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TITLE: Parents' and Teachers' Ratings of the Social Skills of Elementary-Age Students Who Are Blind

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ABSTRACT

Ratings by 23 parents and 21 regular education teachers on the Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS) for elementary-age students who were blind were compared to ratings for the SSRS sighted norm group. No significant differences were found in the overall ratings of social skills or on the Self-Control or Responsibility subscales, but several important differences were noted on the Assertion and Cooperation subscales. Students who were blind were rated as less academically competent and higher on problem behaviors than the sighted norm group, even though stereotypical behaviors were not assessed by the SSRS. Implications for instruction are discussed.

The acquisition of social skills occurs, to a large extent, through the observation of others' behavior. Observation is particularly important for learning nonverbal social behaviors, such as smiling and gesturing. Blindness makes it difficult to learn incidentally the skills that reflect social competence (Skellenger, Hill, & Hill, 1992).

Furthermore, visual information enables one to monitor social interactions; for example, without the required visual information for interpreting nonverbal communication, communication may break down (Erwin, 1993). Thus, it is not surprising that many children who are blind have difficulty with social interaction. The difficulty is, no doubt, at least partially the result of the reduced visual input these children receive.

Comparing the social interaction of sighted children with children who are blind, Tröster and Brambring (1994) observed that children who are blind interacted less frequently with others. Likewise, Schneekloth (1989) noted that children with visual impairments spent 56 percent of their time playing alone, whereas sighted children spent 14 percent. In addition, Miletic (1995) found that children who were congenitally blind had more difficulty with perspective taking than did sighted children.

Social skills are important for acceptance by peers, as well as for success in school. Raver-Lampman (1990, p. 70) suggested that "appropriate social interaction is the logical prerequisite to social acceptance." Hence, instruction in social skills seems particularly important for students who are blind.

Gresham (1981) noted that studies from related fields indicated that the more similar a person's behavior is to that of a desired peer group, the greater the likelihood that the person will be accepted by the group. This conclusion and results of other studies suggest that teaching some of the social skills demonstrated by sighted children to children who are blind may enhance others' perceptions of these children. Thus, research comparing the development of social skills of children who are blind with that of sighted children should provide further useful information for planning instruction.

The purpose of this study was to compare the social skills ratings for children who were blind with those of sighted children with average social skills using the Social Skill Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990), a norm-referenced measure standardized on a nationally

representative sample of sighted children. Ratings by both parents and teachers of children who were blind were compared with the sighted norms.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Twenty-three parents (21 mothers and 2 fathers) and 21 regular education teachers (all female) from Michigan completed SSRS rating scales on elementary-age students who were blind. Each of 20 students was rated by both a parent and a teacher; 1 parent and 3 teachers did not return the scale. To be included in the study, the children had to be enrolled in Grades 1-6 in regular education classrooms, have no physical impairment other than blindness, have no emotional impairment, and meet the criteria for "legal" blindness (visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye after correction or a restricted visual field of no more than 20 degrees). (See Table 1 for the children's characteristics.) The 24 children who participated (13 girls and 11 boys) ranged in age from 6 to 10 and were in Grades 1-5. Nine children had no usable vision; only 5 had visual acuities as high as 20/200; 4 had acuities of 20/400; 3 of less than 20/200; and for 3, the acuities were unknown. Eighteen children were congenitally blind, and 6 were adventitiously blind. For 11, the cause of the vision loss was unknown.

INSTRUMENT

On the SSRS both the frequency and importance of behaviors are rated. Because determining the importance of behaviors was not the purpose of the study, only frequency ratings were used. In addition, problem behaviors that may interfere with appropriate social skills, as well as academic problems (on the Teacher Form) that may occur simultaneously with problems in social skills are rated. On both the Parent and Teacher Forms, there are Cooperation, Assertion, and Self-control subscales; and on the Parent Form, there is a Responsibility subscale.

The Teacher Form for the elementary grades consists of 30 items in the Social Skills Domain (such as "Invites others to join in activities" and "Makes friends easily"), 18 in the Problem Behaviors Domain (including "Interrupts conversations of others" and "Acts sad or depressed"), and 9 in the Academic Competence Domain (for example, "This child's overall motivation to succeed academically is ..."). The Parent Form for the elementary grades comprises 38 items in the Social Skills Domain and 17 in the Problem Behaviors Domain. Each item is rated for frequency on a 3-point scale, from 0 (never) to 1 (sometimes) to 2 (very often). The results from the domains can be reported in terms of standard scores (mean = 100, SD = 15) or percentiles.

The results for the subscales are described only in terms of the behavioral levels "more than average," "average," and "fewer than average." Levels are determined by comparing a student's raw score on a subscale to the raw scores for his or her age or grade level and gender.

For the elementary level of the SSRS, the standardization sample included 1,021 teachers' ratings and 812 parents' ratings of sighted children. Of the students in special education who were included, 10.2% had learning disabilities, 2.2% had behavioral disorders, 3.5% had mental handicaps, and 1.6% had "other" problems. Children in the "other" group included those who were visually impaired, hearing impaired, orthopedically impaired, or speech impaired or had multiple disabilities.

The demographic characteristics of the sample were similar to those in the 1985 U.S. census in terms of gender, race, and urban-rural residence. However, a lower proportion of parents in the sample (8.8%) than in the U.S. population (16.8%) had less than a high school education, and the proportion with one to three years of college or technical school (30.9%) was higher than in the

U.S. population (19.2%).

All data for technical adequacy were based on the results for sighted students. Internal consistency reliability for the domains for the Parent and Teacher Forms ranged from .85 to .96, and subscale correlations ranged from .58 to .82 for the Parent Form and .77 to .91 for the Teacher Form.

Test-retest correlations for the Parent Form were .87 for Social Skills and .65 for Problem Behaviors (at the four-week retest interval). Correlations on the Teacher Form were .85 for Social Skills, .84 for Problem Behaviors, and .93 for Academic Competence. Subscale correlations ranged from .48 to .84 for the Parent Form and .75 to .88 for the Teacher Form.

Content validity was addressed on the basis of an extensive survey of the literature. Support was provided in terms of subscales correlating satisfactorily with each other, those for Problem Behaviors not always correlating well with those for Social Skills, and those for Academic Competence correlating satisfactorily with those for the other subscales. No developmental trend was evident for the results for Social Skills or Academic Competence. Girls were rated higher for Social Skills and Academic Competence, and boys were rated higher for Problem Behaviors. A factor analysis generally supported the structure of the system. Evidence was provided for both convergent and discriminant validity. Generally, acceptable correlations were found with several measures for the Parent and Teacher forms.

PROCEDURE

Of the 22 consultants for children with visual impairments who were contacted to determine whether they had students on their caseloads who met the criteria for the study, 16 indicated that they did. These consultants were sent parental permission slips and sheets requesting demographic information on the children. They sent sets of these materials to 30 parents, 23 of whom agreed to participate. The parents who agreed to participate and who gave permission for their children's teachers to complete the SSRS on their children returned the forms to the consultants. The SSRS rating scales were then sent to the parents and teachers.

RESULTS

The results for the overall Social Skills Domain for the children who were blind were compared with the results for the sample of sighted children on whom the SSRS was standardized. Independent sample t-tests indicated no significant differences in the overall standard score for Social Skills for either the Teacher Form ($t(1040) = 1.67, p > .05$) or the Parent Form ($t(833) = 1.29, p > .05$). For the Parent Form, the mean was 95.84 (SD = 17.72), and for the Teacher Form, it was 94.53 (SD = 10.00).

Because the only quantitative results for subscales are raw scores, t-tests were used to compare these raw scores for social skills for the two groups of children. A significant difference was found on the Assertion Subscale of the Parent Form ($t(543) = 2.38, p < .05$) between the two groups. Children who were blind were rated lower than the norm sample of sighted children. No significant differences were found between the two groups on the Cooperation subscale ($t(543) = .99, p > .05$), the Self-control Subscale ($t(543) = 1.02, p > .05$), or the Responsibility Subscale ($t(543) = -0.34, p > .05$) on the Parent Form. (See Table 2 for the means and standard deviations). Thus, the perceptions of the parents of the children who were blind were no different from the perceptions of the parents of sighted children with regard to cooperation, self-control, or responsibility. However, the parents of the children who were blind thought their children were less assertive.

