Title: Longitudinal Social Skill Development in Children with and without Intellectual Disability

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Introduction: There is need to understand the longitudinal patterns of growth in social skills functioning across early childhood and through adolescence, particularly for at-risk groups such as individuals with intellectual disability (ID) and other risk factors (e.g., Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004). Social skills are critical to children's development from a young age and particularly during formal schooling; intervention programs have successfully improved these skills in school-aged children (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011). The goal of the present study was to identify the social skills trajectories from ages 6 to 13 of children with intellectual disability (ID) or typical development (TD).

Method: We utilized structural equation modeling techniques to examine the longitudinal development of social skills in children with (N = 84, mean IQ = 60.87) and without (N = 120, mean IQ = 103.3) intellectual disability, from age 6 to age 13. Participants were recruited from a larger longitudinal study examining school and child influences on the development of behavior problems in children with and without disabilities. Researchers measured social skills using the Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) and behavior problems using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Latent growth curve analysis was used to model intraindividual and interindividual changes in social skills over time, with disability status, gender, socioeconomic status, special education placement, and externalizing and internalizing behavior problems as possible predictors. Model fit indices included: chi-square difference test, RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, and TLI.

Results: The best fitting growth model specified a linear slope, or rate of change in social skills across time, which was greater for children placed in special education at age 6. Other covariates indicating risk-status at age 6 accounted for additional variance in the growth model, indicating that children with ID, children placed in special education at age 6, and children with clinical levels of externalizing and internalizing problems, demonstrated lower initial social skills scores. In addition, there was a positive significant effect of special education placement on the slope factor, with $\beta = .50$, $p < .001$, showing that children with ID who spent most of their time in special education classes at age 6 demonstrated greater growth in social skills from age 6 to age 13.

Discussion: The findings reported in this study suggest that social skills grew at a linear rate over time, consistent with previous work (e.g., Lamont & Van Horn, 2013). Initial social skills were lower for children with ID status, special education placement, and borderline or clinical levels of externalizing and/or internalizing behavior problems, suggesting that students with such risk factors may need special attention. A promising implication of the study is that early placement in special education may improve the rate of change in social skills over time, despite these children beginning with lower scores. This speaks to the importance of providing free and appropriate public education to all children, highlighting the role of teachers and peers in shaping youth outcomes (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004).

References/Citations: