

## Original Article

# Compilation and validation of the puppet show-based social skills training package and its effectiveness on the behavioral problems of the preschoolers

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## Abstract

**Background:** The aim of this study was to compile and validate the social skills training (SST) package based on puppet shows and determine its effectiveness on the behavioral problems of preschoolers.

**Methods:** 40 preschool children were selected using available sampling method to evaluate the effectiveness of the compiled package on behavioral problems of preschool children (puppet shows, all components of preschool social skills) using a semi-experimental method with a pretest-posttest design. Then the intervention and the control group were selected. The opinions of the experts were collected by the Delphi method. The research population at this stage was all the specialists in the field of SST of children whom 10 were selected using purposive sampling method. The validity was confirmed using content validity index (CVI). Data of the behavioral problems subscale were collected using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), and analyzed using one-way analysis of covariance.

**Results:** The findings showed that the effect of the SST package based on puppet show in the intervention group was statistically significant ( $F=47.28$ ,  $P<0.05$ ), so that it was effective in reducing behavioral problems of preschoolers. To validate the package, content validity index (CVI) was used, which was obtained as 0.87.

**Conclusion:** In order to prevent and treat behavioral disorders in children, harmless treatment methods can be replaced physical punishment and verbal aggression. Correct and continuous training of social skills, along with correct and friendly communication with attractive and entertaining methods such as showing puppets to children, can be a solution to improve behavioral problems at this age.

**Keywords:** Child, Preschool; Education; Problem Behavior; Social Skills.

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## Introduction

In a period when children are interacting with the society, it is a necessity to pay attention to the training of skills. One of the preventive programs that has received

worldwide attention is teaching life skills to children (1). In order to increase the level of mental health and prevent mental and social distress, the World Health Organization

(WHO) prepared a program entitled (life skills training) and presented it to UNICEF in 1993. Since that year, this program has been assessed and implemented in many countries. Among the life skills, scientific researches and clinical applications related to children's social skills have received more attention as an important issue since the 1980s. The preschool period is a very important period in terms of skills formation (2). Research has shown that in the first few years of life, the essentials of cognitive, emotional, and social development must be established in children. About 20% of preschool children generally suffer from low to high levels of behavioral and affective problems, these problems are involved in acquiring the necessary skills at this age and have a negative effect on cognitive and social development (3).

According to the study of Arnold et al., children with advanced social skills are preferred by their peers and these types of children are more successful in their social and academic life (4). However, children who lack social skills at the beginning of their academic life, may suffer from the lack of acceptance by their peers and academic failure, and usually have behavioral problems. A number of studies have shown a negative relationship between strong social skills and behavioral problems (5). In today's Iranian society, art is gradually proving its position as an efficient tool in creating a new space for life and changing attitudes. Puppet shows can be very useful and effective in transferring training achievements and increasing social-communication skills and life skills for children due to their attractiveness and exhilaration. Evidence shows that early interventions (e.g., in preschool) to teach social skills can lead to positive interpersonal relationships and prevent behavioral problems and other harmful consequences in adulthood (6).

SST using art can be a suitable intervention option for treating behavioral problems and

various social behaviors in childhood; however, there are few studies inside and outside the country that have been conducted to investigate the effect of teaching these skills using puppet shows in preschoolers, and in most of them, other training methods have been used (7-9). The common point in all these studies is the use of ready-made training packages, not researcher-made ones. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to compile and validate the puppet show-based SST package using the collection of the components of this type of skill from theoretical bases and to examine its effectiveness on the behavioral problems of preschoolers.

### **Methods**

The present study was applied research in terms of its purposes, and in terms of data collection, mixed research method was used, which consists of three stages.

In the first stage, the puppet show-based training package was compiled. At this stage, the research community was all the theories and sources including books, articles, and internal and external researches related to children's social skills of preschoolers. After studying the references, all components and variables related to the social skills of preschoolers were identified.

Then, using Delphi qualitative method and designing a questionnaire, the experts' opinion on these components were collected, and the final components were identified and the consensus of the experts was reached, and then, the validity of each component was confirmed using content validity index (CVI). After the consensus and validation of the validity of the components of children's social skills, plays and assignments related to the final components of social skills, the design and content of the SST package were compiled in the form of puppet shows.

In the second stage, the content validity index (CVI) was used to validate the

training package. At this stage, the research community was all the specialists in the field of children's social skills training in Kerman city, 10 of whom were selected using purposeful sampling method. The questionnaire was given to all 10 people, and 8 people responded to the questions. According to the results, the CVI of the puppet show-based SST package was 0.87.