A significant difference was found on the Cooperation Subscale of the Teacher Form ($t(788)$

= 2.99, $p < .01$) between the children who were blind and the sighted children. The children who were blind were rated lower than their sighted peers. No significant differences were observed for either the Assertion Subscale ($t(788) = .43$, $p > .05$) or the Self-Control Subscale ($t(788) = .83$, $p > .05$). The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. Thus, unlike the parents, the teachers did not perceive that the children who were blind were less assertive, but they did rate them lower on cooperation. Ratings of both the parents and teachers of the children who were blind were similar to those for the sighted children for self-control.

Because the children who were blind were rated significantly lower on the Assertion Subscale (Parent Form) and the Cooperation Subscale (Teacher Form), individual items on these subscales were examined to determine which received low ratings. Table 3 displays the items that were rated "never" or "sometimes" for more than 60% of these children.

Despite differences on the Assertion Subscale completed by the parents and the Cooperation Subscale completed by the teachers, ratings for subscales for the large majority of students were average to above average (see Table 4).

Comparisons of standard scores for the Problem Behavior Domain indicated no differences on the Parent Form (mean = 104.11, $SD = 13.1$, $t(833) = -1.29$, $p > .05$). Significant differences were noted on the Teacher Form (mean = 109.3, $SD = 11.4$, $t(1040) = -2.83$, $p < .01$), where the children who were blind were rated higher (indicating more problems) than were the sighted children by their teachers. The teachers also rated the children who were blind significantly lower (indicating poorer achievement) (mean = 92.24, $SD = 10.3$) in the academic competence domain ($t(1040) = 2.36$, $p < .05$) than the sighted children.

DISCUSSION

OVERALL RATINGS

No significant differences were evident in the overall ratings of social skills by the parents and teachers on the SSRS for the children who were blind and the sighted norm sample. Furthermore, the majority of students who were blind were rated average or above average for all the social skills subscales (Assertion, Cooperation, Self-control, and Responsibility). These findings suggest that, according to parents and teachers, the majority of the elementary-age students who are blind display similar social skills to those of sighted students.

These overall results differ somewhat from those of previous studies, which found that children with visual impairments have more problems with social skills. This apparent discrepancy could be a result of several factors, including the fact that many of the previous studies were more than 10 years old. Since that time, there may have been significant changes in instruction and attitudes. Inclusion efforts may play a role as well. In addition, differences in measurement may partly account for this discrepancy, including the possibility that the SSRS may not be sensitive to factors that discriminate between the two groups of students. For example, the SSRS does not address the stereotypical behaviors displayed by some children who are blind, such as eye poking, body rocking, and repetitive hand movements (Brambling & Tröster, 1992), that may affect the children's acceptance in the school and the community (Ross & Koenig, 1991).

SUBSCALES

ASSERTION

On the Assertion subscale, the parents rated their children who were blind significantly lower

than did the parents of sighted students in the SSRS norm group. But the teachers' ratings of the students who were blind did not differ from the teachers' ratings for the sighted norm group.

The items on the Assertion subscale that the parents of more than 60% of the students rated "never" or "sometimes" (indicating behaviors that they considered problems) were "has difficulty making friends" and "has difficulty accepting friends' ideas for play." These results suggest that at least at home, instruction in assertion with peers in relation to these two behaviors may be beneficial for elementary-age students who are blind.

Why the teachers did not note problems with assertion is unclear because other studies have found that teachers perceive difficulties for students who are blind in this area. For example, teachers of students in Grades 1-12 reported that students with visual impairments spent more time alone and waited for their classmates to initiate interactions (Hoben & Lindstrom, 1980). Several variables may contribute to the difference in results between this study and earlier studies: the use of different measures, the gradual decline in the use of residential schools (Poppe, 1996), and differences in instruction and in the structure of today's classrooms.

COOPERATION

The parents of children who were blind rated their children's cooperative behaviors as similar to the ratings by the parents of sighted children. However, the teachers of children who were blind rated the blind children significantly lower in cooperation than did the teachers of the sighted norm group. An examination of the items for which the majority of students who were blind received ratings of "never" or "sometimes" on this subscale indicated that cooperative behaviors that were considered problems pertained specifically to classroom requirements.

One item of concern for 62% of the students who were blind was "Finishes class assignments within time limits." One factor that may affect the rate of completing assignments is the students' reading rates. Reading braille and large type takes considerably longer than reading regular print, although other factors, such as the material involved, the type of visual loss, and experience with braille also affect reading rates. Moreover, because reading braille or large type is tiring, these students often require more time to complete assignments and may need more breaks to avoid fatigue. Some regular education teachers may be unaware of the extra time these students require.

Another item rated as a problem on the Cooperation subscale for 81% of the students who were blind was "Keeps desk clean and neat without being reminded." To function efficiently and avoid frustrating searches for materials, it is particularly important for students who are blind to be well organized (Bradley-Johnson, 1994). The fact that these students did not keep their desks well organized unless reminded could have interfered with their ability to complete assignments within time limits. It is important to teach organizational skills to children who are blind as soon as they are old enough to put their toys away, because these skills are not likely to be learned incidentally.

Attending to instructions is yet another critical skill that enables students who are blind to function independently. This skill needs to be particularly well developed because these students rely more on auditory input than do sighted students. Yet the teachers rated "Attends to your instructions" as a problem for 76% of the students. Thus, this is another skill that would benefit from additional emphasis for elementary-age students who are blind.

Finally, 71% of the students were rated as having problems with "Uses time appropriately while waiting for help." To improve efficiency in completing assignments and teachers' perceptions of these students, this skill seems appropriate to target for instruction as well. This skill may be affected, to some degree, by the lack of organization of students' desks. Because of

a messy desk, it may be difficult to locate other things to work on while waiting for help or to locate resources that may help the students find answers to questions. Thus, if students who are blind are better organized, they may be better able to use their time while waiting for teachers' assistance.

Improvement in the skills noted by the teachers as problems on the Cooperation Subscale may increase students' achievement and reduce behavioral problems in the classroom. Both the Academic Competence and Problem Behaviors Domains, the students who were blind were rated as having more problems than the sighted students in the normed sample. Even though there were significant differences in these domains, the mean differences were not large--92 for the students who were blind versus 109 for the sighted students. The parents also rated students who were blind as having more problem behaviors (mean = 104).

SELF-CONTROL AND RESPONSIBILITY

For the Self-control Subscale no significant differences were evident between the parents' or teachers' ratings of the students who were blind and the sighted students. Thus, neither the parents nor the teachers thought that the self-control skills of the students who were blind differed from those of the sighted students. On the Responsibility Subscale, which was rated only by the parents, no significant differences were found between the groups.

IMPLICATIONS

Thus, the findings show that the elementary-age students who were blind had many more skills in common with the sighted children in the SSRS norm group than differences. However, low ratings for Academic Competence and Problem Behavior are a concern. Additional instruction in the problem areas noted may enable these students to function more independently and efficiently and to perform better academically.

Erin, Dignan, and Brown (1991) urged caution in planning social skills instruction for students who are blind. They noted that although teaching skills commonly used by the sighted population may facilitate interaction in the sighted world, these skills may not encompass all the social skills that people who are blind need to enjoy rewarding social interactions.

Yet, a further examination of the ratings on the SSRS with students of different ages, with larger samples, and with students with various degrees and types of vision loss may provide useful information for instruction both at home and at school. The age range of the SSRS (preschool through high school) and the ecological nature of the scale (parent, teacher, and student) makes it particularly useful for such studies.

Added materialADDED MATERIAL

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Table 1 Characteristics of the students.

Gender	Age	Grade	Visual acuity	Degree of vision loss
F	8	3	None	Total
M	10	4	20/200	Degenerative
F	8	2	None	Total

M	10	5	None	95%	
F	9	3	20/400	Very near sighted	
F	8	3	None	Total	
M	7	1	20/200	Unknown	
F	6	1	20/200	Unknown	
M	7	1	< 20/200	Unknown	
M	9	3	Unknown	Limited light perception	
M	8	2	None	Total	
M	9	3	20/400	Degenerative	
F	7	1	Unknown	Limited light perception	
F	10	4	None	Total	
F	7	2	20/400	Monocular	
F	10	4	None	Total	
M	9	3	20/400	Unknown	
M	11	5	< 20/200	Unknown	
M	10	4	20/200	Unknown	
M	7	2	None	Total	
F	9	4	Unknown	Limited light perception	
F	6	1	20/200	Unknown	
F	9	3	None	Total	
F	10	4	< 20/200	Unknown	
	Age of onset				Reading mode
Gender	Birth		Retinal detachment		Braille
F	Unknown		Retinitis pigmentosa		Large
M					
print					
F	Birth		Goldenhar syndrome		Braille
M	1 month		Retinopathy of prematurity		Braille
F	Birth		Defective gene		Large
print					
F	Birth		Unknown		Braille
M	Birth		Unknown		Large or regular
print					
F	Birth		Unknown		Large
print					
M	Birth		Unknown		Large
print					
M	Birth		Leber's congenital amaurosis		Braille
M	Birth		Retinal detachment		Braille
M	Unknown		Retinitis pigmentosa		Large
print					
F	Birth		Premature retina		Braille
F	Birth		Iliosyncratic malformation		Braille
F	21 months		Retinoblastoma		Braille
F	Birth		Microphthalmus		Braille
M	Birth		Unknown		Large
print					
M	Birth		Unknown		Large
print					
M	Birth		Unknown		Large or regular
print					
M	Birth		Retinal detachment		Braille
F	Birth		Unknown		Braille
F	Unknown		Unknown		Large
print					

F	Birth	Unknown	Braille
F	Unknown	Unknown	Large

print

Table 2 Raw score means and standard deviations for the SSRS subscales for both groups of children.

Subscales	n	Mean	SD
Assertion			
Parent Form			
Blind students	23	14.5 (FN*)	3.8
SSRS norm sample	522	15.9	2.7
Teacher Form			
Blind students	21	12.1	3.8
SSRS norm sample	769	12.5	4.2
Cooperation			
Parent Form			
Blind students	23	11.3	3.6
SSRS norm sample	522	12.0	3.3
Teacher Form			
Blind students	21	12.5 (FN**)	3.8
SSRS norm sample	769	15.4	4.4
Self-control			
Parent Form			
Blind students	23	11.8	3.3
SSRS norm sample	522	12.5	3.2
Teacher Form			
Blind students	21	13.2	3.5
SSRS norm sample	769	14.0	4.4
Responsibility			
Parent Form			
Blind students	23	13.5	4.2
SSRS norm sample	522	13.3	2.7

FOOTNOTES

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$.

Table 3 Items most often rated "never" or "sometimes" on the Assertion (Parent Form) and Cooperation (Teacher Form) subscales.

Item	Percentage
Assertion (n = 23)	
Makes friends easily.	60.91
Accepts friends' ideas for playing.	65.22
Cooperation (n = 21)	
Finishes class assignments within time limits.	61.93
Uses time appropriately while waiting for help.	71.44
Keeps desk clean and neat without being reminded.	81.00
Attends to your instructions.	76.24

Table 4 Overall ratings on social skills subscales (percentage).

Form	Below average	Average	Above average
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Parent Form (n = 23)			
Cooperation	22	70	13
Assertion	30	70	0
Self-control	17	65	17
Responsibility	22	78	0
Teacher Form (n = 21)			
Cooperation	29	71	0
Assertion	14	76	10
Self-control	14	86	0

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