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An Observational Study of Gender Differences in Social Skills of Preschool Children

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Abstract:
Social skills form one of the major life skills. Social experiences with peers constitute an important developmental context for children. In these contexts, children acquire a wide range of behaviours, skills, attitudes and experiences that influence their adaptations during the life span. An observational study was carried out to study the gender differences in the social skills of preschool children of 3 – 8 years, during their interactions with peers in various play settings such as outdoor play, block play, pretend play and snack time as well as in interage summer group camps. 72 video clippings of 10 minutes each were purposively collected to form the sample which was equally distributed among the 5 age groups. Observer Behaviour Software X.T. 7.0 was used to code and observe the various behaviours of children which were categorized under conversations, body language, gender related behaviours, and for acceptance, rejection, and resistance strategies and unsociable actions. The results revealed that the social behaviours of girls were very high in frequency and duration as compared to that of boys during pretend play. Boys used humour to gain attention, as an important acceptance strategy whereas girls used sharing and playing together as a team. Unsociable behaviours, such as self centered speech were more frequent and for longer duration among boys. Girls used dominations and arguments. Boys used aggressive body language more frequently whereas girls used rejections more often. Girls were found to be more flexible in the use of gender related behaviours whereas boys were more sex stereotypic. Girls usually picked up adult roles and pretended daily events more whereas boys picked up fantasized roles. Both boys and girls used acceptance strategies more frequently with same gender peers, used indirect rejection strategies more frequently with same gender peers and physical resistance and unsociable actions frequently with opposite gender peers.

Keywords: social behavior, unsociable behavior, gender related behavior, Intergender behavior, stereotypic gender roles, gender difference, play settings

1. Introduction

Social experiences with peers constitute an important developmental context for children. In these contexts, children acquire a wide range of behaviours, skills, attitudes and experiences that influence their adaptations during the life span. One of the major tasks of the early childhood years is to learn positive and socially acceptable ways of interacting with others. As much of this learning occurs within the context of the peer group, positive peer interactions make a substantial contribution to children's socio-emotional and cognitive development beyond the influences of family, school and neighbourhood. Relationships with peers have significant importance in the lives of even very young children by allowing them to experiment with roles and relationships and develop social cognitive and behavioural skills (Asher, 1990; Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993).

Parten (1932) described six social participation categories that purportedly unfolded as stages as children matured. In order of presumed maturity, these categories include: unoccupied behaviour, solitary play, associative play, co-operative play, socio-dramatic play and games with rules. The demonstration of elaborate forms of social pretence during the preschool years is impressive. It provides opportunities for developing communication skills, allows children to negotiate over roles, rules and play themes and to practice a variety of roles in particular play scripts. Children's interactions with one another do, in many cases endure over a long period of time and are vital for normal social development. Children who do not play with age mates miss-out on important social experience and are at considerable risk of becoming socially inept and uncertain of themselves in the interpersonal situations later in life.

With increasing age, play partners become better able to agree with each other about the roles, rules and themes of their pretence. They are also better able to maintain their play interactions by adding new dimensions to their expressed ideas. These

developments reflect the preschooler's capacity to take the perspective of the play partner and even more important, reflect the increasing sophistications of preschooler's naïve "theory of mind" (Watson, Nixon, Wilson and Capage, 1999).

Hence, it provides the right context to understand social skills which can form foundation for future social competence. Children can and do learn from each other. They exchange information about the world and themselves; they offer each other suggestions about appropriate ways to behave. The notion that preschool children can learn from one another is an important one, as it provides a basis on which to structure preschool programmes. The present study was undertaken with the objective of observing social interactions of children in the age group of 3- 8 years in various play setting (natural/ informal settings) to understand the gender differences in the social interactions among young children.

2. Materials and Methods

As the present study is a basic research; aimed at observing the gender differences in the early social skills of children from 3 – 8 years; both positive and negative behaviours of children in their interactions with peers in natural settings, an *EXPLORATORY RESEARCH DESIGN* was adopted for conducting the study. The city of Hyderabad was selected for the present study as there are number of schools and has a cosmopolitan environment wherein children from various backgrounds, cultures, and wide socioeconomic groups could be observed and studied so that it makes a comprehensive sample in order to understand the interactions, the content and all the stuff that children use in different play settings. Purposive sampling method was employed because the research aimed at studying the conversations of 3 – 8 year children in outdoor play, block play, pretend play and snack time using video recordings of interactions of 10 minutes duration. A sample of 72 video clippings was selected for studying the early social skills of children in various natural setting; both indoor and outdoor. Video recording was used as a major technique to observe the social interactions of children in various play settings. The social interactions of children were video recorded using hand video camera for about 10 to 12 minutes duration each in various play settings as mentioned above. These recordings were further used for coding the behaviours of children using the Observer Behaviour Software.