In the third stage, the effectiveness of the compiled training package on the behavioral problems of preschoolers was investigated. At this stage, the present research was quantitative in terms of the underlying paradigm. Data were collected using a semi-experimental method with a pretest-posttest design and a control group. At this stage, an experimental group (receiving the puppet show-based training package and a control group) participated. The statistical population at this stage was all children (boys and girls) of preschool age (5 years old) in Kerman province in 2022-2023. According to the experimental design of the research and that the quorum of the sample size in the experimental research (at least 15 people in each group) (10), using the convenience sampling method, a total of 40 preschoolers were selected as samples. For this purpose, first, 2 preschool centers of Kerman province were selected, and then, 20 people from the first preschool center were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 20 people from the second preschool center were randomly assigned to the control group. The inclusion criteria were the consent of parents and children to participate in the training sessions and complete the questionnaire, and not having physical defects. The exclusion criteria were the absence of more than 3 sessions and the lack of cooperation between parents and children.

At this stage, data were collected using Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), Gresham et al., (parent version). The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), the parent version of the SSRS, included 55 items, 18

of which measure behavioral problems. Behavioral problems scale (BPS) includes 3 subscales (internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and hyperactivity). This tool is scored such that the parent ranks that item based on the frequency of the children's action and its importance. Frequency, according to how often the desired social behavior occurs, is rated based on a 3-point scale (never = 0, sometimes = 1, often = 2). Also, the parents are asked to rate the importance of the behaviors based on a 3-point scale (not important = 0, important = 1, very important = 2), and by summing the scores of each subscale, its total score of that subscale is obtained. The rating duration is 25 to 30 minutes. Externalizing behavior subscales were assessed through questions 39, 46, 55, 43, 49, 54; internalizing behaviors through questions 41, 42, 45, 40, 52, 53, and hyperactivity through questions 53, 47, 50, 51, 44, 48. Gresham et al., reported that the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of the parent version for the total social skills factor and the subscales were 0.90, 0.81, 0.76, 0.75, and 0.83, respectively (11). Shahim, has reported the internal consistency and retesting of this instrument as an indicator of scale validity, as well as the construct and concurrent validity of this scale favorable (12). For the teachers' form, Gresham et al., also reported reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.94 for the total social skills factor and reliability coefficient of 0.90, 0.90, and 0.91 for the subscales, respectively.

In order to identify the components of children's social skills, the existing domestic and foreign literature and background in this field were assessed and 33 components were identified. In the next stage, the Delphi method was used to check the experts' opinions of these 33 components. In the first step of the Delphi method, by designing an open-ended questionnaire, the experts expressed their opinions about all the components descriptively. In this step, the experts

suggested overlapping, separating, and rejecting some components as unrelated components and suggesting another component for social skills. Then, in the second step of the Delphi method, a multiple-choice (Likert) questionnaire was sent to the experts to achieve their consensus about the effect of each component on social skills, and finally, 10 components were extracted for children's social skills.

After verifying the content validity of the final components of the SST; using the

educational resources as well as the contents related to the principles of puppet shows, assignments and puppet shows related to each component were designed and the SST package preschoolers in the form of puppet shows in 10 sessions of 45 minutes were compiled and re-checked by the experts for the content validity of the presented shows.

The content validity index (CVI) of each session of the training package was also calculated, which is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Content validity index (CVI) and summary of the sessions of the children's social skills training package abased on puppet shows

Session	Content of Session	Objectives of the Show	Duration (min)	CVI
1	Balloon show	Reducing social anxiety as an icebreaker for child communication	45	0.87
2	Emoticons show	Understanding the emotions of other children and adults Recognizing and labeling emotions	45	0.75
3	Shopping show	Increasing tolerance level Development of social relations Development of resilience and patience	45	0.75
4	Emotion presentation show	Expressing emotions in a visual way, Knowing the emotional states of the child in different situations Recognizing emotions and feelings	45	0.87
5	Anna and Sally show	Understanding the point of view of others in social situations Understanding the beliefs and intentions of others' behavior in different situations	45	0.75
6	The show of I in the family; playing the role of father, mother, and child	Familiarity with the basic principles of communication with parents Familiarity with the situation of children in the family and their awareness of the principles and rules of the family	45	100
7	The show of I in the classroom; playing the role of teacher and child	How to communicate with the teacher How to express a request to the teacher Knowing the children's condition and their awareness of the class and its rules The basic principles of communication in the classroom (teaching politeness)	45	100
8	The show of I in a party; playing the role of host and guest	Familiarity with the concepts of guest and host How to enter a gathering at parties Table manners and hospitality Familiarity with the children's condition and their awareness of the party and its customs	45	100
9	Let's talk show, train show; role play and show	Strengthening the positive feeling towards the law and everyone's need for the law Acquaintance with punishment and consequences of non-compliance Compliance with law and order Familiarity with the concept of order through play	45	100
10	The red show, the queue for the bathroom, fight; role play and play	Delay in success and reaching a collective point of view Accepting the consequences of non-compliance with law and order Familiarity with the concepts of compensation, penalty and peace	45	0.87

Table 2. Demographic information of the specialists

History	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Teaching experience in the field of social skills (years)	1.00	8.00	3.57
Activity experience in the field of social skills (years)	8.00	18.00	11.50
Study experience in the field of social skills (years)	1.00	10.00	6.00

In the next stage, after compiling and validating the compiled training package, this package was implemented on preschoolers and its effectiveness on their behavioral problems was investigated.

After collecting the questionnaires, the data were analyzed using univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

To investigate the effect of the puppet show-based SST training package on behavioral problems, to keep the effect of the pre-test scores of behavioral problems constant in the two experimental and control groups, and to compare the post-test scores, ANCOVA was used.

## Results

The demographic information of the experts is presented in Table 2. In this study, 10 experts were included, but 8 of whom completed the survey questionnaire.

Then, the validity of 10 components identified based on the experts' opinions and calculating the content validity index (CVI) based on the frequency of responses to the effective to truly effective options and dividing by the total number, was determined, which is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Content validity of the components of children's social skills

Components	CVI
Emotional self-awareness	0.87
Recognizing and understanding emotions	0.87
Asking and helping skills	0.80
Social etiquette	0.93
Self-expression and determination	0.80
Law and order and tolerance	0.80
Accountability	0.80
Having cooperation	0.87
Sympathy	0.93
Social etiquette and communication skills	0.83

In Table 4, the descriptive indices of the pre- and post-test scores of the behavioral problems variable in the experimental and control groups are presented.

As shown in Table 4, in the pre-test stage, there is no significant difference between the mean scores of internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and hyperactivity. But in the post-test phase, the average scores of all three subscales in the experimental group decreased compared to the control group.

To compare the performance of the control and experimental groups, and to eliminate the effects of pre-test, univariate analysis of covariance was used. Before the covariance

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of pre- and post-test scores of behavioral problems in experimental and control groups

Variable	Stage	Puppet Show		Control		P, value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Internalizing problems	Pre-test	12.05	2.49	10.94	4.17	0.07
	Post-test	9.45	2.88	11.96	3.96	0.04
Externalizing problems	Pre-test	10.05	3.02	11.65	4.14	0.06
	Post-test	8.97	2.35	10.70	3.07	0.01
Hyperactivity	Pre-test	9.57	3.27	10.57	3.11	0.1
	Post-test	7.24	2.68	10.70	3.70	0.01

analysis, the violation of its assumptions was checked to verify the conditions of using this statistical test. Shapiro-Wilks test was used to check the normality of the distribution of the dependent variable scores in the pre- and post-test stages, and the significance level of the z score of this test for the dependent variable is greater than 0.05 ( $P=0.01$ ), therefore, the normality of distribution of scores of dependent variables is confirmed. Levene's test was used to check the assumption of homogeneity of error variances and the results of this test showed that there is no significant difference between the groups in terms of the variance of the dependent variables. Also, the assumption of homogeneity of the regression slope of the test and with significance level of  $P=0.001$  and ( $F=1.57$ ) for internalized problems, ( $F=0.94$ ) for internalizing problems and ( $F=0.02$ ) for hyperactivity showed that this assumption is also established and the implementation of covariance analysis is unimpeded.

*The hypothesis testing:* The puppet show-based SST training package has an effect on the behavioral problems of preschoolers.

According to the statistical value obtained from the covariance analysis for the effect of the covariate variable effect with dependent variable ( $F=14.57$ ,  $P=0.001$ ), the assumption of linearity of covariate and dependent regression is also confirmed. Also, the effect of the group (experimental) ( $F=47.28$ ,  $P=0.001$ ), as a result, the hypothesis of the research is confirmed and it can be said that the training package was effective in reducing the behavioral problems of preschoolers. The calculated effect size (0.55) also indicates a relatively great effect of the training package on children's behavioral problems.

## **Discussion**

This research was conducted to compile and validate the puppet show-based SST package and determine its effectiveness on the behavioral problems of preschoolers.

The results showed that both the components of children's social skills identified in the qualitative phase of the research, and the training package of the puppet show developed based on these skills have the adequate validity and reliability. The findings obtained from the implementation stage of the training package showed that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of the variable of behavioral problems, so that the puppet show-based SST training package was effective in reducing children's behavioral problems. The findings of this study are consistent with the results of some studies Tahmasebi et al., Asghari, Karimi et al., Silva et al., Gómez-Romero et al., Chmielewski & Beste and Kulakova et al. (13-19).

