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# The Child at School

Interactions with Peers and Teachers

SECOND EDITION

INTERNATIONAL TEXTS IN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY



# THE CHILD AT SCHOOL

What is the nature of children's social life in school? How do their relationships and interactions with peers, teachers, and other school staff influence their development and experience of school? This book, written by leading researchers in educational and developmental psychology, provides answers to these questions by offering an integrated perspective on children's social interactions and relationships with their peers and teachers in school. Peer interactions in school have tended to be underestimated by educationalists, and this book redresses the balance by giving them equal weight to teacher–child interactions.

This second edition has been extensively revised on the basis of many years of research and teaching experience. The authors highlight common misconceptions about children, their social lives, and school achievement which have often resulted in ineffective school policy. The book covers a number of important topics relating to the child at school, including:

- The significance of peer-friendships
- The nature and importance of play and break-times
- Aggression and bullying
- Peer relations and learning
- The classroom environment and teacher–pupil interaction
- The influence of gender on children's learning
- Advantages and disadvantages of different methodological approaches for studying children in school settings
- Policy implications of current research findings.

*The Child at School* will be essential reading for all students of child development and educational psychology. It will also be an invaluable resource for both trainee and practising teachers and teaching assistants, as well as clinical psychologists and policy makers in this area.

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The Child at School: Interactions with Peers and Teachers, Second edition  
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# THE CHILD AT SCHOOL

Interactions with Peers and Teachers

Second Edition

*Peter Blatchford, Anthony D. Pellegrini  
and Ed Baines*

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PB: to the memory of Irene Blatchford

AP: to the memory of Ann Pellegrini

EB: to Evan and Orla, my fantastic children. I am enjoying your childhood very much and hope that when you are older, you will remember it fondly too!

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# 1

## AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE CHILD AT SCHOOL*

### **A personal introduction**

The idea for this book began almost 25 years ago when one of us (AP) was spending the year at Sheffield University conducting research on children's behaviour on the school playground. AP and PB had been invited to participate in a symposium at the university on bullying and aggression on the playground. After that day, and the subsequent evening in the pub, we each recognized the fact that children's social lives in schools were both very important and very understudied.

Since that time we have collaborated on a number of projects, including a project on children's games and their social relations, funded by the Spencer Foundation. Most centrally, our work has taken a developmental orientation on children's social behaviour and relationships in schools. Over the past number of years we have participated in a number of symposia on both sides of the Atlantic and written numerous journal articles for psychological and education journals addressing the role of children's social behaviour, especially during breaktime, in the lives of children at school.

Since the first edition, the authors have conducted extensive further research. PB has extended his work on peer interaction by co-directing a large-scale project in which a programme of collaborative group work in schools was developed and evaluated (the SPR.inG project). We draw on this project and also two other large projects directed by PB, one on the effects of class size in schools (e.g., Blatchford, 2003) and another on the role and impact of Teaching Assistants in schools (e.g., Blatchford et al., 2012). PB and EB also directed a follow-up survey of breaktimes in schools, which we draw on in the book.

AP has also been extending his work in the areas of play, aggression, and development more generally. Specific to his work in play, he has helped to further

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clarify how object play is different from other forms of object use, such as construction, exploration, and tool use, and how play may actually affect phylogeny. His work on aggression and bullying has demonstrated how some bullies are socially competent, not deficient in social information processing, and how some forms of aggression relate to group stability, in the form of dominance hierarchies.

AP and PB are pleased that EB has joined us in writing this second edition of the book. He first joined us on the Spencer project and then subsequently worked with PB on the group work projects at the Institute of Education and also national surveys of breaktime/recess in UK schools.

The second edition has been substantially revised to reflect the many developments in the fields covered and to reflect material and insights from our research projects. The authors also draw on many years of teaching at undergraduate, masters and doctoral levels, as well as professional development work with teachers. We draw on these experiences and the feedback we received to further refine what we consider to be key applications of the research on the academic and social world of children and their peers at school.

### **Our ‘developmental’ orientation**

Our orientation to the study of children in schools draws extensively from the sub-fields of developmental, social, educational and evolutionary psychology. As we explain below it seems to us that research in these different traditions has tended to be conducted separately, and not always with knowledge of research in other areas. It is our aim in this book to offer a unifying perspective on interactions that draws on developmental, but also educational and social psychology, in order to inform both adult-child and peer interactions and relationships.

In this second edition we have expanded our discussion of development, *per se*, and consequently have drawn extensively from the evolutionary biological literature. Specifically, we stress a developmental perspective on children in schools because children are qualitatively different from adults and this perspective captures this distinction most directly. Below, we make a number of points about the way the term ‘development’ is understood and used. First though, we identify some other main themes in the book.

As the book’s subtitle states, an important theme of the book is a focus on interactions and relationships between and among people. We feel that interactions in school have tended to be considered by researchers in a fragmented way; for example, interactions between teachers and pupils have tended to be considered quite separately from research on interactions between children. Often the two types of interaction have been studied from very different theoretical perspectives and even disciplines.