2.1 Coding Schemes Developed and Used for the research
- Coding scheme for conversations – both sociable and unsociable conversations, content
- Coding scheme for body language – social, unsocial, physical proximity, facial expressions
- Coding scheme for gender related behaviours – sex appropriate, neutral and cross gender   behaviours
- Coding schme for acceptance, rejection, and resistance strategies and unsociable actions.

2.1.1. Coding Scheme for Conversations
- Social conversations - Initiation, Following, Direction, directing peers, Pleasantries, Supporting Encouragement
- Unsociable conversations - Quiet, Interruption, Arguments, Gossiping, Teasing, Domination
- Social content-Social speech, Common interest topics, Fantasy, Words of gratitude, Daily events, Secrets, Requests, Compliments, Approvals
- Unsociable content-About self, Abusive words, Words of rejection, Disapprovals

2.1.2. Coding Scheme for Body Language
- Social activity Active, into groups
- Unsociable activity Lethargic, Outside group, Dispirited
- Physical proximity- Holding hands, Hugging, Patting etc
- Facial expressions- Social facial expressions Pleasant/happy, smiling Excited, Surprised, Laugh
- Unsociable facial expressions–Sad, angry, threatening etc

2.1.3. Coding Scheme for Gender Related Behaviours
Sex appropriate behaviour Encouraging   sex appropriate behaviour, Condemning sex in appropriate behaviour, Cross gender roles, Encouraging cross gender behaviour

2.1.4. Coding Scheme for Acceptance, Rejection and Resistance Strategies and Unsociable Actions
- Acceptance and co-operation strategies – Showing interest/gaining entry into play, Imitating play – trying to behave similarly as that of peers, Striving for attention, Teasing in a friendly manner Recognition of leader – selecting a leader with common opinion, Competing with leader, Using friendship to bargain or negotiate, Team work – working or playing together in a group towards a common goal, Sharing, Explaining rules of play
- Rejection strategies - Group rejection- preventing entry, Indirect rejection, Denying friendship, Claims of ownership
- Resistance strategies -Physical resistance, yelling resistance, Disputes over toy or roles, Threatening, Disturbing others play

The coding also included 19 modifiers – modifiers were persons, objects or behaviours that formed the reason for exhibiting the particular behaviour with the peers during their interactions. E.g.: children expressed anger because of other's rejection. Here, "anger" is behaviour whereas "others rejection" is the modifier of the behaviour "angry".

2.2. Observer Behaviour Software

The Observer is an important tool for the study of behavioural processes to record a level of detail that cannot obtain without an automated system. The Observer can be used to   record activities, postures, movements, positions, social interactions or any other aspect of the behaviour of humans and animals. In human psychology, the observer aids in collecting data on behavioural development, parent-child as well as any social interaction, communication, education, language acquisition, cognition, psychological assessment.

The observer is also useful whenever one needs to collect observational data that is essential, for instance, to assess a physical workload, usability of products or to study human-machine interactions. The entire process carried out by The Observer may be summarized as follows: A researcher watches one or more individuals (humans or animals) in a certain place/setting, and enters the observations of their behaviour in the form of codes according to what he/she or another collaborator has specified in an earlier phase, when he/she created the Coding Scheme. Different behaviours of interest are listed along with codes, either specified by researcher or the software. The behaviours are listed under different heads as per convenience. The subjects to be observed are also mentioned along with codes. Modifiers, a list of variables that affect the subjects or behaviours, are specified for in-detail analysis. The video clippings selected for the study are loaded into the processor, and stored as media files. Once the coding scheme is ready, the Observer file is used to observe and code the behaviours of the interactions of children by simultaneously viewing the media file of video clipping. After coding the behaviours, a data profile is created using the software, where the coded behaviours are selectively filtered and fed into processor for getting a result sheet with frequencies, durations, mean durations of the behaviours and modifiers for each of the behaviours. This is later used to perform further statistical analysis and graphical representation to answer specific research questions. The results are presented using statistical analysis such as frequencies, durations and test of significance viz. Two-Way ANOVA

3. Results

Social behaviors in outdoor play and block play were similar among both genders. There was no difference observed.

