAR OLD CHILDREN

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Introduction

Social skills have been defined and classified by several researchers in many ways (e.g., Caldarella & Merrell, 1997; Gresham & Elliott, 1987; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). In our study, the emphasis is on the ways a child acts in various social situations. Social skills acquired in preschool years are important predictors of later school success (McClelland & Morrison, 2003; McClelland et al, 2006; Denham et al., 2014). Thus, social-emotional skills are one component to be assessed as decisions about school readiness are made (Denham, 2006). Merrell (2001) suggests that naturalistic observations and behavior check lists should be used to assess the social skills of the children. Teachers are in an excellent position to assess children's social skills as they can observe children in various situations where children's peers as well as adults are present (Achenbach & Edelbrok, 1984; Milfort & Greenfield, 2002; Webster-Stratton & Lindsay, 1999).

The aim of this study was to create a new questionnaire to be filled in by kindergarten teachers to assess three to four year old children's social skills. The reliability of the questionnaire is explored and findings considering structure of the questionnaire are described.

Method

Questionnaires were filled in for 186 children from 20 kindergartens by their teachers (all female). On 83.5% of occasions teachers claimed to know the child well or very well. Of the children 160 belonged to the control group, they were healthy and with no development/health problems (80 boys and 80 girls, mean age 44.5 months, SD=6.1), 26 children belonged to the at risk group, they had delayed language development (19 boys and 7 girls, mean age 50.7 months, SD=10.9). 60% of the families were from middle class or higher as indicated by the education level of mothers and families' monthly income.

The questionnaire included 41 statements about social activities. The statements were selected according to double purpose. First, these had to cover a wide range of social skills. Second, teachers should be able to make a decision based on observation. Each statement is assessed on 4-point Likert scale ranging from almost always to never.

Results

Explorative factor analyses (principal components, varimax rotation, KMO = .82, Bartlett test p < .0001) yielded in a model with four factors (47.7% of variance; $\alpha > 0.84$): good playmate / interpersonal social skills (13.6% of variance; $\alpha > 0.84$), dominant / impulsive (13.5% of variance; $\alpha > 0.86$), well behaved /learning related social skills (11.5% of variance; $\alpha > 0.80$), and inappropriate behavior (9.1% of variance; $\alpha > 0.78$) (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Five statements had multiple loadings and were excluded from analyses. Models with three or two factors were also considered.
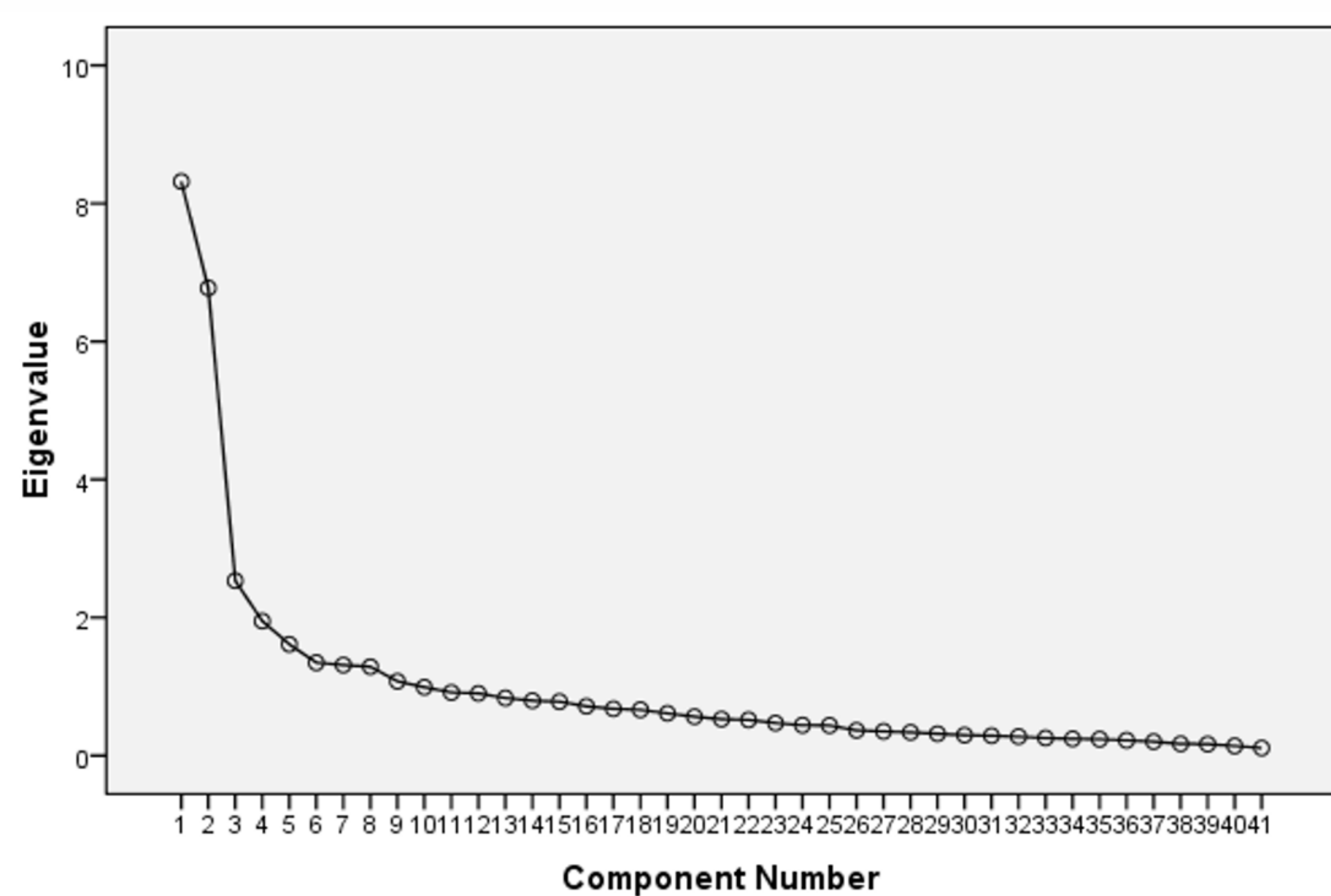

