

## Peer Acceptance in Early Childhood: Links to Socio-Economic Status and Social Competence

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### Abstract

Social relationships and peer interactions play an important role in the healthy development of the child, and opportunities for socialization in early childhood present a good opportunity for children to gain the necessary experience and maturity for development of healthy relationships in the future. This study looks at factors associated with, and predictive of, peer acceptance and rejection in early childhood. Participants of the study are 130 children, their parents and teachers. Sociometric techniques, socio-demographic questionnaire and the Vineland scale for adaptive behavior were used to collect the data. Results indicate that socio-economic factors influence children's social standing in the group, and higher scores in social and communication skills are positively correlated with peer acceptance. There was also a high correlation between child's peer acceptance and their level of socialization ( $r(50) = .640, p = 0.00$ ) and between child's peer acceptance and their level of development in the field of communication ( $r(50) = .626, p = 0.00$ ). Although slightly lower than the above-mentioned correlations, a positive correlation exists between child's peer acceptance and socio-economic status of the family with a correlation of  $r(50) = .406, p = 0.00$ . The results of this study have been able to establish that all factors that are assumed to correlate with peer acceptance in early childhood are determinants of a particular importance. Moreover, the results of the regression indicate that the model explained 54.9% of the variance and that the independent variables were a significant predictor of peer acceptance.

**Key words:** *social skills, social competence, peer acceptance, early childhood, preschool institutions.*

### Introduction

Social development underlies the process through which the child learns to interact with others, and as such, it implies gaining experience in social relations and learning to adapt to the surrounding environment. From an early age, the child feels the need to befriend someone, a need that later develops in their constant need for friendships (Perolli-Shehu, 2019). Social relationships and interactions play a very important role in the healthy development of the child, and opportunities for socialization in early childhood present a good opportunity for children to gain

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maturity in development of successful relationships. According to Dijkstra (2004), the social status of the child implies the phenomenon of acceptance or rejection of children by their peer group, and as such is recognized as a strong determinant of child development. Genuine acceptance of the child in the peer group creates the basis for healthy development while rejection from peers from an early age brings about such risks as externalizing problems (poor school adaptation, physical aggressiveness) and internalizing problems (loneliness, social anxiety, depression, and negative self-esteem) (Dijkstra, 2004).

Children who have difficulty interacting with peers and fail to build positive relationships are at serious risk for social adaptability in the future (Rubin et al., 1998). Research done by Rubin and colleagues found that difficulties in interactions with peers are accurate predictors of peer relationships and future social competence problems (Rubin et al., 1998). Previous research indicates that the style of interaction with peers in early childhood does not change at later stages of child development (Shuey, 2007); therefore, it is important to recognize this style and understand the factors that lead to acceptability or rejection by peers at the earliest stages of development. Experiences and interactions with peers provide opportunities for social skills development, social awareness and sound psychosocial adjustment. With the development of these skills, and with the sound psychosocial adaptation in the surrounding, we can say that the child has reached the appropriate level of social competence (Xie et al., 2006).

Over the last few decades, special attention has been paid to this topic, and there have been major advances in understanding the phenomenon of peer acceptance and rejection. Although, most children are lucky enough to be rewarded with good relationships with their peers, there are children, who view social interactions as punishment, and relationships with peers as stressful for both them and their families (Slaughter et al., 2002; Asher, 2002). The reason why it is important to know the factors related to peer acceptance or rejection, is that by comparing rejected children to those who are better accepted in the group, not only do we learn how children's relevant behaviors lead to difficulties in dealing with peers, but we also learn about adaptive and maladaptive ways of dealing with the social world and what kind of skills a child should have in order to be able to initiate and maintain a social relationship (Perolli-Shehu, 2009).

### **Socio-economic status and child development**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) was the first to place child development in an ecological perspective. Looking at child development from Bronfenbrenner's perspective, we become aware of the complex network of factors in play shaping children's development and day-to-day learning. Looking at the microsystem, which represents the immediate surrounding of the child, it is defined as the immediate family, and therefore mostly concerns the living conditions of the child and the interaction patterns between family members. Studies have found that socio-economic situation largely influences the development of social competences and peer acceptance. According to Mulder (2008), parent's incomes bring social status to the family and can influence a child's social development, by providing social opportunities to the child. Children, who live in homes where financial resources are limited, are less likely to have these social opportunities. Children in families with limited financial resources compared with their more affluent peers are more likely to experience a variety of socio-emotional difficulties, such as behavioral problems (Anthony et al., 2005; Carothers, & Parfitt, 2017; Mirza, 2018), internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Duncan et al., 1994; Parker, 2019), and problematic peer relations (Patterson et al., 1990). Children who have good peer relations and, positive interactions (e.g., helping, caring, sharing interactions) may lead other children to think and feel positively about the child with whom such exchanges have taken place, be attracted to that child, and seek to develop a meaningful, supportive, and constructive friendship with the child (Rubin et al., 2012).