It is probably true to say that developmental psychologists are not as familiar as they might be with research on classroom interactions – but, in turn, educational psychologists tend not to be familiar with developmental research

on parent–child interactions and peer interactions. This is unfortunate because there are many conceptual and methodological overlaps between the two kinds of research, and much that each can learn from the other. Pianta (2006, in Hamre & Pianta, 2010) makes the strong assertion that the study of development in classrooms offers as much for developmental theory as it does for educational practice. He argues that the classroom environment should be of particular interest to developmental psychologists because: (1) there are important effects of daily interactions with adults and peers in schools on children’s development – after all, they are in schools for the majority of the day; (2) interactions in schools are as important as interactions with parents and in the home because they are intended to bring about developmental change; and (3) classrooms are often the location within which intervention programmes are implemented. Despite Pianta’s call, it is a salutary fact that the recent two-volume *Oxford Review of Developmental Psychology* (2013) does not have any chapters which examine pupils in classroom or school contexts.

Nevertheless it is possible to take the application of developmental psychology to schools too far. Hamre and Pianta (2010) have shown how, particularly in the USA, recent research on classrooms has drawn on research on processes in home settings, working on the assumption that there are underlying processes driving development, e.g., in the application of research on maternal sensitivity and effective parenting to research on teacher sensitivity and effectiveness. But Hamre and Pianta also point out that one needs to be careful about taking this application to an extreme because the home and the classroom are very different environments with very different dynamics, culture and interactions. In classrooms the driving rationale is the need to consider interactions in relation to school academic progress. So although the more recent interest of developmental psychologists in classrooms is, from the point of view of this book, very timely, it is important not to lose sight of the earlier longstanding research on classrooms and the interactions that take place there.

There is another reason why we feel the classroom is an important site for research in its own right. In preparing this edition it has become apparent that there has if anything been a decline over the past 20 years or so in close observational studies of what goes on in classrooms. Given the rich tradition of classroom studies, on which we draw in this book, this more recent trend is unfortunate and perhaps reflects the way school policy has become driven by econometric concerns with academic performance rather than close attention to the details of pedagogy and teacher–pupil talk. One aim of this book, therefore, is to champion the value of observational studies of children and their interactions in schools.

Observational methods are important because they enable us to describe in a systematic and rich way the everyday interactions children have with their social and physical environments. As we show in this book, the authors have possibly a uniquely extensive experience of direct systematic observational methods for studying children in different school settings such as the playground or the classroom (e.g., Pellegrini, 2012).

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One thing that strikes anyone interested in interactions and relationships in school settings is that there is also a large literature that extends well beyond the realms of psychology, e.g., sociological, ethnographical and linguistic. This book differs from other texts which have focused on interactions in school contexts, because our approach is concerned with the psychological dimensions of these interactions and relationships.

But we are very mindful that all too often research and reviews of research situate themselves in silos of discrete subject knowledge, even when they are essentially interested in the same phenomena. It is probably beyond the space available to conduct a fully integrated text across disciplines, but in this book, despite the psychological orientation, we seek wherever we feel it is helpful to integrate material from different approaches, e.g., with regard to teacher–pupil interactions and sex differences in classroom interaction.

Children's interactions and relationships with peers and adults are complementary. It seems to us that peer interactions in schools have tended to be underestimated, and sometimes discouraged by educationalists, and one aim of this book is to give equal weight to peer–peer and teacher–child interactions. In this book we seek to point out ways in which these two types of behaviours and relationship affect children in different ways. So, for example, adults may be effective at helping a child plan a shopping trip, but peers are much better at affording opportunities for children to use diverse functions of language. When preschoolers are playing, they use a wide variety of functions of language (Pellegrini, 1983) but when children are interacting with the teacher they typically are in the role of responder and reciter.

As well as the developmental approach, a main theme of this book is the adoption of a contextual approach. One widely known theoretical tradition seeks to interpret learning and development within ecologically meaningful environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Weinstein, 1991). Peer relations will take place in different contexts – out of school, e.g., at home or outside the home, as well as in school. Within the 'microsystem' of a school, there will be smaller within-school contexts, in particular the classroom and playground, which have qualitatively distinct sets of relationships, rules and dynamics that promote or hinder learning and social development. As we shall see there are also within-class settings, especially small groups of pupils, that can also be considered as distinct contexts with particular features and effects.

School environments are often considered purely in terms of settings for academic development. Of course, the classroom is a prime place for interaction, at least between children and teachers, and these interactions have a specific role in children's academic development. But interactions between teachers and pupils have been considered in much research as if existing in a vacuum. In contrast, we consider some of the particular ways in which the classroom context can affect the nature of interactions between teachers and children. We also believe that other contexts in schools are important. In particular we have each spent much time researching children's behaviour on school playgrounds, and

consider this a neglected but important area. Indeed, we consider the school playground, and school breaktime, as one of the best places to study children's social behaviour. Additionally, we also show how breaktime, and social behaviour on the playground, can be important to children's academic and social skills.

Children can also be seen to interact with 'context' as well as with people. In this book we discuss ways in which contexts affect children; for example, when children are given doctor props with which to play, they typically engage in play which has a medical theme. On a more global level, children are embedded in classrooms and schools which have different levels of structure. In less structured, 'open field' situations, children may be free to choose their activities and partners. In this sort of context, children are likely to choose a friend with whom to interact and their interaction is likely to be cooperative, rather than disruptive.

Additionally, interactions with friends, compared with other classmates, around academic tasks are likely to be sophisticated and result in high performance. In more structured, 'closed field' situations, children do not have such a choice, and their interactions are less cooperative and in many cases less productive (Hartup, 1996). We also recognize that children affect contexts. By this we mean that children choose contexts which are consistent with their personality; for example, aggressive children choose other aggressive youngsters to play with, while shy children choose other shy children. As children continue to interact with each other they tend to re-enforce this similarity.