3.1 Graph: Social Behaviours of Children in Pretend Play
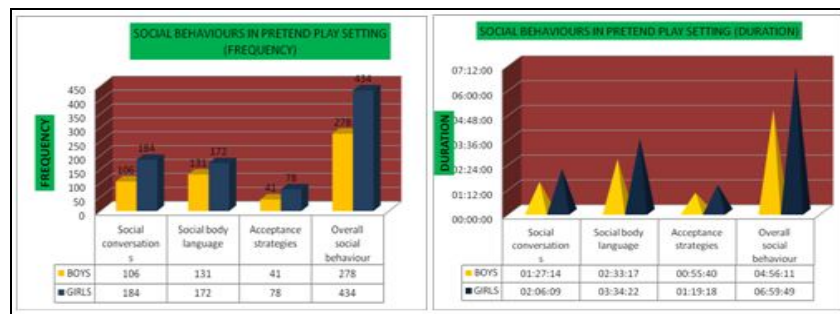
F= 14.79 P<NS gender ; F = 40.54 P< 0.02 behaviours

Girls were found to converse socially for almost double the frequency and duration as compared to their counterpart, and used socisal body language and acceptance strategies more frequently and for longer duration than boys. Mean differences for gender were non-significant but were found to be significant among various social behaviours in pretend play; social body language with high variance.

3.2. Graph: Social Behaviours of Children in Snack Time
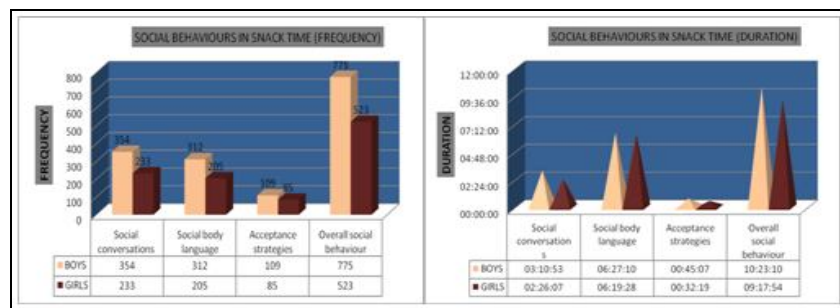
F= 3.60 P<NS gender; F = 300.39 P< 0.003 behavoiurs

Boys were found to converse more socially, use more social body language and acceptance strategies than girls. Social body language and acceptance strategies were used for almost same durations by both the genders whereas boys conversed socially for more duration than girls during snack time. Mean differences for gender were non-significant but mean differences for behaviours were found to be significant.The results revealed no difference in the unsociable behaviours of children during outdoor play.

3.3. Graph: Unsociable Behavours in Block Play
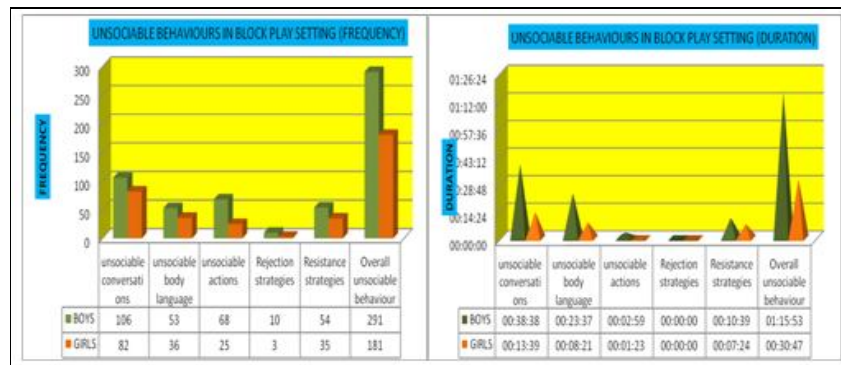
F = 3.53 P<NS gender, F= 3.81 P< NS behaviours

Boys conversed unsociably, exhibited unsociable body language, and used resistance more frequently than girls. Boys also expressed unsociable actions and 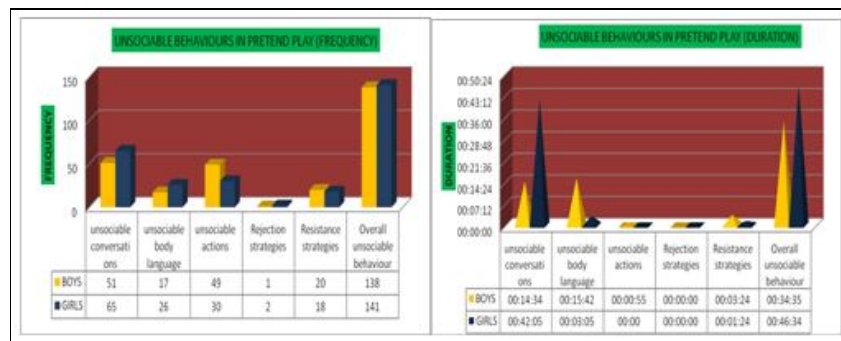rejection strategies more than double the times used by girls. Boys were found conversing unsociably and using unsociable body language for longer durations; more than double the duration used by girls. This finding is similar to the research finding where differences in the way in which boys and girls resolve conflict were apparent from age 3. Whereas girls incline toward reaching a compromise, it is more common for boys to use physical force (Sheldon, 1990). Unsociable actions and resistance strategies were almost persistent for similar duration whereas rejection strategies were not used by both the genders during block play.

3.4. Graph: Unsociable Behaviours in Pretend Play

F= 0.12 P< NS gender, F= 2.4 P<NS behaviours

Girls conversed unsociably, more than double the duration of that of boys whereas boys were found using unsociable body language more than double the duration of that of girls. Resistance strategies persisted for shorter durations whereas unsociable actions and rejection strategies were all momentary and did not persist for considerable duration; irrespective of the gender. Both boys and girls were found conversing unsociablely and exhibiting unsociable body language for same durations whereas other behaviours were momentary and did not persist for considerable durations among both the gender.

The results revealed that there was no difference in the gender related behaviours exhibited by children in outdoor and block play.
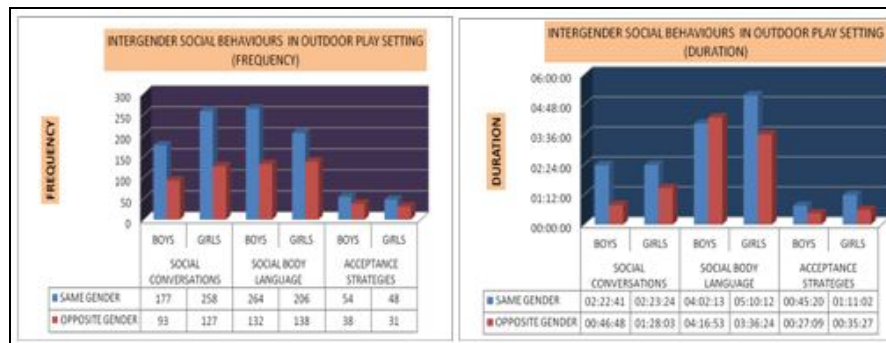
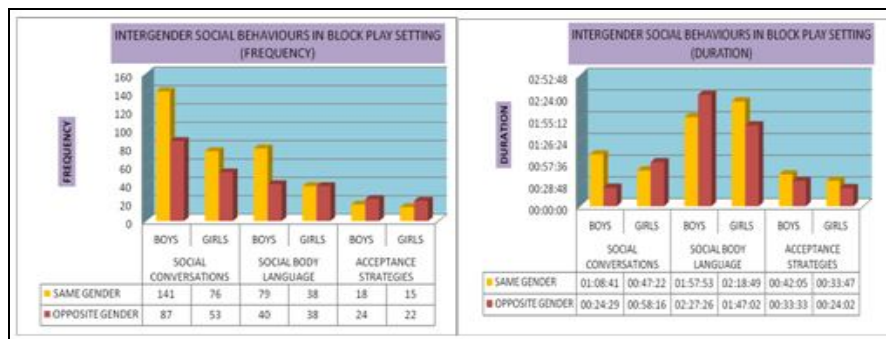*3.5. Graph: Gender Related Behaviours in Pretend Play*
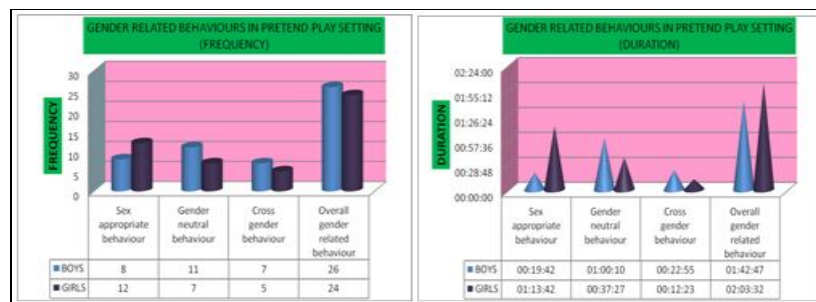
F = 0.33 P< NS gender, F = 5.45 P<NS behaviours

Sex appropriate behaviours were more frequent among boys whereas gender neutral and cross gender behaviours were more frequent among girls, but differences were not prominent. Sex appropriate behaviours were exhibited by girls to longer duration than boys whereas gender neutral behaviours and cross gender behaviours were evident for longer durations among boys . A study revealed that by 3 years of age, girls are much more likely than boys to play with dolls, dolls' houses, tea sets, and other domestic toys, whereas boys are more often found with toy guns, swords, cars, trains and trucks (Dunn & Hughes, 2001, O'Brien & Huston, 1985).

3.6. Graph: Intergender Social Behaviours in out Door Play

	SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS		SOCIAL BODY LANGUAGE		ACCEPTANCE STRATEGIES	
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
SAME GENDER	177	258	264	206	54	48
OPPOSITE GENDER	93	127	132	138	38	31

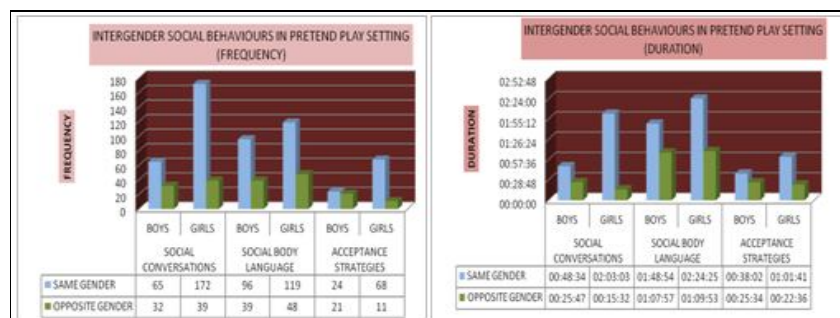|	SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS		SOCIAL BODY LANGUAGE		ACCEPTANCE STRATEGIES	
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
SAME GENDER	02:22:41	02:23:24	04:02:13	05:10:12	00:45:20	01:11:02
OPPOSITE GENDER	00:46:48	01:28:03	04:16:53	03:36:24	00:27:09	00:35:27

The results showed that both the genders conversed socially, exhibited social body language, and used acceptance strategies with same gender more frequently than with opposite gender; however acceptance strategies used by both genders were not very high with same gender as compared to opposite gender. Boys and girls were found to converse socially for longer duration with same gender; more prominent among boys and also were found exhibiting acceptance strategies for longer durations with same gender. Boys expressed social body language almost for similar duration with both genders whereas girls expressed social body language towards same gender for longer duration.

	SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS		SOCIAL BODY LANGUAGE		ACCEPTANCE STRATEGIES	
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
SAME GENDER	141	76	79	38	18	15
OPPOSITE GENDER	87	53	40	38	24	22

|	SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS		SOCIAL BODY LANGUAGE		ACCEPTANCE STRATEGIES	
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
SAME GENDER	01:08:41	00:47:22	01:57:53	02:18:49	00:42:05	00:33:47
OPPOSITE GENDER	00:24:29	00:58:16	02:27:26	01:47:02	00:33:33	00:24:02

During block play boys conversed socially with same gender frequently and for longer duration with same gender whereas girls conversed socially frequently with same gender but duration was more with opposite gender. Children were found to use acceptance strategies more frequently with opposite gender but for longer duration with same gender, peers irrespective of their gender. Boys exhibited social body language frequently towards same gender peers but duratio was more towards opposite gender peers. In case of girls, the social body languaeg usage with both gender peers was similar but duratio was high towards same gender peers.

3.7. Graph: Inter Gender Social Behaviour in Pretend Play

	SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS		SOCIAL BODY LANGUAGE		ACCEPTANCE STRATEGIES	
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
SAME GENDER	65	172	96	119	24	68
OPPOSITE GENDER	32	39	39	48	21	11

|	SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS		SOCIAL BODY LANGUAGE		ACCEPTANCE STRATEGIES	
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
SAME GENDER	00:48:34	02:03:03	01:48:54	02:24:25	00:38:02	01:01:41
OPPOSITE GENDER	00:25:47	00:15:32	01:07:57	01:09:53	00:25:34	00:22:36

All the social behavoiurs were exhibited more frequently and for longer duration towards same gender by both boys and girls. Social conversations and social body language of girls were exhibited towards same gender for more than double the duration that they used for the opposite gender. A study also revealed that at around 30 to 36 months of age, children display a marked preference for same sex peers (Powlishta, Serbin, & Moller, 1993).

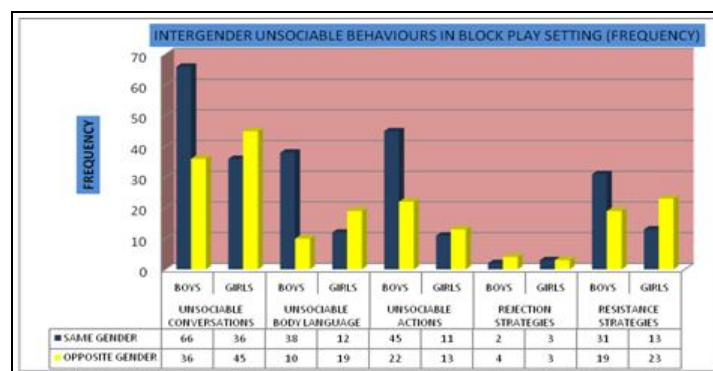*3.8. Graph: Intergender Social Behaviour in Snack Time*
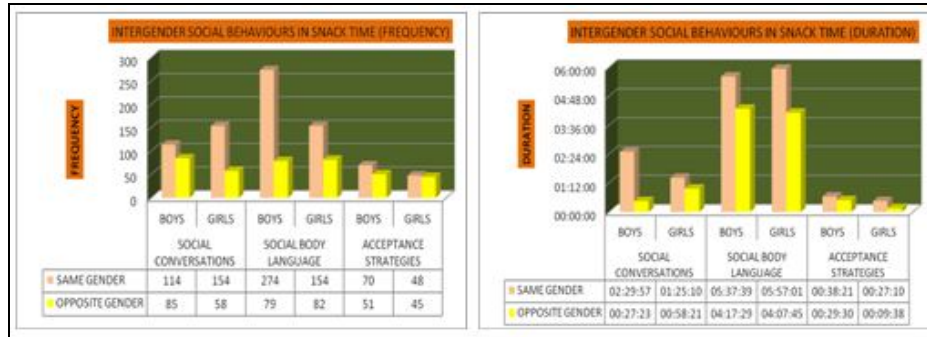
The social behaviours were exhibited more frequently and for longer duration towards same gender by boys as well as girls during snack time. Social body language being very frequently used for long duration by boys with same gender peers and social conversations being frequently used for long durations by girls with same gender peers was evident. Children's preference for same-sex play mates is a universal aspect of growing up (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Acceptance strategies used by both genders with same gender and opposite gender did not vary much.

3.9. Graph: Intergender Unsociable Behaviours in Outdoor Play
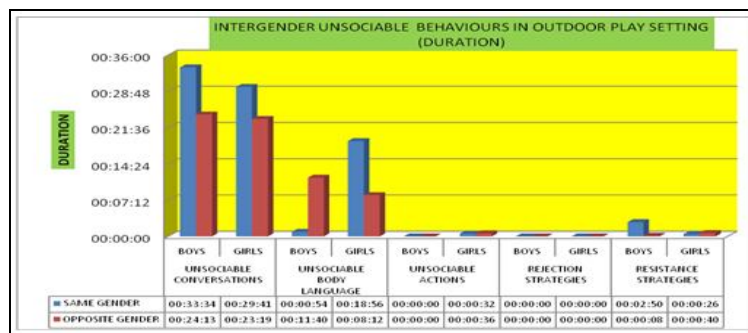
Unsociable behaviours were exhibited almost with similar frequencies towards same gender as well as opposite gender but duration was high towards same gender peers. However both boys and girls were found to converse unsociably more frequently and for longer duration with same gender High frequency and longer duration of unsociable body language was expressed towards opposite gender peers by boys and towards same gender peers by girls. Unsociable actions, rejection and resistance strategies rarely persisted for considerable durations among both genders.