Hoglund and Leafbeater (2004) found that parental education was also related to child's social skills. Low levels of mother's education predicted increase in emotional and behavioral problems of children in classrooms with few prosocial behaviors, which leads to lower social competence of children in the classrooms. Uribe and colleagues (1994) also found that parental education attainment contributes to the social development and peer acceptance of children. Ubom (2015) argued that the level of education, and knowledge of social world, permits the parents to devote more time, energy and material resources to nurturing children's psychosocial characteristics, and found that the quality of parents' social networks is significantly associated with children's social competence. Other studies show that children with poor social skills become rejected more often, and they are often excluded from positive interactions with peers, interactions that are critical for the learning of social skills (Ferris, 2019; Rubin et al., 2012).

### **Social development and peer acceptance**

Children grow and develop in social networks with peers and others persons in their circle and these relationships represent an extremely important aspect of social, emotional and cognitive development of children, especially up to the age of five years (Xie et al., 2006). During social relationships, young children are both influenced by their peers and they themselves influence their peers, and during these interactions their subordinate or dominant roles within the social circle become evident.

According to Erik Erikson's theory, the child's psychosocial development goes through eight stages, which he has formulated not only as a result of experimental work, but also as a result of extensive experience in direct work with children and adolescents. Each stage, according to Erikson, is a "psychosocial crisis" that requires resolution at that stage, so that the child can master his or her development and move on successfully to the other stage. According to Erikson, preschool children are in the third stage (Initiative vs. Guilt), when their interpersonal skills also begin to develop and they are preoccupied with their social world. When they manage to accomplish goals that are acceptable to their peers, they develop what Erikson calls the *sense of initiative*. On the contrary, children develop *feelings of guilt*. To further elaborate, Erikson believed that this stage, occurs at "playtime" or preschool age, when children learn to imagine, fantasize and expand on their abilities through active play with others; learn to collaborate with others, lead the game or follow the leader. As these skills are developed through interaction with other children, in case of rejection by others, the child is mobilized with a sense of guilt that results in fear of others, high adult dependency, lonely play and hesitation to join the group, all hindering the development of skills and imagination (Perolli-Shehu, 2009). According to Erikson, the child develops socially as a result of being part of a group, always learning how to act to adapt to others (Hurlock, 1981). If the child does not overcome this social crisis at this stage, then this will follow on other stages as well, when children are required to raise their level of social competence and possess the more formal life skills. The child, who has successfully mastered the previous stages will have confidence, will be more independent, able to play and act in group and will have initiative. Otherwise, the child will doubt himself and his abilities (Perolli-Shehu, 2009).

According to John Coie's theory of rejection by peers, it is the specific characteristics of the child itself, not of the social group that influence peer acceptance and rejection. According to Coie, the refusal from peers results in increased aggressiveness and internalization of problems, pointing out

that it is the child's social behavior that is principally responsible for peer rejection. What ultimately determines the child's social status, is the way the child behaves in front of the social group. For example, according to Coie, obese children are the subject of much bullying, however the way they respond to these harassments determines their social status – children who laugh at these harassments are more likely to be readily accepted by the group, rather than if they get angry, react harshly or start crying (Coie, 1990).

One of the main developmental tasks in childhood is achieving competence in social relationships, and research studies indicate that early childhood experiences are highly correlated with the social development of children (Mulder, 2008). Children's social competence is a fundamental developmental process that implies possessing the necessary social, emotional and cognitive abilities and behaviors for them to be well adapted to society and to prevail as a successful member of a society. The child's social competence depends on many factors such as social skills of the child, communication skills, his social awareness and his confidence. Social competence has been defined as the ability to make use of environmental and personal resources to achieve a desired social outcome (Hussong et al., 2005). Bierman (2004) defines social competence as the capacity to organize social behavior in different social contexts in a manner beneficial to oneself and consistent with social conventions and morals.

A large number of research studies, focused on identifying factors that lead to the development of social competence in children, have found that children who interact more with other children during early childhood are more likely to accept and understand the opinions of their peers, and interact better with one another (Slaughter, 2002). Children with strong language skills have more opportunities for productive social interaction with peers, and competent communicators are more likely to gain social acceptance (Mendez et al., 2002; Odom et al., 2006). Studies by Badenes, Estevan, and Bacete (2000) have found that children who have difficulty understanding others' inner feelings, thoughts or motivations, exhibit great difficulties even during regular activities in peer groups, and are rejected or neglected by the group, it will result in reduced opportunities for them to experience proper social interactions, acquire the skills for relating to others. The child's eligibility for play and group activities enables them to adhere to their social needs and provides opportunities for genuine personality development and creation of healthy relationships with others (Reavis, 2007). Whereas, the feeling of being unwanted in the group cause fear, anxiety, the child is reluctant to join activities and feels isolated. Children who are not accepted well from

the group exhibit problems of adaptation and various forms of delinquency (Reavis, 2007). In addition, research shows that peer rejection also leads to internalizing problems, which can cause depression and social anxiety from preschool age.

### *Research questions*

This study explored the following research questions and hypotheses:

- (1) How is peer acceptance related to socio-economic status of the child?

*H1: Children coming from families with higher socio-economic status are more likely to be accepted by their peers than children coming from families with lower socio-economic status*

- (2) How is peer acceptance related to child social and communication skills?

*H2: Children with higher scores in social and communication skills are more likely to be accepted by their peers than children with lower scores in social and communication skills*

## **Method**

### **The study aim**

The aim of this study was to examine how socio-economic status and social competences are related to peer acceptance in early childhood in Kosovo.

### **Research Design**

The study followed a quantitative approach. According to DeFranzo (2011), quantitative research is used to quantify the problem by way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics. It is used to test variables and generalize results from the sample population. Quantitative data collection methods are more structured and include various forms of surveys, interviews, and systematic observations, similar to those used in this study.

The design of the study is correlational, a type of non-experimental research method, which measures two variables, in order to understand and assess the statistical relationship between them (Kumar, 2017). Similar studies conducted in the past were examined in order to support the decision for the design of this study.

Descriptive statistic techniques were used to tabulate the frequency counts, percentage, means, and standard deviations. Correlational design was used to determine whether data on socio-economic status and social skills and competences were correlated with the data on peer acceptance of children. Correlation analysis was instrumental in quantifying the degree to which variables in the

dataset were related with one another and determine how these variables were related to one another. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine the degree to which socio-economic status and social skills and competences are predictive of peer acceptance.

### **Participants**

The study was conducted in five heterogeneously mixed preschool classrooms, with a sample of 130 children, aged 3-6 years old. The sample was representative of all social classes of Kosovo. Out of 130 children, 8 children were without parental care, 6 children with disabilities, 30 children from families living on social assistance and children of single mothers with no family support. The subjects of the study were children; however, most of the data was collected from parents and teachers.

### **Data Collection Tools**

*Sociometric Technique* - Sociometric technique is used to identify preferences, likes, and dislikes among group members as well to identify patterns of intergroup interaction (Hoffman, 2001). It proved very successful in evaluating intra-group relationships and group acceptability or rejection among children. Visual representation of interpersonal relationships within a group can be done through the Sociogram or Sociometrics chart. Choices made by children can be made through nominations (nominate friends they like and dislike) and or by grading friends against a pre-determined scale (which one do you like better). The first is used more in elementary school, and the second is used in preschool institutions (Hoffman, 2001).

*Socio-demographic survey with parents*- the survey was composed of 15 questions on the socio-demographic characteristics of the family. The data collected through this survey was instrumental in defining the link between demographic characteristics and peer acceptance.

*Vineland Scale of Adaptive Behavior* - utilizes the format of survey and relies on the responses of parents / guardians and teachers for the social functioning of children in areas such as Communication, Life Skills, Socialization and Motor Skills. Adaptive behavior in this context underlies the child's ability to function independently and meet social and cultural demands for social and personal responsibility. This scale was a revision of the Vineland degree of social maturity, developed by Edgar Doll in 1935, and as such contains 297 questions, which take 20 to 60 minutes to complete. The scale also contains a portion for diagnosing maladaptive behaviors,

which is not included in this study. The scale showed good internal reliability  $\alpha=.92$ . The reliability of the scale, including subscales and reported  $\alpha$ s is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Reliability of Scales*

Measures	Alpha	# Items
Vineland Scale of Adaptive Behavior	0.92	n=116
<i>Communication</i>	0.83	n=32
<i>Daily living skills</i>	0.78	n=32
<i>Socialization</i>	0.84	n=32
<i>Motor Skills</i>	0.76	n=20

Items in each domain are placed in developmental order and rated on a scale of 0 (behavior never performed), 1 (sometimes or partly performed), and 2 (behavior usually or habitually performed).

### **Data Collection**

Preschoolers were observed during their stay in the preschool and interviewed according to standard sociometric techniques. Since the children were of preschool age, the grading method was used instead of the nomination, which implies that they were not asked to give the names of children they like or not, but they were asked to tell which child they would play the most and least with. Data from this technique was then entered into the Microsoft Office Access application Sociogram version 6.0., and the Walsh Classroom Sociometrics program and were separated by age group / class and by peer rating (accepted / rejected). Results from these data are presented in graphical form with diagram, where the most liked and disliked children in the group are clearly distinguished. From each class, five most accepted, and five most rejected/neglect children were selected, in total 50 children.

To continue the study further, data were collected from parents on socio-economic status through surveys, and the Vineland scale was filled out by teachers for each child. Each child was scored in four areas of development. In parallel, the researcher observed children playing 1 hour per day for approximately two months, focusing mainly on communication and socialization skills of children.



## Data Analysis

The data collected in the study were analyzed using the IBM Statistical Program for Social Studies (SPSS) version 23. The analysis began with data cleaning to ensure data accuracy and data preparation. Data preparation also included examining internal consistency reliability of the scales. Descriptive statistic techniques were used to tabulate the frequency counts, percentage, means, and standard deviations. Correlational design was used to determine whether data on demographics and social skills and competences are correlated with the data on peer acceptance of children. The Pearson  $r$  was used to determine bivariate correlations. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine the degree to which social competence is predictive of peer acceptance.

## Findings

### *Findings from the Sociometric Technique*

The word “*Sociometry*” derives from the latin words “socio” meaning social, and “metrum” meaning measurement. For the first, time the term was used by Jacob Levy Moreno in 1930, when he performed studies on social structures of the groups, and the need arose to develop sociometric testing techniques to measure acceptance and rejection within individuals in a group. He developed methods to analyze interpersonal relations between members of a group, methods that are still used today to identify non-formal leaders, social rankings and more importantly, to identify rejected and neglected individuals within a group (Hoffman, 2001). Sociometry is based on the fact that people make choices in their interpersonal relationships (Hoffman, 2001). We always make choices based on some given criteria. This criterion can be subjective, such as any feeling of being liked or disliked, or it may be objective in the sense that we can choose a person because of the abilities that this person possesses. In this way, through individual choices, groups are created in social networks that determine the relationships between groups. In educational settings, sociometry serves as a very important tool for looking at the relationships between students and the overall classroom climate, identifying popular children who receive the most attention, and identifying neglected children who are overlooked by their peers. Sociometry has served over the years as a particularly valuable tool in identifying neglected children and children in need of help or support in developing social skills so that they can actively participate in classroom activities. In this study, children were asked the following questions: (1) *Who would you like to play the most*

*with? Who do you least want to play with? and (2) If you had three gifts now in your hand - to whom would you give the first, the second, and the third?*