This interest in contexts for development has a broader connection with policy. Children may, for example, have a school friendship network which is quite separate from their out of school network. For some pupils it may be difficult to meet their school friends out of school. At secondary school level, students may travel some distance to school, often by car, and are unlikely to meet school friends, unless visits are arranged. This situation may be becoming more common with more market-led policies in education, when the encouragement of parental choice of schools can result in long journeys to the desired school, rather than the automatic choice of the nearest, local school.

There is another kind of context – this time not spatial but historical. Peer relations, and the contexts within which they occur, may be very different to the situation 10 or 25 years ago. There have been many complex social cultural changes over time and these will inevitably affect peer relations. To give an example: peer relations are now the focus of much media interest usually because of the widespread reporting of bullying, anti-social behaviour and violence between gangs in inner cities. There is a widespread sense of risk and threat from criminality and bad behaviour when children and young children meet when unsupervised. There is a general sense that behaviour has got worse in recent years (Blatchford & Baines, 2010). A recent submission to the Children's Society national inquiry in the UK (2007) indicated that the number of teenagers with no best friends had increased over the past 16 years, while those who reported being assaulted or threatened by a peer had increased.

There are signs that these negative views about peer interactions affect parents of school-aged pupils and their decisions concerning the movements of their sons and daughters. It also affects school policies on pupil behaviour. There are signs, for example, that in the USA, the UK and Australia, children of primary school age (5–11 years) have fewer opportunities out of school for interacting freely with peers and thus developing friendships and social skills. For example, a survey in the early 1990s showed that one important venue for peer interaction is disappearing: students are now far less likely to walk to school, in comparison to 30 years ago, and have far less independence out of school (Hillman, 1993). A survey by the Home Office and the DCSF in 2003 found that two-thirds of 8–10 year olds and nearly a quarter of 11–15 year olds had never been to the park or shops on their own (Home Office and DCSF, 2005). In addition, a third of 8–10 year olds had never played out with their friends without an adult present. A survey of pupil views (Blatchford & Baines, 2006) found that nearly a third of 8–15 year olds rarely met friends outside of school.

To return to our treatment of development, we will also discuss the effects of, or consequences of, interactions and relationships in schools – for example in terms of the consequences of having/not having friends in school, of being rejected by their peers, of receiving different kinds and quantities of interactions from their teachers, and of teachers having low expectations of children in their class. These effects can be seen in the short term and the long term; for example, difficulties in interactions with peers can be considered in terms of immediate effects, but can also be considered in relation to long-term effects on personal adjustment (e.g., Parker & Asher, 1987).

Attention to the effects of interactions and relationships is consistent with our developmental approach, and is also connected to a concern with the role or function of interactions in different school contexts, e.g., relationships, such as friendships, in school, interactions on playgrounds, interactive teaching in classrooms, and different interactions of boys and girls in classroom and playground. A broad approach to effects is useful because the value of interactions in some school contexts can be overlooked and underestimated, with sometimes unfortunate consequences. The way schools in the USA and the UK are limiting or eliminating breaktime (Baines & Blatchford, 2011; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005) may be misguided if breaks during the school day have an important social function (Blatchford, 1998), improve achievement (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998) and positively impact children's adjustment to school. Further, the social cognitive skills used in the playground have important implications for achievement (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005).

We stress the fact that different relationships have different consequences. As noted above, when children interact with friends rather than acquaintances, their interactions are often more complex. For example, they are both more likely to disagree and resolve their disagreements (Hartup, 1996). Relatedly, when children make the transition from preschool to primary school with a friend in their classroom, they adjust to school more successfully than children

without friends (Ladd & Price, 1987). Importantly, friends, relative to acquaintances, also facilitate higher levels of performance on cognitive tasks (Jones & Pellegrini, 1996; Pellegrini et al., 2002; Zajac & Hartup, 1997). These sorts of comparisons between different types of peers are particularly important because they are often the opposite of what gets done in schools; for example, teachers often separate friends because they think it will interfere with engagement.

Another theme of this book is a concern with differences between children. This will be evident in two main ways. First, the differences between children in their social relations in terms of rejected vs. popular, friendless vs. befriended, high vs. low expectation, etc. Secondly, we will be interested throughout in group differences, mainly male vs. female, e.g., in relation to interactions with teachers. As we shall see in several chapters, it can also be important to examine ways in which gender and ethnicity are connected.

We cover the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative approaches to observation research. We situate ourselves in the longstanding debates between different educational research traditions. In general, our view of the long-running debate (sometimes the term ‘war’ has been applied) between different research paradigms is that it is often both unproductive and artificial. Specifically, the scientific enterprise consists of both inductive processes, as is primary in ethnography and ethology, and deductive processes (Russell, 1931/1959), as is typified in experimental psychology. For example, in our use of observational methods, we, like some ethnographers and ethologists, stress the importance of inductive categories. Similarly, like some branches of ethnography, we talk about the transaction between children and their contexts. Yet we also, in contrast to some working from a qualitative or ethnographic framework, see value in quantifying our observations, and deductively testing hypotheses experimentally generated from the inductions. In the tradition of ethological studies of children’s development and children in school (Blurton Jones, 1972), we too agree that children should be studied in their natural habitats to maximize our understanding. This is one reason why we were drawn to the school playground as a research site, but why we also think observations in the classroom are very valuable.