3.10. Graph: Intergender Unsociable Behaviours during Block Play
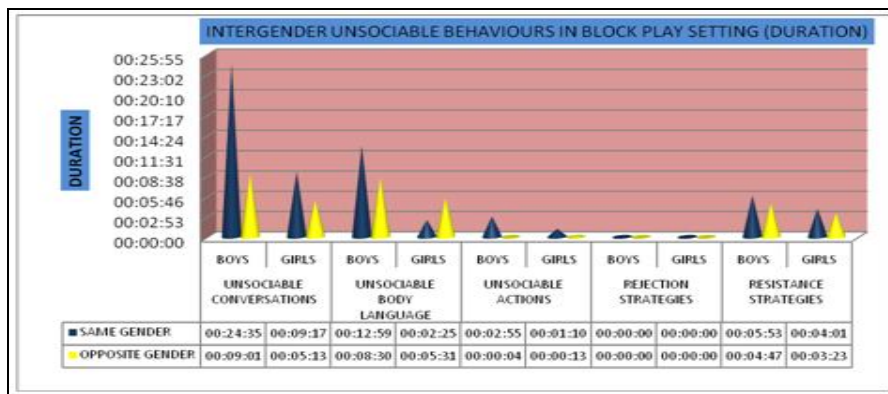
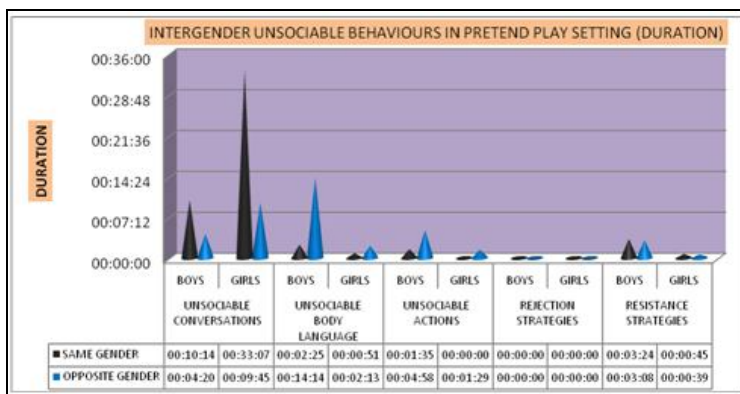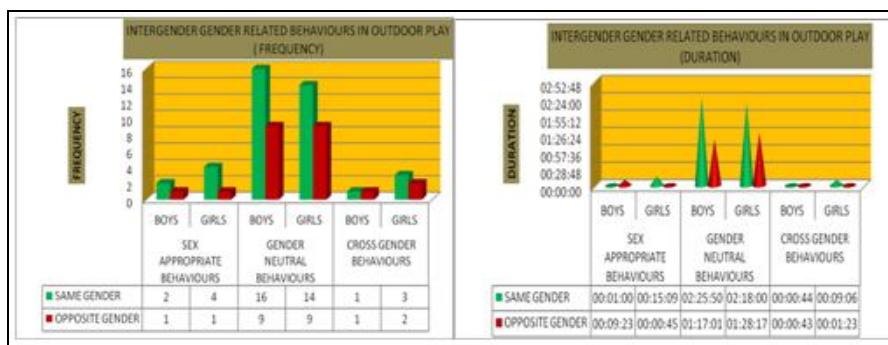| | INTERGENDER UNSOCIABLE BEHAVIOURS IN BLOCK PLAY SETTING (DURATION) | | | | | | | | | |
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
	UNSOCIABLE CONVERSATIONS		UNSOCIABLE BODY LANGUAGE		UNSOCIABLE ACTIONS		REJECTION STRATEGIES		RESISTANCE STRATEGIES	
SAME GENDER	00:24:35	00:09:17	00:12:59	00:02:25	00:02:55	00:01:10	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:05:53	00:04:01
OPPOSITE GENDER	00:09:01	00:05:13	00:08:30	00:05:31	00:00:04	00:00:13	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:04:47	00:03:23

Boys conversed unsociably, exhibited unsociable body language, unsociable actions and used resistance strategies more frequently and for longer duration with peers of same gender whereas girls conversed unsociably, exhibited unsociable body language, unsociable actions and used resistance strategies more frequently with opposite gender during block play. But the frequency of unsociable behaviours of girls with either genders did not differ much.

3.11. Graph: Intergender Social Behaviourduring Pretend Play

| | INTERGENDER UNSOCIABLE BEHAVIOURS IN PRETEND PLAY SETTING (DURATION) | | | | | | | | | |
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
	UNSOCIABLE CONVERSATIONS		UNSOCIABLE BODY LANGUAGE		UNSOCIABLE ACTIONS		REJECTION STRATEGIES		RESISTANCE STRATEGIES	
SAME GENDER	00:10:14	00:33:07	00:02:25	00:00:51	00:01:35	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:03:24	00:00:45
OPPOSITE GENDER	00:04:20	00:09:45	00:14:14	00:02:13	00:04:58	00:01:29	00:00:00	00:00:00	00:03:08	00:00:39

Both boys and girls conversed unsociably more frequently and for longer duration with same gender whereas they used unsociable body language almost with similar frequency with both genders during pretend play. Boys used unsociable actions and body language more frequently and for more duration with peers of same gender.

3.12. Graph: Intergender Gender Relteted Behaviours in Pretend Play

	INTERGENDER GENDER RELATED BEHAVIOURS IN OUTDOOR PLAY (FREQUENCY)					
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
	SEX APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOURS		GENDER NEUTRAL BEHAVIOURS		CROSS GENDER BEHAVIOURS	
SAME GENDER	2	4	16	14	1	3
OPPOSITE GENDER	1	1	9	9	1	2

	INTERGENDER GENDER RELATED BEHAVIOURS IN OUTDOOR PLAY (DURATION)					
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
	SEX APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOURS		GENDER NEUTRAL BEHAVIOURS		CROSS GENDER BEHAVIOURS	
SAME GENDER	00:01:00	00:15:09	02:25:50	02:18:00	00:00:44	00:09:06
OPPOSITE GENDER	00:09:23	00:00:45	01:17:01	01:28:17	00:00:43	00:01:23

Gender neutral behaviours were more frequently seen for longer durations in outdoor play with both genders using them towards with peers of same gender. Though sex appropriate and cross gender behaviours were rarely evident; were more frequently used with same gender peers by boys as well as girls.
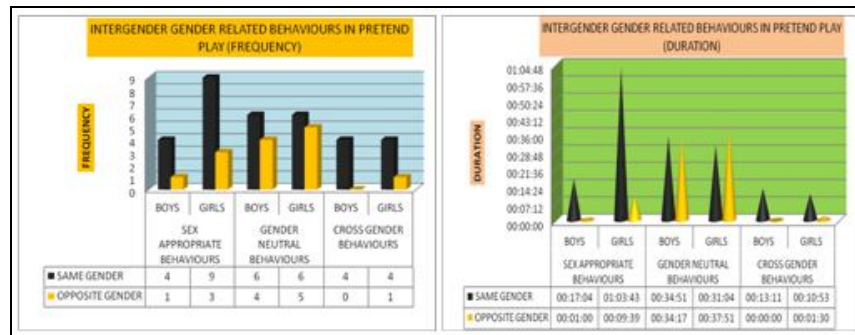
During pretend play both boys and girls used sex appropriate behaviours more frequently and for longer duration with peers of same gender, gender neutral behaviours were used with similar frequencies and duration with both genders peers and cross gender behaviours were used for considerable duration with peers of same gender. The only gender related behaviour observed during snack time was gender neutral behavour

4. Conclusion

The present observational study serves as an important basic research in the area of peer interactions, which brings out the general trends in gender differences in the use of social and unsociable behaviours of children, during their interactions with peers in natural play settings. The study focuses on the social skills of young children who are trying to expand their horizons of social network. Thus with the knowledge regarding the social trend and gender differences among children, the early childhood education programmes could be planned with the incorporation of social competence curriculum to promote early social skills among young children which could help building a healthy society and improved mental health leading to better relationships and better life ahead.

5. References

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