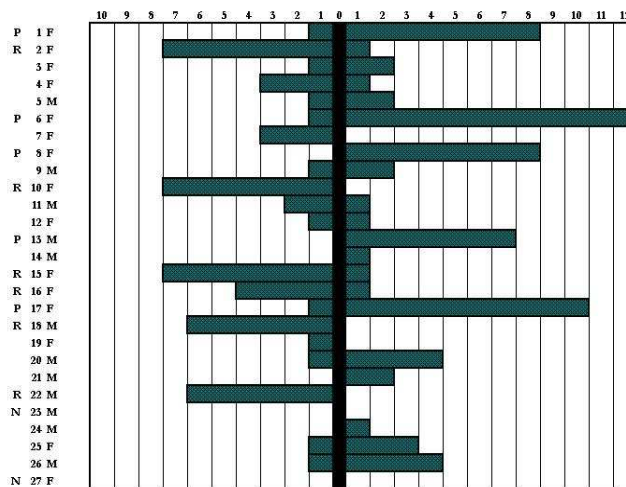
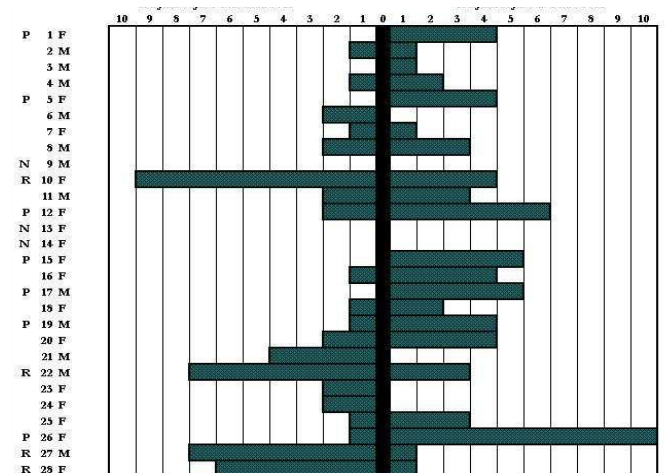
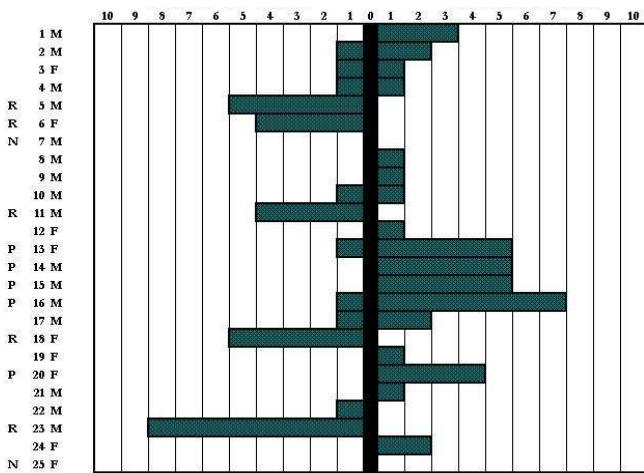
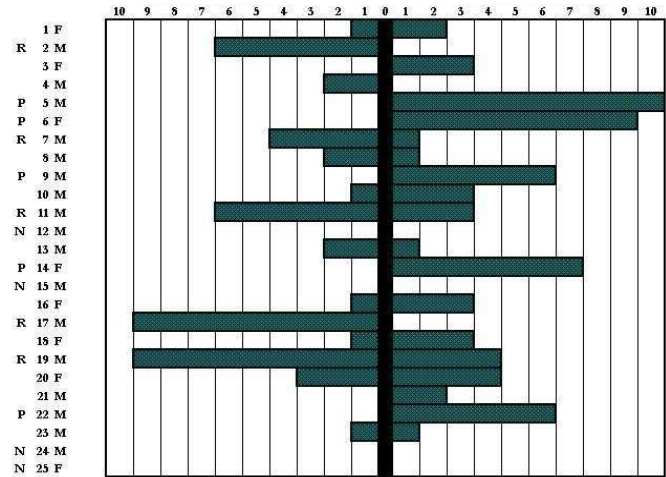
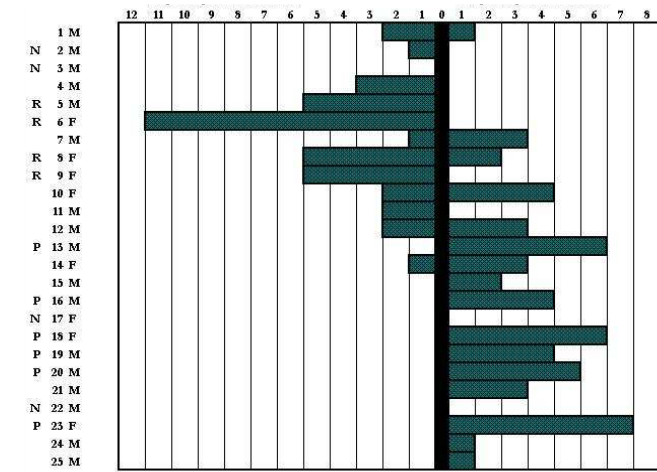
Children who receive the most positive nominations and little or no negative nominations are usually described as popular children. Those who receive the most negative nominations are usually described as rejected children. However, children who are not named at all are considered neglected children, and as such the most vulnerable group in the class.

The data collected from the sociometric technique are presented graphically with a diagram to clearly identify which children in the group in question are popular children, rejected and neglected. In this study, the sociometric technique was instrumental in selecting 50 children, 25 popular and 25 rejected/neglected for the next stage in the study.

Table 2 below is a graphic representation of popular, rejected and neglected children in 5 classrooms. The vertical line presents all the children in the classroom, their assigned numbers and gender (M/male and F/female). The horizontal line presents how many times they were positively/negatively chosen by their peers. The black line in the middle of the graph differentiates between positive choices on the right, and negative choices on the left. Based on the choices from peers, in the vertical line of the graph, children are marked with P for popular, R for rejected, and N for neglected.