Correspondingly, we recognize the value of using experimental analogues of naturalistic settings. The field experiments of Smith and Connolly (1972), Pellegrini, Hubert and Jones (1995) and Baines et al. (2007) are examples of the ways in which experiments can be conducted in schools to understand more closely the nature of things. After all, teachers often ‘experiment’ with different techniques of teaching – this is not much different. But we also comment critically on the use of experimental methods, for example, as used to study teacher expectations and class size differences. Experimental methods are usually seen as the ‘gold standard’ for addressing causality, and we discuss studies that have used such designs. But there are also alternatives which may, for some purposes, be more valid, and we discuss these as well; for example, the use of regression analyses which control statistically for potentially confounding factors, as in research on the effects of class-size differences in school (see [Chapter 8](#)).

Consistent with our developmental orientation, we recognize and stress the role of longitudinal research. Indeed the only way in which development per se can be studied is longitudinal, for developmental research is concerned with the 'process' of change. Cross-sectional studies of different age groups do not meet that criterion. Neither do they, nor can they, examine the ways in which children address transitions in development, such as from preschool to primary school or from primary to middle school. Longitudinal research embedded in a naturalistic design is a very powerful tool in understanding children in schools, and one that researchers of all stripes should aspire to.

Although we take a developmental perspective, in this book we do not seek to cover extensively areas such as cognitive and emotional development and learning, even though they are clearly related to social behaviour. Rather the focus is on the interactive and social nature of school life, involving peers and adults.

### **What do we mean by 'development'?**

The term 'developmental' is used in many different ways by those interested in children. Most basically, the term has its origins in biology (recall that Piaget was trained as a biologist), and from embryology more exactly, and it addresses the process of differentiation that living organisms undergo from conception until death (i.e., ontogeny). The construct 'development' is also of interest to those of us interested in children in schools. Even at the level of public educational policy, the notion of 'development' is evoked: some states in America have 'Developmental Kindergartens'; 'development' in such cases is defined implicitly as 'remedial' classrooms for children. Also in terms of applications to schooling, development is used in terms of curricula and evaluation procedures for children as being 'developmentally appropriate'. Here 'development' means that curriculum and evaluation procedures should be congruent with the children's level of competence. For example, in the area of evaluation, because preschool and kindergarten children's motivation in assessment situations is highly variable (e.g., affected by the sex and/or race of the tester), more naturalistic approaches of evaluation (e.g., observation of behaviour) are developmentally appropriate for this period. Similarly, if peer relations are a hallmark of the preschool and early school years (Waters & Sroufe, 1983), developmentally appropriate practice should therefore involve opportunities for children to interact with each other in a variety of settings.

### ***Different views of development***

It should be clear that the term 'developmental' has wide and disparate uses. Here we present our view of 'development' as it applies to children's development in the context of schools and contrast it with another, more commonly held position. The first, and probably more common and familiar, model considers

the child as an unfinished or incomplete adult. This view is represented in the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky (see Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). For Piaget (1969, cited in Gould, 1977), especially, ontogeny represents a progression towards human adulthood, perhaps reflecting his not so implicit view that human cognitive development recapitulated phylogeny. For example, he suggested that by studying children's thinking we could gain insight into thinking of 'primitive man' and, correspondingly, that children's acquisition of logico-mathematical thought parallels the history of Western science (Piaget, 1969, cited in Gould, 1977). From this view, the less mature stages represent 'lower forms', relative to adulthood. Relatedly, this view of development is often seen as something controlled by a genetic problem, possibly related to distant phylogeny, with minimal 'plasticity', or changeability, in response to genetic mutation, epigenesis, and environmental perturbations (Bateson & Gluckman, 2011). Importantly – and as we will expand upon later – changes in one's environment from conception through adulthood can impact on individual development.

Most developmental theories under this heading assume the existence of an extended period of childhood in terms of training for adulthood. Thus children's behaviour is understood in terms of adults' more advanced behaviour (e.g., pre-operational thought is deficient relative to formal operational thought) and early behaviours are seen in terms of how they are 'transformed' into mature behaviours. In Piaget's terms, the end point is formal operational thought. The thought and behaviour of preschool children is thus considered to be 'less developed' than formal operational thought or merely a means to the end of operational thought. It is the job of the developmentalist to chart the course from infancy and early childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood. Typically, and as exemplified by Piaget's model, one developmental pathway is specified. Piaget's discussion of egocentrism is a good example of this 'unfinished' orientation. The egocentric child, in this model, has neither the ability nor the desire to take another person's perspective. This limitation is 'overcome' through repeated clashes with the social world. In short, egocentrism is a liability to be overcome.

The educational implications of this view are that we present children with materials and activities at their 'developmentally appropriate' levels but the importance of these tasks is considered in terms of the ways in which they contribute to operational thought. Further, we often consider the specified pathways as the only ways in which children can reach desired outcomes. For example, we may think that all children must engage in symbolic play if they are to develop into competent adults. Alternative pathways to competence are not typically considered.

Related to the notion of continuous progress towards adulthood, is the stress on early experiences. If development is continuous, the argument goes, disturbances in the early processes should have important, and sometimes irreversible effects. It is these early experiences upon which subsequent development is based. Viewing infancy and early childhood as a 'critical period' is an example of this perspective.

A second, and preferred, view, however, considers development as much more plastic and sensitive to the individual's ecology, and thus proceeds through 'epigenesis' (Bateson & Gluckman, 2011). Though the term 'epigenetics' was coined by Waddington (1957) in his prescient discussion of epigenetic landscape, it currently refers to the molecular processes by which genetic traits can persist without changing the sequenced DNA through processes that result in the silencing or activation of gene expression (Bateson & Gluckman, 2011). From this position, development is not the mere unfolding of the DNA inherited from one's parents or as a result of gene mutation. Instead, there is transaction between the organism and the environment such that each influences the other over the course of development. In the case of individuals influencing their environments, they can change environments to make them safer, warmer, cooler, etc. In the other case, a very well-known example involves the effect of mothers' nutrition on foetal and subsequent development. Babies born to mothers experiencing poor nutrition will be smaller than if the mother were well nourished. On the other hand, if this same baby, after birth, was to be reared in a richer environment, with an abundance of nutrients, this individual, as an adult, would be more prone to insulin deficiency and high blood pressure.

Also following from this position, 'childish' behaviours are not considered to be imperfect and something to be overcome, but as important responses to the niche of childhood. This view of development assumes that individuals use strategies at different points in development and in different ecological niches so as to maximize benefits and minimize costs, similar to views represented in the theories of Bateson (1978). So, for example, in some contexts it might 'pay' for children to learn how to use tools through play, while for others a better strategy would be to learn them directly from a more competent adult (Bock, 2005). Obviously, these two views have very different, and important, implications for the ways in which we interact with children in schools.

According to this second view, and as noted above, developmental processes can be viewed as responses to the specific demands of specific niches in development, such as childhood. So, specific behaviours, such as egocentric responses and pretend play, are not viewed as immature versions of adult behaviour but as adaptive responses to the special needs of the niche of childhood. Take the example of very young children's limited locomotor capabilities. These could be viewed in immature, unfinished terms or could be viewed as adaptive, in that this limited mobility results in children staying closer to their caregivers, which, in turn, fosters children's learning new skills (Bjorklund & Green, 1992; Gould, 1977). Educationally, this stance also stresses the need for 'developmentally appropriate' practice, but stress is placed on the role of these activities for the specific needs of childhood, rather than as preparation for adulthood.

This view of development also has implications for our views on the continuity of developmental pathways. Accordingly, we suggest that individual children may take many different pathways to developmental competence in different

periods (Bateson & Gluckman, 2011; Kagan, 1983). This is very different from the first view of development that implied that the developmental route is related to phylogenetic history. The second view of development assumes that there is no one royal road to competence. The road taken is a result of children's individual differences and a result of different niches. Suffice it to say for now that we have two views of development, one stressing the child as an incomplete version of adults, and the other viewing childhood as having its own integrity. Correspondingly, the behaviours and cognitions characteristic of childhood have value for that period and a specific context. Because of the important and we feel neglected role of peers we now offer some introductory comments on the role of peers in development.

### ***The role of peers in development***

There is an ambivalent view about peer relations stemming from psychological theory and research. On the one hand there is a well-established position that peer relations have particular value for social and even cognitive development. In an influential book, Youniss (1980) adapted the theories of Piaget and Sullivan to show how peer relations differed from adult-child relations by showing equality, cooperation, reciprocity and mutuality – all of which make a contribution to social development. This positive view has been given an added dimension with a theory of socialization which downplays the role of parents and other adults in favour of the important role of the group and particularly the peer group in development (Harris, 1995). On the other hand, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, much psychological research on peer relations has been concerned with difficulties experienced with peer relations in terms of, for example, peer rejection, bullying, victimization and withdrawal.

One general theme that underpins discussion of peer relations is the overall importance of peer relations in development. Hartup (1996) has argued that the evidence is not strong because much is correlational, that is, features of peer relations are related to later outcomes, but not necessarily in a causal way. There are two basic models recognized in many papers concerning the role of peer relations and friendships in social development. In the first model, peer relations and friendship relations play a direct role in development; for example, low peer acceptance causes peer developmental outcomes. However, a second model does not assume that peer relations directly affect developmental outcomes. Rather, underlying individual differences and behavioural/social difficulties lead to poor peer and friendship relations and hence poor developmental outcomes. Low peer acceptance is therefore a symptom of the underlying disturbance (personality traits/behavioural problems). So, according to this model, poor peer relations do not cause maladjustment, but are a reflection of it. An allied debate involves the extent to which peer relations can be considered a developmental 'advantage' or 'necessity'. Hartup (1992) tends to favour the first of these two models, while

Harris (1995) and Newcomb and Bagwell (1996) argue that the friendships of children and adolescents have a special place in development.

An excellent discussion of the role of peer relations in development can be found in Howe (2010). In our view we need to move beyond basic and simple models of the role of peer relations in development to focus on the complex multivariate dynamic between individual characteristics, peer relations, the quality and nature of relationships and the socializing influence of peers, and a host of other variables including family factors, background (SES, ethnicity and so on).

### **This book**

In this volume, therefore, we view the child in school as a developmental being, interacting with his/her social and physical environments. From this view we can better understand those seemingly idiosyncratic behaviours of young children and help make schools more effective and happier places for children to live in. Importantly, we have pointed out how some common misconceptions about children, their social lives, and school achievement (e.g., regarding breaktime and friends) have resulted in ineffective school policy. We have identified some main themes in this book – its developmental perspective on interactions in schools, but also its concern with contextual factors and the effects of interactions, differences between children and research methods.

