

## Social skills and behavioral problems in 3- to 5-year-old children: a case study

Habilidades sociales y problemas de conducta en niños de 3 a 5 años de edad: un estudio de caso

Alexandra Cárdenas-Loor\*  
Patricia Genovezzy-Velásquez\*  
Ligia Napa-Arévalo\*  
Henry Alarcón-López\*



### Abstract

The aim was to evaluate social skills and behavior in children from 3 to 5 years of age. The research was conducted at the "TIWINZA" Basic Education School, located in the Buena Fe canton, province of Los Ríos. The skills of 16 children were evaluated through surveys to their parents or legal representatives, and the proposed survey was used for this purpose. Eighty-seven percent and 75% of the children were located within a medium level of cooperation, interaction and social independence. Regarding social skills, 75% of the children were located between the medium and significant deficit levels. The 62.5%, 56.3%, and 37.5% did not present problems of social isolation, anxiety/complaints, or selfish or egocentric behavior, respectively, and only one student showed a

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\* Bachelor's Degree in Education with a major in Early Childhood Education. Unidad Educativa Particular ADONAI, Quevedo, Ecuador, [acardenas@adonai.edu.ec](mailto:acardenas@adonai.edu.ec); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9791-3679>

\* Engineer in Business Administration, Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, Quevedo-Ecuador. [pattyrocig76@gmail.com](mailto:pattyrocig76@gmail.com); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8556-5777>

\* Certified Public Accountant, Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, Quevedo-Ecuador. [filiylili84@gmail.com](mailto:filiylili84@gmail.com); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5652-3412>

\* Doctor of Pedagogical Science, Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, Quevedo-Ecuador. [halarcon@uteq.edu.ec](mailto:halarcon@uteq.edu.ec); <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0077-6207>

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significant problem. Finally, 56% of the children externalized their emotions easily. These findings indicate that most of the children studied did not present significant behavioral problems.

**Keywords:** Students, anxiety, behavior, social cooperation, skills.

## Resumen

Se planteó evaluar las habilidades sociales y comportamiento en niños de 3 a 5 años de edad. La investigación se realizó en la Escuela de Educación Básica “TIWINZA”, ubicada en el cantón Buena Fe, provincia de Los Ríos. Se evaluó las habilidades a 16 niño(as) mediante encuestas a sus padres o representantes legales, y para el efecto de empleó la encuesta propuesta. El 87% y 75% de los niños, se ubicaron dentro de un nivel de cooperación, interacción e independencia social, medio. En cuanto a las habilidades sociales, el 75% de los niños se ubicó entre los niveles medio y déficit significativo. El 62.5%, 56.3%, y 37.5 no presentaron problemas de aislamiento social, ansiedad/quejas, ni comportamiento egoísta o egocéntrico, respectivamente, y tan solo un alumno mostró problema significativo. Finalmente el 56% de los niños exterioriza sus emociones con facilidad. Estos hallazgos señalan que la mayor parte de los niños(as) estudiados no presentaron problemas conductuales significativos.

**Palabras clave:** Alumnos, ansiedad, comportamiento, cooperación social, destrezas.

## Introduction

Social skills and behavioral problems in children under 5 years of age express behaviors, thoughts and emotions typical of human beings at an early age, which allow the child to relate to other individuals of the same species and the surrounding environment. In this sense, Petrides et al. (2016) and Olivares-Olivares et al, (2019), point out that early education is essential to create strategies and skills in children that will facilitate their social orientation, giving them confidence and security with their family, social and school environment. However, for Black et al. (2017), these social skills should be stimulated at an early age, which allow them to interact socially or relate to others, experience social groupings, and be accepted by their peers (Guzmán, 2018; Barba-Martín, 2020).

Behavioral problems in children from 3 to 5 years of age, affect early

childhood education (initial) being the psychological strength of parents at home, the main basis for the problems to be channeled in a better way, as this directly influences the children (Gardner et al., 2016; Morales et al., 2016; Barba-Martín, 2020), Gamboa, Barros, Barros (2016), Rodríguez (2010) and Ibabe and Bentler (2016), when problems have their genesis at home, children's behavior is manifested through emotions such as sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, tantrums, tantrums.

In Ecuador, education is a right protected in Article 26 of the Constitution of the Republic (2008), which stipulates that education is a right of people throughout their lives and an inexcusable duty of the State. Article 344 recognizes for the first time in the country, initial education as part of the national education system.

In this sense, this research presents the results of a case study conducted in a basic education school in the Buena Fe canton, province of Los Ríos, whose objective was to evaluate social skills and behavior in children from 3 to 5 years of age.

## **Materials and methods**

Social skills and preschool behavior were estimated according to the perception of the child's parents and/or mothers, according to a scale from 0 to 3, where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often. For social skills, the scale was applied in a survey consisting of 34 items, whose results were classified into three functional levels (social cooperation, social interaction, and social independence), using the following scale: high functioning, medium, moderate deficit, and significant deficit.

To determine preschool behavior, the survey consisted of 42 items, and its results were ordered in five groups: social isolation (AS), anxiety/somatic complaints (AQ), egocentric/explosive (EG), attention problems/hyperactivity (AH), antisocial/aggressive (AA), following guidelines proposed by O'Hare et al. (2015), described by (Masten, 2018). The scale used was: no problem, average, moderate problem, significant problem. The total score discriminated in high

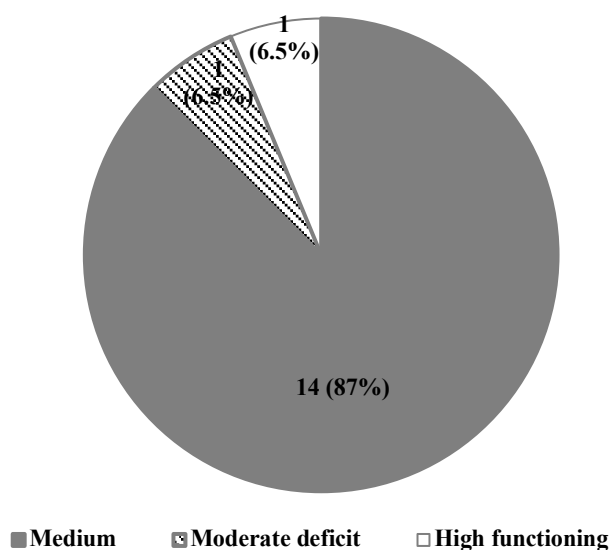
or low level of social skills, as indicated by Gresham (2016).

Data were sorted using the Excel spreadsheet. The results were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools (percentages and arithmetic means).

## Results

Regarding the social cooperation of children aged 3 to 5 years, most of them, represented with 87% (14 children), were pigeonholed within a medium level of cooperation, while moderate and high functioning deficits shared representation with 6.5% each (Figure 1).

*Figure 1.* Functional level of social cooperation in children from 3 to 5 years of age from the "TIWINZA" Basic Education School, Buena Fe canton, Los Ríos province.



The functional levels of social interaction and social independence detected in the children showed similar results, since in both, 75% (12 children) are considered within the medium level of social interaction and independence, and only 25% (4 children) in the high-functioning level (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Functional level of social interaction and social independence in children from 3 to 5 years of age from the "TIWINZA" Basic Education School, Buena Fe canton, Los Ríos province.

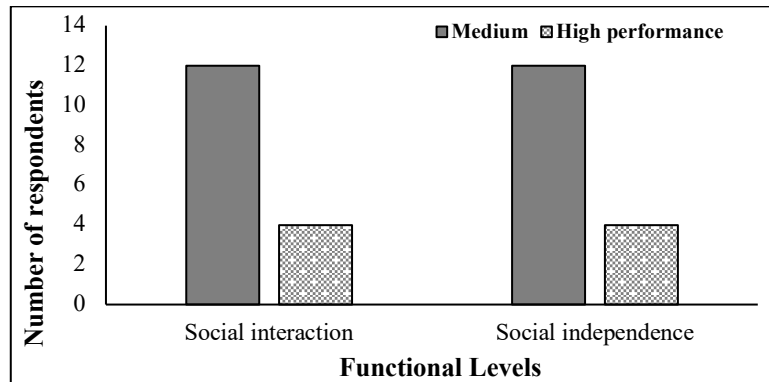
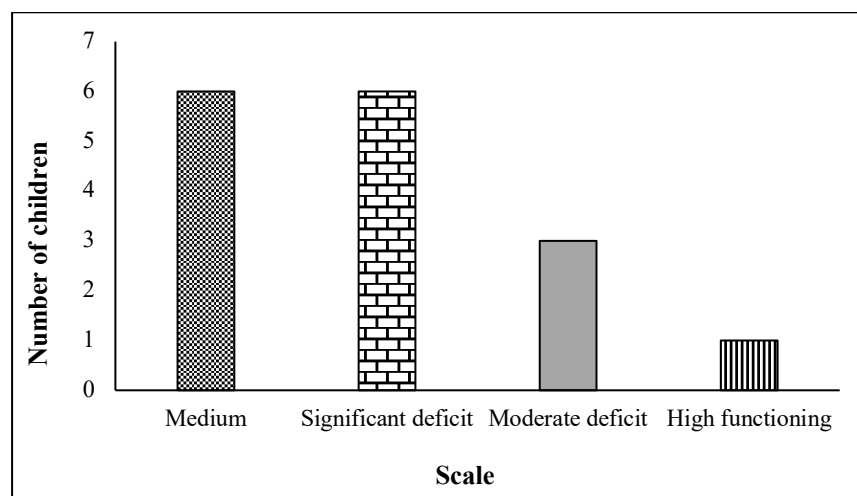


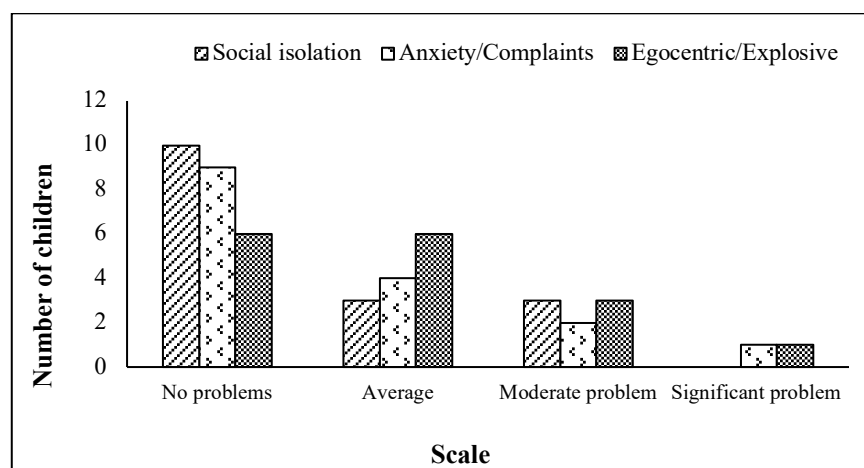
Figure 3 shows the final analysis of social skills of the children evaluated. The medium and significant deficit levels showed a representativeness of 37.5% (6 children) each, while 18.8% (3 children) were pigeonholed in the moderate deficit level, 6.2% (1 child) a high functioning.

Figure 3. Social skills in children from 3 to 5 years of age from the "TIWINZA" Basic Education School, Buena Fe canton, Los Ríos province.



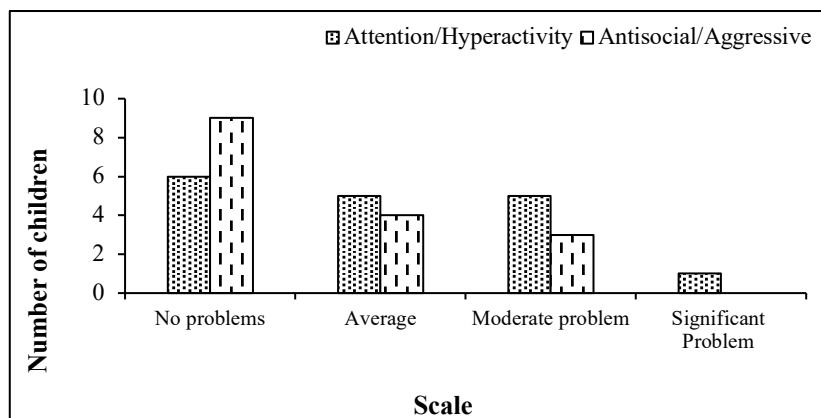
In terms of preschool behavior, social skills may be associated with the child's relationships with his/her surroundings or environment in which he/she develops. In this sense, most of those evaluated, 62.5% (10 children), 56.3% (9 children), and 37.5% (6 children) did not present problems of social isolation, anxiety/complaints, or selfish or egocentric behavior, and only one student showed significant problems. Between three and six children showed average behavior in these behaviors. However, only one student presented a behavior surrounded by anxiety and egocentrism (Figure 4).