**Table 2.**

*Graphic representation of popular, rejected and neglected children in 5 classrooms*



*Demographic data*

Based on the analysis of descriptive statistics, 32% of the subjects included in the second part of the research were aged 3-4 years, 44% were aged 4-5 years and 24% were aged 5-6 years. Of the 50 subjects, 24 were female and 26 were male. Over 50% of subjects had parents with a high level of education and 70% had both employed parents. The results of the study showed that of the 50 subjects selected for the survey, 48% came from families with very good household incomes (over 1000 Euros per month), 26% came from households with incomes of 500-1000 Euros per month, 10% from households with incomes of EUR 100- 500 per month and 16% from very poor households (under EUR 100 per month), indicating that in this respect the group of children selected was heterogeneous. The relationship between the child's social status in kindergarten and the monthly household income is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3***Monthly household income*

		Monthly household income				Total
		Over 1000Euro	500-1000 Euro	100-500 Euro	Less than 100 Euro	
Social Status of the child	Popular	42.0%	6.0%	2.0%	0.0%	50.0%
	Rejected/ neglected	6.0%	20.0%	8.0%	16.0%	50%
Total		48.0%	26.0%	10.0%	16.0%	100.0%

As shown in Table 3, children coming from households with very good monthly incomes were more accepted in the group, while those from poor households were rejected or neglected in the preschool group. In 48% of children coming from households with very good monthly incomes, 42% were accepted and 6% rejected by the group, in 26% of children coming from households with a monthly income of 500-1000 euros, 6 % were accepted and 20% rejected by the group, in 10% of children coming from household with a monthly income of 100-500 Euros, 2% were accepted, while 8% were rejected by the group, while in 16% of children coming from poor families (under € 100 a month) all fall into the category of rejected children.

Looking at the employment aspect of parents, the study found that out of the 50 subjects selected for the survey, 70% had both employed parents, 14% had only one employed parent, and 16% had

both unemployed parents. The relationship between the child's social status in kindergarten and the employment of parents is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Parental employment*

		Parental employment			Total
		Both parents employed	One parent employed	Both parents unemployed	
Social Status of the child	Popular	44.0%	6.0%	0.0%	50.0%
	Rejected/neglected	26.0%	8.0%	16.0%	50%
Total		70.0%	14.0%	16.0%	100.0%

As shown in Table 4, out of 70% of children with both employed parents, 44% were accepted and 26% rejected by the group, in 14% of children with only one employed parent, 6% were accepted and 8% rejected by the group, while 16% of children whose parents were unemployed all fall into the category of rejected children.

In terms of parental education, it can be seen from the study that out of 50 subjects, 58% had fathers with a higher education, 28% with a secondary education and 14% with a low education; while 56% had mothers with higher education, 30% with secondary education and 14% with lower education. The relation between the social status of the child in the kindergarten and the level of education of the father, respectively the mother, are shown in Tables 5 and 6 below.

**Table 5**

*Father level of education*

		Father level of education			Total
		Higher education	Secondary education	Primary education	
Social Status of the child	Popular	42.0%	8.0%	0.0%	50.0%
	Rejected/neglected	16.0%	20.0%	14.0%	50%
Total		58.0%	28.0%	14.0%	100.0%

**Table 6***Mother level of education*

		Mother level of education			Total
		Higher education	Secondary education	Primary education	
Social Status of the child	Popular	38.0%	12.0%	0.0%	50.0%
	Rejected/neglected	18.0%	18.0%	14.0%	50%
Total		56.0%	30.0%	14.0%	100.0%

As shown in the Tables 5 and 6 above, the largest percentage of children accepted by peers had at least one highly educated parent, while on the other hand, all children of parents with lower level education fell in the group of rejected children.

An interesting finding of the study was that, out of the 50 subjects selected for the study, 84% had both parents, while 16% had only one parent / guardian. Of these 16% of children without parents / with one parent (or guardian) all belong to the group of rejected children, while in 84% of children having both parents, 50% belong to the group of adopted children and 34% belong to the group of rejected children.

*Data on Social and Communication Skills*

The results of the study show that of the 50 subjects selected for research, 6% scored very high in the communication scale, 28% above average, 40% average, 14% below average, and 6% very low score. The relationship between the child's social status in preschool and his or her level of development in the field of communication is shown in Table 7.