It has been 15 years since the first edition and in this second edition we have extensively revised and extended the text. We have tried to reflect newer research and understandings about the topics covered, and there are many ways in which the narrative has been restructured. As described above, we have also drawn heavily from our research work since the first edition. We now indicate the key changes we have made in the description of each chapter.

The book is divided into two halves. In the first half we look at peer interactions. In [Chapter 2](#), we examine children's social competence and peer relations. Social competence is considered broadly and developmentally. While there are different demands in different developmental periods, the ability to adjust and contribute to one's context is a hallmark of competence. As Pellegrini's (2009) research has shown, dimensions of social dominance are included in social competence.

This is followed by a chapter on friendships in school ([Chapter 3](#)) which, in line with much research, summarizes how friendship relations develop with age, but concentrates on the significance of friendships in the school context. It also examines the school breaktime as a context for friendships, and highlights the group nature of social life and experiences with friends. The chapter also considers the value of friendship experiences for development and also the possible positive and negative psychosocial implications of having friends as well as the developmental implications for children that are friendless.

As mentioned above, the authors have championed research on children's play behaviour and experience on school playgrounds (e.g., Blatchford, 1998;

Blatchford, Baines & Pellegrini, 2003; Pellegrini, 1995), and we devote two chapters to research on play (Chapter 4) and breaktime/recess (Chapter 5). In our discussion of play, we define play from a number of different dimensions, outline different forms of play that are observed during childhood, and then make inferences about the value of each form for children. We examine the pro vs. anti breaktime debate, describe ‘within-child’ influences of gender, temperament and age on playground behaviour, and the influence of the timing of breaktime, and end with an examination of its cognitive and social implications.

In Chapter 6 we discuss a dark side of peer interaction in school – aggression. An aspect of peer aggression in schools, studied extensively, is bullying. For this reason our discussion will concentrate on problems of bullying and victimization. Bullying is defined as persistent negative behaviour directed at a specific child or group of children. Victims are typically weaker and more submissive than bullies, so there is also a power differential between bullies and victims.

Chapter 7 is a new chapter in which we bridge the gap between the world of peer relations and schools. This captures recent work on ways that peer relations and social networks are connected to: school attainment and academic adjustment; friendships and learning interactions; effects of school factors on peer relations; and the formal role of peer relations in classroom learning – specifically, research on collaborative and cooperative group work. There have been huge advances in understanding of groupings and collaborative group work, and the SPRinG project co-directed by PB and involving EB has taken place since the first edition. This was one of the biggest (and possibly *the* biggest) study worldwide on collaborative group work, and the book weaves key findings and implications into the text in this chapter.

In the second half of the book we turn to teacher–pupil interactions and influences on children’s school performance. In Chapter 8 we examine research and conceptualizations of the classroom environment. The chapter has two parts: first, ways of conceiving contexts at the class level, in terms of the physical layout of classrooms, the number of pupils, allocation to classes on the basis of ability, social and psychological dimensions of the classroom; and, second, in terms of within-class contexts such as behavioural segments, tasks, activities, and within-class groupings. We further extend the chapter beyond the first edition by looking at more recent work including our own on class-size effects, on ability grouping/tracking, and within-class group arrangements in schools.

In Chapter 9 we turn to interactions with adults in the classroom. We extend the chapter to encompass work stemming from sociocultural and ethnographical approaches, including coverage of questioning, scaffolding and dialogic teaching. In addition – given that Teaching Assistants or paraprofessionals working in classrooms now make up a quarter of the workforce in schools in the UK, with signs that this is growing in other countries too – we also look at interactions between Teaching Assistants/Aides (TAs) and pupils, which was a key concern of recent projects directed by PB.

In [Chapter 10](#) we examine teacher expectations. We believe this topic is very important, e.g., because it is a main process through which social psychological research has been insightful when applied to classrooms. We update this chapter, e.g., by reference to the wider school influences on expectations and also the clearer consequences for pupil progress. We make use of recent experiences in working through this topic with primary school trainee teachers.

In [Chapter 11](#) we turn to sex differences in classroom interaction. We argue that better understanding of influences on the relative performance of boys and girls is a main challenge for educational research, with important theoretical and practical implications. As in the first edition, the chapter focuses on the role of teaching and classroom interactions, but we also look at ways in which other within-child factors such as self-perceptions, self-concept and motivational processes help inform gender differences in interaction and achievement. The literature review is updated and we again include coverage of ethnographical work, because of the insights it sheds on the role of peer relations and self-perceptions on sex differences.

Finally, in [Chapter 12](#) we draw out some overarching points that we feel arise out of the book and stress the importance of this work for policy in schools.

In conclusion, our aim in this book is to stress the importance of research on interactions for educational as well as social policy. School policy and practice, like other aspects of social policy, should be based on our best available knowledge. In this book, we have provided what we see as the best knowledge on children's social lives in school. Further, in anticipation of unanswered and unasked questions, we provide a thorough exposition on methods for studying social processes in school.