Figure 1. Scree plot

Table 1. Factor loadings and communalities of the statements in the questionnaire

Statements	Factors 1	2	3	4	Communalities
switches quickly into games	.786				0.625
starts the games	.726				0.686
plays simple role games	.631				0.487
plays pretend/fantasy games	.565				0.455
makes jokes to amuse others	.555				0.433
likes to compete	.534				0.318
imitates peers	.479				0.267
laughs at the jokes of others	.423				0.269
keeps his/her distance	-.628				0.404
tries to assert him/herself		.675			0.602
expresses dissatisfaction to get what s/he wants		.668			0.524
loses self-control easily		.646			0.506
is aggressive towards others		.601			0.440
expresses feelings regardless of situation		.580			0.450
waits for his/her turn		-.515			0.428
accepts losing in a competitive game		-.590			0.369
calms down quickly after becoming angry		-.604			0.376
agrees to give his/her things to others for a short while		-.611			0.449
can give in to others		-.699			0.520
is polite (e.g. says hello and thanks)			.681		0.474
talks about things that have happened			.630		0.626
asks for approval			.629		0.403
can reach agreements using words			.568		0.442
tries to reach agreements with peers			.562		0.553
follows rules of games			.561		0.597
his/her speech is easy to understand			.544		0.403
monitors if others follow rules of games			.516		0.470
asks for help from adults			.460		0.269
as if does not hear what s/he is supposed to do				.653	0.495
talks but does not listen to the other				.633	0.693
takes others' things without asking for permission				.620	0.555
intrudes others' discussions				.588	0.612
is clumsy compared to peers				.560	0.554
does not like the activities that need persistence and mental effort				.543	0.357
answers before the question is finished				.525	0.569
peers do not want to play with him/her				.439	0.354

There was a significant difference (Cohen's d = 0.56, p < .007) in overall mean scores between control (Mc = 69.83, SD = 12.95) and at risk group (Mr = 62.56, SD = 13.03) due to differences in mean scores for first factor (interpersonal social skills) (Cohen's d = 0.46, p < .035, Mc = 19.57, Mr = 17.35) and third factor (learning related social skills) (Cohen's d = 0.88, p < .000, Mc = 20.78, Mr = 16.08). At risk children were from families with lower SES compared to control children.

Conclusions

The study showed that we can distinguish a group of children with lower levels of social skills (especially interpersonal and learning related social skills). Children with language development delay had also lower levels of social skills and they came from families with lower income. It has been found in previous research that language abilities are important means to acquire social skills and our results are in accordance with these findings. In summary, the questionnaire may be considered to be used as a screening tool for three to four year old children's social skills as it has internal reliability and it enables to distinguish children with lower levels of social skills from the general group.
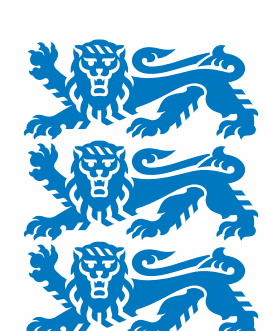
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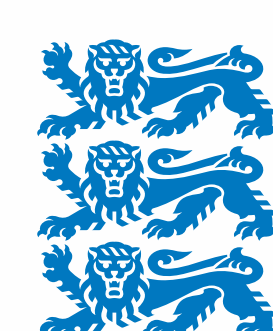*September 3 – 5, 2015*

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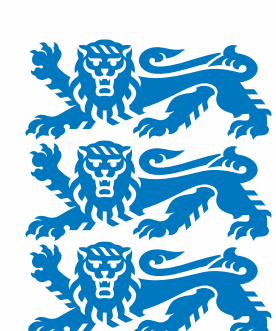
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