**Table 7***Development in the area of Communication*

		Development in the area of Communication					Total
		High score	Above average score	Average score	Below average score	Very low score	
Social Status of the child	Popular	6.0%	28.0%	16.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%
	Rejected/neglected	0.0%	6.0%	24.0%	14.0%	6.0%	50%
Total		6.0%	34.0%	40.0%	14.0%	6.0%	100.0%

As shown in Table 7, children with very high and above average communication development were more likely to be accepted in the group, while children with lower levels of communication were more likely to be rejected or neglected in the group. In 40% of children with higher levels of communication development, 34% were accepted and 6% rejected by the group; in 40% of children with an average level of development in the field of communication 16% were accepted and 24% rejected by the group, while in 20% of children with lower scores in communication, all children were rejected by their peers.

The results of the study show that of the 50 subjects selected for the research, 4% scored very high in social development, 26% above average, 48% average, 14% below average, and 8% had very low scores in social development. The relation between the child's social status in preschool and their level of development in the area of socialization is presented in Table 8.

**Table 8***Development in the area of Social Skills*

		Development in the area of Social Skills					Total
		High score	Above average score	Average score	Below average score	Very low score	
Social Status of the child	Popular	4.0%	24.0%	22.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%
	Rejected/neglected	0.0%	2.0%	26.0%	14.0%	8.0%	50%
Total		4.0%	26.0%	48.0%	14.0%	8.0%	100.0%

As shown in Table 8, children with very high and above average score in social skills were more likely to be accepted in the group, whereas children with lower scores were more rejected or neglected in the group. In 30% of children with higher scores, 28% were accepted and 2% rejected by the group, in 48% of children with average level of development in social skills 22% were accepted and 26% rejected by the group, while 22% of children with lower scores are all children were rejected by their peers.

### *Correlation Analysis*

The results of the study with preschoolers showed that there was a close relationship between peer acceptance in the group (dependent variable) with socioeconomic status of the family, and level of development of the child in the field of social and communication (independent variables). Table 9 below shows that there was a high level correlation between the dependent variable and the independent variables.

**Table 9**

#### *Social Status of the child*

	Socio-Economic status of the family	Level of development in Communication	Level of Development in Social Skills
Social Status of the child	.406**	.626**	.640*

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As noted in Table 9, there was a high correlation between the social status of the child in preschool and their level of socialization [ $r(50) = .640, p = .00$ ] and between the social status of the child preschool and their level of development in the field of communication [ $r(50) = .626, p = .00$ ]. Although slightly lower than the above-mentioned correlations, a positive correlation was also found between the social status of the child in preschool and social status -economic of a family [ $r(50) = .406, p = .00$ ].

In analyzing the results further with the multiple regression technique, a strong predictive correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable was found. The results of this analysis are presented in the table below, "Model Summary".



**Table 10***Model Summary*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
1	.777	.604	.549

Table 10 shows a multiple correlation coefficient  $R = 0.777$ , indicating that there was a strong correlation between the dependent variable (criterion) and the independent (predictive) variable. Based on the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.549, the results of the regression indicated that the model explained 54.9% of the variance and that the model was a significant predictor of peer acceptance. The measurement of the contribution of each independent variable in the model was made through the standardized Beta coefficient, by which we can measure the power of the influence of each predictor variable on the criterion variable. The higher the Beta value, the greater the impact of that respective variable on the criterion variable. The results showed that the most predictive factor for the acceptability of children in kindergarten was the level of child development in the area of social skills,  $\beta = .207$ ,  $p < .001$ . Further, results also showed, the level of development in the field of communication with  $\beta = .168$ ,  $p < .001$ , parental factor (whether the child has both parents or not) with  $\beta = .048$ ,  $p < .001$  and socioeconomic status of family with  $\beta = .038$ ,  $p < .001$ , as significant predictors of peer acceptance.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify and examine the factors that influence the determination of peer acceptance in early childhood in preschool institutions. Given the importance of being part of the group and the importance of being accepted into the group, it is clear that it is essential to examine the factors that influence peer acceptance of children, even at an early age. Many studies have investigated the factors that have influenced the phenomenon of acceptance or rejection of children in the group and these studies have identified a variety of factors that have influenced the acceptability of children ranging from social and cognitive abilities, motor skills, speech skills, sensitivity to the needs and concerns of others, physical appearance, etc. It is a well-known fact that children rejected by their group are at risk of having difficulty adapting to the social circle as adults. Numerous studies have shown that children who fail to form close relationships with friends, and who have been rejected by the group, appear to be more at risk for depression, anxiety,

low self-esteem, and adjustment problems. It is therefore important to identify the influencing and predictive factors on this highly expressed phenomenon among children.