Obviously, children with behavioral problems not only cannot reach the level of skill and self-actualization in society, but with the occurrence of immature and disorganized behaviors, antisocial behaviors can be predicted in adolescence and adulthood. While the acquisition of skills that make it possible to express thoughts and feelings will enrich interpersonal relationships with others in family, school, and community situations. Teaching skills using show-based methods as a necessity for behavior modification in children and adolescents has attracted the attention of researchers. Behavioral problems are among the problems faced by preschoolers. Considering these problems, it can be seen that effective results cannot be achieved only through teaching with words (13). Since puppet language is unique for its ability to help teachers and children learn from each other, grow, communicate, gain self-confidence and self-expression, and the method of performing puppet shows can be used to reduce behavioral problems (16).

The findings of the present research also confirm that children's behavioral problems are influenced by the SST. At the same time, most of the non-show-based

interventions, despite reporting positive changes, have shown few changes (20). taught social skills in a direct and usual way to children with the participation of their parents, and reported few positive changes in children's externalizing behavior problems. The significant positive changes reported in the present study, unlike the study of Van Vugt, can indicate the increase in the effectiveness of teaching social skills to children by placing it in the framework of a puppet show (20). It seems that providing education in the form of a show has led to deeper and better learning by creating more attractiveness and motivation as well as making information, concepts and skills more tangible for children. Trainings, intra-group processes, and the attractiveness of show-based training in a safe, cooperative, and active environment, probably led children to know more about themselves and their feelings and behaviors, and these factors, along with identification with fictional characters, led children to become more self-controlled and to have more positive interactions with peers. Puppet show can help improve children's behavioral and social skills through secretly and indirectly making children interested in applying the social and behavioral skills they already have in their behavioral battery. In addition, adding new behaviors to their behavioral treasure, improves behavioral and social skills of children and increases the motivation to use them, and subsequently, will have an effect on their desire and interest in academic, social, and behavioral fields.

Art therapy, especially the use of drama, can play an effective role in reducing these inappropriate behaviors (18). Children with behavioral problems are usually anxious with feelings of fear or apprehension and depression. Some of them show extroverted behavior and others are hermit. Puppet show is also effective for confronting the child with anxiety. What puppets teach about facing fear and dealing with anxiety will ultimately reduce the child's anxiety to a manageable level. Depression, fear, and in

general, anxiety-based behavioral problems can be solved using puppet shows (20). Puppet show awakens children's inner joy and innate need to play because of having a doll. Show-related actions as a training tool will encourage and develop individual ability in the realm of social life.

Bahr et al., showed that the SST for all three types of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) reduces the reports of teachers regarding social isolation, distraction, emotional instability, disorders of children with ADHD and increases their social performance (21). The SST has also reduced behavioral problems such as inattention, hyperactivity, inability to focus on tasks and doing them, reducing or modulating excessive motor activity and destructive behaviors in children with ADHD (22).

### **Limitation**

The main limitations of this study was the possibility of bias due to the self-reporting tools used in the research, the absence of a follow-up phase, the use of convenience sampling method (non-random), as well as limiting the statistical population to preschoolers, which leads to the generalization of the research findings with caution. The main result that can be inferred from the present research and previous researches is that just as children need food and air, they also need play as a factor for social development. Children familiarization with dolls can lead to the effect of this art in attracting interest and reducing inappropriate behavioral symptoms, therefore, teachers and counselors of preschool centers are suggested to use the puppet show program to reduce inappropriate behavior of children. For children of this age, it is suggested to design the teaching of different concepts like other life skills in the form of a puppet show so that the objectivity of the education can lead to more durable learning. In addition, considering the effectiveness of the puppet show-based SST package on the

improvement of children's behavioral problems, the effectiveness of this training package is suggested to be used on other psychological variables.

### **Conclusion**

In order to prevent and treat behavioral disorders in children, harmless treatment methods can be replaced physical punishment and verbal aggression. Correct and continuous training of social skills, along with correct and friendly communication with attractive and entertaining methods such as showing puppets to children, can be a solution to improve behavioral problems at this age. These results show that for the prevention and treatment of behavioral disorders in children, harmless treatment methods can be replaced with aggressive and harmful methods, including corporal punishments and verbal aggression, which are still used in some schools. Therefore, correct and continuous training of social skills along with proper and friendly communication with attractive and entertaining methods such as puppet show to children, can be a solution to improve behavioral problems at this age.

### **Authors' contribution**

Abbas Sadeghzadeh and Fariborz Dortaj developed the study concept and design. Hassan Asadzadeh and Ali Delavar acquired the data. Abbas Sadeghzadeh and Esma'il Sadipour analyzed and interpreted the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the intellectual content, manuscript editing and read and approved the final manuscript.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

### **Informed consent**

Questionnaires were filled with the participants' satisfaction and written

consent was obtained from the participants in this study.

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