

The University of Hong Kong
Department of Psychology

Departmental Seminar

***When free-play time is scarce in preschool:
What predicts peer acceptance and friendship***

Date: July 13, 2015 (Monday)
Time: 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Venue: Room 8.13, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU
Speaker: Ms. Tse Man Yan, Hannah
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Peer acceptance and friendship are important predictors of children's well-being and developmental outcomes. Social behaviors during free-play constitute one of the best predictors for peer acceptance. In Asia, many preschools place great emphasis on academic achievement, making free-play time scarce. How do children interact in such preschools? Can their social interactions nonetheless predict peer acceptance status? The present study addressed these questions.

Children's peer-directed social behaviors, including play, communication, laughter, humor, and friendly physical contact (e.g., holding hands), were observed in Years 1 and 2 of a Hong Kong local 3-year preschool program. Children were asked to rate how much they liked to play with each classmate and also to nominate three classmates they liked to play with the most at the end of Years 2 and 3.

Boys who played and communicated more in Years 1 and 2 turned out to be better liked by both boys and girls in Years 2 and 3, and girls who communicated more with peers early on were better liked by girls in Year 3. However, girls' play behaviors in Year 2 were not associated with their peer acceptance. Furthermore, girls who had played more in Year 1 turned out to be less liked by girls in Year 3.

Children who nominated each other as among the three most preferred playmates were paired as friends. Children with friends in Years 2 and 3 were found to have had engaged in more social behaviors in Year 2, compared to their friendless peers. Boys – but not girls – with friends in Year 2 had displayed more humor, laughter, and peer-directed behaviors in Year 1 than their friendless peers.

Overall, even when free-play time was very limited (e.g., 15 minutes in a half-day program), children managed to interact with their classmates in preschool, and their peer interaction in preschool early on (i.e., Years 1 and 2) did predict peer acceptance and sociometric status later on (i.e., Years 2 and 3). Clear sex differences were uncovered in the pattern of results on such longitudinal predictions, perhaps due to sex differences in self-regulations and sex-stereotype expectations.