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# 2

## CHILDREN'S SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND PEER RELATIONS

### Introduction

It is current practice in many, if not most, schools in the UK, USA, and much of the rest of the industrialized world, to be concerned with children's academic achievement, typically defined in terms of children's performance in the traditional areas of literacy, mathematics, and science. These same assessments are used, in turn, to rank schools within countries and compare countries with each other. While we do not disagree with the importance of academic progress, in the present book we take a broader and more developmental view of children and schooling. Correspondingly, and also central to the orientation of the book, children's social experiences, with peers, siblings, and adults, are crucial not only to healthy and optimal development but also to their performance on traditional measures of academic achievement.

As we argued in the [first chapter](#), young children are qualitatively different from teenagers and teens are, again, different from adults. Further, and perhaps more importantly, each of the stages in development have integrity within themselves and are not imperfect variants of adulthood. From this position there are different 'developmental tasks' (Waters & Sroufe, 1983) for different periods of development. For example – and as we'll expand upon later – infants' seeking and maintaining proximity to an adult caregiver is a hallmark for that period, but that same behaviour would not be an appropriate developmental task during middle childhood or adolescence. Consequently, there is little direct continuity in behavioural indicators of competence across ontogeny – and thus highlights the notion that stages are qualitatively different from each other. In cases where continuity may be observed, the homologous behaviours may have different functions at different periods. On the other hand, a developmental orientation also entails continuity across periods. Social competence appears to be such a complex construct, and if schools are to

be effective they should recognize both the importance of social competence and the developmental integrity of different developmental periods. In this chapter, we first make a case for the centrality of social interaction in schools. Next we define 'social competence', the organizational construct around which this chapter will be organized.

## **The centrality of social interactions for children in schools**

It is not controversial to state that humans are social animals and that they spend much of their time interacting with peers and in mixed age groups, throughout their life spans. While the exact nature of the behaviours and interactions change, with time, many of these interactions and relationships are in the service of them securing resources in their environments and, with development and transition across different niches, the nature and abundance of resources change, and so too should corresponding interactions. For example, in infancy, individuals are typically well-provisioned, protected, and dependent on the almost constant care from adults with whom they form attachment relationships (Sroufe, 2005). Attachment relationships, in turn, are the basis for subsequent relationships: friendships beginning in childhood, and romantic relationships, beginning at puberty (e.g., Dunn, 1993).

The way in which children learn to interact with peers and form relationships is a result of, among other things, opportunities to do so. To state the obvious (though sometimes ignored) point, children do not learn to cooperate, compromise, and assert themselves in a social vacuum; lots of opportunities are necessary to hone these interactional and relationship skills (Harlow & Zimmerman, 1959; Sroufe, 2005; Suomi & Harlow, 1972). This is our reason for putting a premium on affording opportunities for children's social interactions and relationships in schools: school is where children in the industrialized world learn to interact and form relationships with others. While opportunities exist in most preschools, this changes very abruptly when children enter formal schooling (at around 5 years of age in many industrialized countries). Indeed, and certainly in many American and UK primary schools, social interaction and 'talking' to peers during most of the school day is frowned upon, if not formally sanctioned.

Why this change? Speculatively, it may be the case that educators and adults naively see the job of schooling as teaching children 'basic skills' in the form of reading, arithmetic, and science, and interaction with peers is something that interferes with this mission, when in fact they are inter-correlated and complementary (e.g., Coie & Dodge, 1998; Parker & Asher, 1987).

To take an interesting (and troubling) case study, many university educational psychology departments in the United States are marginalizing social and developmental courses and personnel, and adding to a more cognitive and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) orientation. The not so implicit assumption is that social interactions and relationships interfere with the more important job of learning more important subject matter. Correspondingly,

in many American schools, ‘talking’ between children is characterized as something ‘bad’, often sanctioned, and social interaction between students, beginning in and continuing through secondary schools, is limited to break/recess times (where they too have not been eliminated) or lunch breaks. In a similar way, in [Chapters 3 and 5](#) we show how teachers often separate friends in classrooms because they believe that friends will talk and distract each other, while the research evidence is clear that the quality of working relations between friends can be more productive than that between non-friends.

There are islands of enlightenment, however. The province of British Columbia has recently recognized the importance of peer interaction to children’s school adjustment by labelling social responsibility a ‘foundational skill’ in schools, equivalent to a fourth ‘R’ (British Columbia Performance Standards, 2001; we acknowledge Shelley Hymel, at the University of British Columbia, for this information).

In support of our claim of the importance of social interaction in schools, numerous longitudinal studies have documented the importance of children’s peer relations in their adjustment to elementary school. For example, Ladd and colleagues (Ladd et al., 1996; Ladd, Price & Hart, 1988) have shown that successful transition from preschool to primary school is fostered when children make the transition with a friend. As we show in [Chapter 3](#), friends provide important social emotional support for each other in the new and stressful environment of primary school. Further, longitudinal research has also shown that young children’s lack of social competence predicts disaffection with school, poor grades, and eventually, dropping out of school (Coie & Dodge, 1998). In short, social competence, not academic achievement, drives certain measures of school effectiveness, like dropping out, and to ignore or minimize its importance is short-sighted, at best.

