



Press Release

“NO PLAY NO GAIN” Kindergarten Social Emotional Learning Project HKU studies reveal that kindergarten children playing interactive group games can improve their social-emotional learning

Executive summary

In this age of technology, studies have reported that excessive use of digital devices can affect the social-emotional development of young children. The Quality Education Fund sponsored the Centre for Advancement in Inclusive and Special Education (CAISE) in the Faculty of Education of The University of Hong Kong to implement a research project to evaluate the impact of a social skills programme on social competence of children from 5 local kindergartens in Hong Kong. Public seminars were also open to the public. The project provided education seminars and workshops for parents, teacher professional development workshops, and on-site group games to develop young children’s social competence systematically. The Social Emotional Learning Project was school-based, and training was implemented by trained parent volunteers in classrooms during normal school hours. A total of 367 children directly benefited from the group activities. A total of 97 parents completed workshop training and game practices. In addition, 542 parents and 243 teachers participated in public seminars. The research group evaluated the project’s impact on children’s social and play competencies and found that the children showed significant and continuous improvement in social competence. All those involved in the implementation gave extremely positive feedback and recommended the programme should continue in their kindergartens and extend to other kindergartens and schools.

Background

In response to a report from the Department of Health on the excessive use of electronic media and digital devices affecting social skills development of young children, the project was designed to educate parents and teachers on how best to develop children’s social competence through playing face-to-face interactive group games. CAISE conducted a research project “**NO PLAY NO GAIN” Kindergarten Social Emotional Learning**” from September 2016 to October 2017 which was sponsored by the Quality Education Fund.

Research design

The project covered teacher professional development workshops, education seminars and workshops for parents, and on-site structured group games interventions to develop young children’s social competence. The project was school-based and training was implemented during normal school hours in classrooms in which parents were trained as leaders to operate social games for young children and support the teachers in developing children’s social competence. The impact of the project was evaluated in terms of changes in children’s social development.

The project was implemented in 5 local kindergartens. A total of 367 children were involved in games activities. There were around 28 children in each classroom. The children were organized into small groups of 6 to 8, with each group guided by 1 to 2 parents. Apart from implementing the project in kindergartens, game education seminars were also organized for the public.

A total of 302 parents gave consent to participate in the evaluation of the project. In each session, children’s play competencies were observed and rated by 2 independent observers. Parents and teachers

of the children also completed a *Social Behavior Scale* before and after the game activity sessions. The project was later evaluated based on the feedback from 34 teachers and 151 parents who participated in the workshops in 5 kindergartens, and 97 parents who participated in workshops and game practices. In addition, 542 parents and 243 teachers who participated in the public seminars also completed a feedback questionnaire.

Conceptual model

The social-emotional programme was adapted from a proven Social Star Mirror Model that has been implemented successfully for 13 years (Liu, 2015). Dr. Sylvia Liu, an honorary adviser on game education, together with a team of experienced game trainers and experienced parent volunteers, provided training and support for teachers and parents at kindergartens. The focus was on how to make use of interactive group games to develop children's social competence, discipline and self-regulation in group settings.

The Social Star Mirror Model integrates five key elements, namely: Play, Positive Reinforcement, Parent Training, Programme, and Point of Breakthrough. These 5Ps complement each other to bring about positive social-emotional learning for the participating players in face-to-face interactive group games.

Findings

Evaluation of the project indicates that children's play skills and social competencies are significantly enhanced. The findings are consistent with Liu (2015) and other related QEF projects in Hong Kong (QEF2005/0336; QEF2008/0064) as well as many studies of school-based social skill interventions in western countries (Caldarella et al., 2009; Clarke et al., 2014; Hoglund et al., 2004, 2008, 2012; Iizuka et al., 2014; Pellegrini et al., 2002). Researchers have recommended early social intervention to enhance children's social-emotional learning, which could prevent intensifying problems associated with social incompetence. The feedback on workshops and seminars was extremely positive, with rapport from 99% of attending teachers and parents. All parents said they would recommend the school programme to others and would join similar social programme in the future.

Participants found the social programme useful, practical, and easy to carry out. Children learned positive social behaviors to interact with peers and adults; while parents applied skills in daily life and built up their confidence to lead children with better understanding of their children. Through "Play with Rules, Work with Rules", children develop discipline and self-regulation and increase focus of attention through following instructions. Teachers also witnessed children's improvement in social competence transferring to daily learning and functioning in the school setting.

Recommendations

Suggestions are provided for implementing social programmes of a similar nature in many more kindergartens. With increasing play opportunities and more playmates, group games can be a valuable social substitute to replace digital games and online devices for young children. The earlier research by Liu (2015) also suggests that this kind of social programme can facilitate kindergarten children's smooth transition to more formal schooling in Primary One.

In the newly released *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* (2017), the value of learning through play is strongly emphasized. Early intervention in the form of social skills training can help teachers and parents identify children at risk who may require more intensive support. The approach used in the project described here represents one such intervention that weaves social development into learning and play.

Looking forward, the project has aroused attention from schools, teachers, parents and the general public on the value of interactive social games for enhancing the social-emotional development of young children. It has also proved the benefits from involvement of parents as game volunteers to

support teachers. The project enhances home-school collaboration and strengthens parent-child relationships that have positive impact on children's long-term adjustment and development.

Media enquiries

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Please visit the website at <http://caise.edu.hku.hk/qef-no-play-no-gain/> for press photos and presentation slides.

October 21, 2017