*Figure 4* Diagnosis of social skills (social isolation, anxiety/complaints, and egocentric/explosive behavior) in children from 3 to 5 years of age from the "TIWINZA" Basic Education School, Buena Fe canton, Los Ríos province.



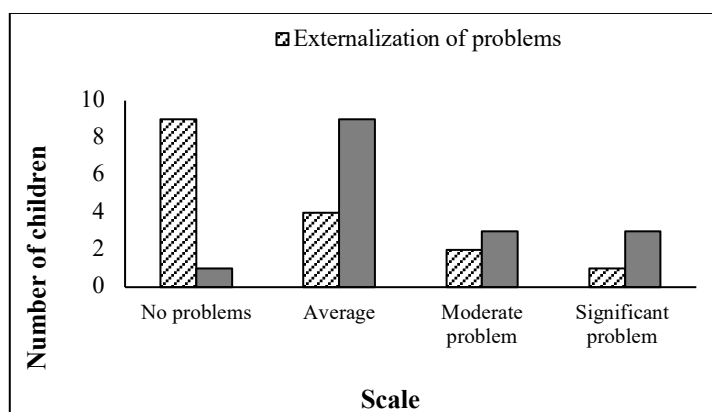
Concomitant with the above, the group of children studied did not present problems of hyperactivity and aggressive behavior, since 69% and 81% of them fell into the categories without problems and average. Only one student was detected with hyperactivity behavior (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Diagnosis of social skills (attention/hyperactivity and antisocial/aggressive behavior) in children from 3 to 5 years of age from the "TIWINZA" Basic Education School, Buena Fe canton, Los Ríos province.



It is common for children at an early age to express their emotions completely, externalizing them to their close relatives, a situation that is reflected in Figure 6, where 56.3% and 25% of the children can externalize their concerns without problems and on average. In the case of internalization, most of the students surveyed fell into the average category.

Figure 6. Externalization and internalization of emotions in children from 3 to 5 years of age from the "TIWINZA" Basic Education School, in the Buena Fe canton, province of Los Ríos.



## Discussion

The response detected in students from 3 to 5 years of age at the "TIWINZA" Basic Education School, regarding the functional level of social cooperation, which covers the interaction and independence of the child, was favorable, since between 75% to 87% showed a social cooperation behavior within the average. This behavior is to be expected due to their age, since children in the pre-operational stage (2 to 6 years), develop intelligence through play, images, and fantastic drawings, representing functional assimilation according to their evolution, which is concomitant with what Hodzic et al. (2018) mentions. In this same context, Bolaños and Stuart (2019) point out that children are able to act effectively and independently in the cultural environment when they develop the learning process together with other people.

It is noteworthy that in the present study, 75% of the students evaluated were classified at the medium level (37.5%) and significant deficit (37.5%), so it could be inferred that many parents are not adequately motivating their children at home. Children's social skills are closely related to the dedication and motivation of their family nucleus, as pointed out by Larose et al. (2019), because it helps to be integrally formed in the process of building the child, strengthening his or her autonomy.

Regarding social isolation, anxiety, explosive behavior, hyperactivity and aggressive behavior, most of the children studied were placed in the no problem and average categories, which would indicate that in their families there are strategies to channel these attitudes, strengthen values and self-control. However, attention should be paid to those students who were classified in the moderate and significant problem categories, because although they are few, the problem is present, and appropriate pedagogical strategies should be designed to address them, not only by the child but also by his or her family, as mentioned by Loza and Frisancho (2010). For Fernández-Cabezas et al. (2011), the internalization of problems in children aged 3 to 5 years generally tends to be a drawback for the development of social skills, which should be managed from their homes or family nuclei. This case study showed that 56% of the

children evaluated had no problems externalizing their emotions and 25% were within the average. While 56% considered that there could be internalization of their emotions, under certain situations such as stress, fear, anxiety or sadness, concomitant with that reported by Alcántara-Canabal et al. (2020), who detected behavioral and emotional problems in premature children in Asturias, Kingdom of Spain.

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