In primary school, social interactions and relationships with peers often develop in the context of social games, such as tag, soccer, and jump rope games. As Piaget (1962) argued, games are a modal form of interaction for primary school-age children and thus an appropriate developmental task for children of this age. Our longitudinal research (Pellegrini et al., 2002) has documented empirically the importance of games for children’s, and especially boys’, adjusting to the first mandatory year of primary school. In this work, inner-city Minneapolis first graders (in two schools) were observed on their playgrounds at recess and assessed on varying aspects of social competence and adjustment to school. We found that children, but especially boys, used their facility with games (ball games, chase, and jumping or singing games) as a way to achieve and maintain social competence with their peers and adjust to very early schooling (as assessed by self-report and teacher ratings). Game facility was measured by aggregating teacher ratings, peer nominations, and observations of time spent in games and levels of game sophistication. Game facility predicted unique and significant variance in children’s end-of-year social competence (measured by teacher rating scales and peer nominations of social preference), beyond that

predicted by beginning-of-year social competence. Similarly, game facility predicted unique and significant variance in end-of-year adjustment, beyond beginning-of-year adjustment (see [Chapter 5](#) for more on this).

These findings are consistent with results showing the reciprocal effects of peer relations and success in early schooling (Coie & Dodge, 1998) and also extend earlier work on peer relationships and adjustment to school (e.g., Ladd et al., 1988) to the extent that the majority of the students in our study were low-income children (75% of our sample of children were on free or reduced price lunch, and Spanish was the first language for 40% of the children). It is well known that children, and especially boys, from economically disadvantaged groups have difficulty adjusting to and succeeding in school (e.g., Heath, 1983). We demonstrated that their success in one part of the first-grade school day (games at recess) could predict more general school adjustment.

## Social competence as a developmental construct

Social competence is a difficult construct to define, and definitions range from relatively discrete behavioural descriptions (e.g., Dodge, 1986) to more broad, organizational conceptions (Waters & Sroufe, 1983). In this chapter we take the latter approach because it is consistent with our developmental orientation in that it can account for continuities as well as discontinuities across developmental epochs. Further, these two properties enable us to treat each developmental period with integrity such that there will be different indicators of social competence at different periods of development. Correspondingly, these within-stage indicators are treated as adaptive to each period and not as imperfect variants of adult behaviour.

From this orientation, articulated by Sroufe and colleagues (Sroufe, 2005; Waters & Sroufe, 1983) and Vaughn and colleagues (e.g., Vaughn et al., 2009), we define social competence as children's ability to coordinate affect, cognition, and behaviour in achieving personal social goals and accessing resources in their specific developmental niches (Vaughn et al., 2009; Waters & Sroufe, 1983). Thus, social, affective, and cognitive processes are integrated to access and maintain resources across development, thus providing underlying continuity to the construct. Correspondingly, the specific behaviours and indicators of social competence at different periods used in the service of resource control will vary across development. For example, crying is a competent strategy for infants to employ to access food from their parents but not for primary school children. In the latter case either asking an adult for help or getting food themselves from a storage area are more appropriate.

The choice of behaviours used to access and maintain resources will, of course, vary in different niches and across different developmental periods. Individuals will marshal their social, cognitive and affective skills and strategies to assess the value of the resources and the associated costs of the behaviours used to access and maintain the resources (Pellegrini, 2008). When resources are

scarce and there is relatively high competition for them, individuals may have to use assertive and sometimes agonistic strategies. By way of evidence, Smith and Connolly (1972, p. 130), in their magisterial experimental studies of preschool environments and behaviour, found that object disputes and aggression increased when the number of toys was diminished. When resources are abundant, and everyone gets a share (i.e., scramble competition), then strategies are more likely to be cooperative than aversive; costs associated with using aversive strategies would be too high given the abundance of resources (Pellegrini & Hou, 2011).

In short, there are different indicators of social competence in different ecologies at different ages, so there are different hallmarks for children at different ages. By implication, the hallmarks for toddlers should not be considered as unfinished or incomplete versions of adult behaviour; they represent adaptability to that specific developmental niche. Our conception of social competence, following Waters and Sroufe (1983), considers competence as ‘an integrated concept which refers broadly to an ability to generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands in the environments’ (Waters & Sroufe, 1983, p. 80).

Waters and Sroufe further specify their definition of social competence by listing some of its subcomponents for the preschool period by which children can secure and maintain resources. First, individuals must contribute to situations. Responding to others (e.g., answering questions) or making one’s own contributions to conversations (e.g., asking questions) are ways of contributing. Second, children must recognize the opportunity or demand to respond. For example, in conversation children are obligated by the rules of social discourse to respond to questions. Third, children should possess a repertoire of response alternatives. For example, children should have an array of responses to others’ discourse; they can ask for questions to be clarified, change the topic, or answer the question. Fourth, they should be able to choose alternatives that are appropriate to specific situations. Importantly, children’s ability to assess costs and benefits associated with different strategies in relation to the value of different situations should determine strategy choice. (We’ll expand more on this point later in this chapter.) Fifth, children should be motivated to respond. That is, children should want to engage in social discourse or interact with materials. As such, children should want to interact with different forms of stimuli; they should be active not passive. Sixth, children should persist at their interactions and change their responses to meet situational demands. For example, children’s play with their peers should be sustained. Individual children may have to alter their social responses (e.g., sharing toys) in order for the interaction to be sustained. Last, children’s responses should be fine-tuned. That is, children should be able to decide quickly when to use certain types of behaviour. In addition, they should be adept at using them in different areas.

How do these individual processes relate to specific developmental hallmarks? Waters and Sroufe (1983) have listed social competence hallmarks through childhood, and they are displayed in [Table 2.1](#). The issues presented in this table