This study found results consistent with previous research in this area, but also uncovered other factors that influence the acceptability of children in the group to add to the long list of influencing and predictive factors. Observations from this study, consistent with previous findings in this area, have shown that children at 3 years of age were able to express their social preferences and at this age child have criteria based on which they choose their favorite companions. Also, during observations of children's play and when interviewing them for their social preferences, it was noted that children expressed their dislike for other children and gave their reasons (the child in question was oppressive, aggressive, crying, unclean), while for the children they liked they did not give reasons why, but these reasons were clearly noted during in class observations - communication skills, socialization, self-esteem, ability to take initiative, and ability to lead the game.

The results of this study were able to establish that all factors that were assumed to correlate with peer acceptance in early childhood were determinants of a particular importance. All hypotheses of this study were supported by the results obtained.

The results of the study supported the first hypothesis on the impact of family socioeconomic status on the child's peer acceptance in preschool. This factor was shown to be very influential, but not so much a predictive factor for the child's peer acceptance in preschool. The correlation between this factor and the child's acceptability in the group reached  $r = .436$ , but a coefficient  $\beta = .038$  indicated that this factor was not one of the most predictive factors of the child's peer acceptance. The results were consistent with other findings from literature. Ashiabi and O'Neal (2015) concluded that there is a significant relationship between socio-economic status, social competence and socially acceptable behaviors, although the associations may not be strong, specifically suggesting that other factors, besides socioeconomic status, may influence the social standing of the child more. Similarly, Bradley and Corwyn (2002) noted that children's externalizing, aggressive behaviors are more often present in lower socio-economic status families, whereas Morris and Gennetian (2003) found that increases in income were related to positive social and behavioral outcomes.

The study uncovered as well (although not initially planned) the influence of the parental factor on peer acceptance in preschool with a correlation coefficient of  $r = .406$ , which indicated that

there was a strong correlation between these two factors. Although not among the predictors of the child's peer acceptance in the preschool group, it is worth noting that all children without parents and with one parent in preschool were listed in the group of rejected, with the highest number of nominations. This is perhaps not due to the fact that they do not have both parents, since one would argue that children at the age of 3-6 are not able to distinguish this, but rather because of the behaviors of said children in the social groups- low level of engagement and self-esteem could be among reasons for their categorization in the group of unwanted children. Therefore, this factor should be better examined in the future, to understand the reasons behind this, since the number of children without parents in kindergarten was small, and it can be hypothesized that this factor would be more influential and more predictive if more children without parents would be included in the study.

The results of this study also supported the hypothesis on the impact of developmental level of communication and social skills in the acceptance of children in the preschool group and it was established that these factors were among the most influential and predictive factors of the child's peer acceptance in preschool. Development in the area of communication skills with a correlation coefficient of  $r = .626$  and  $\beta = .168$ , and development in the area of social skills with a correlation coefficient of  $r = .640$  and  $\beta = .207$ , indicated that these skills are most predictive of the child's peer acceptance in preschool. These findings were consistent with findings from literature. Slaughter (2002) found that children, who interact more with other children, and have good communication skills are more likely to accept and understand the opinions of their peers, and interact better with one another, leading to better peer acceptance. Kim (2012) found that social skills are significantly related to peer acceptance, and aggressive-hostile behaviors lead to peer rejection in early childhood. Shiner (2000) reported that children, who were described by their parents as being extroverted, were found to be more socially competent and were accepted better by peers. In addition, it was concluded that children who tend to be quiet, calm, and introverted are less socially competent when compared with their peers (Shiner, 2000). According to Rubin and colleagues (2012), children who are socially competent are better accepted by peers, and have qualitatively richer friendships.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

There has been much debate among professionals about the importance of friendships in the overall development of the child. The truth is that friendships offer the opportunity to learn social behaviors, to attain a high level of social competence, to gain knowledge of self and group, for emotional and cognitive support, and to provide a foundation for successful relationships in later life (Xie et al., 2006). Being a desired part of the group is a basic human motive, and the need to supplement that motive is reflected in the human desire for frequent, pleasant, and interpersonal relationships (Shuey, 2007). Being rejected by the social group at an early age affects the child's social life and his/her exclusion from the social circle in general.

On the basis of all analyzes conducted, this study found that all factors considered as independent variables – i.e., socioeconomic status of the family, level of development in the field of communication, and social skills of children have a strong impact on the acceptance of preschool children in their peer group. Findings from this study have provided an initial base for future research in Kosovo. Future research should explore these constructs more in depth, through longitudinal and qualitative research designs. Furthermore, future research should focus on child characteristics (thoughts, feelings, and attitudes that may influence social behavior) and other domains of child development (daily life skills, motor skills, emotional competence) to determine how they are related to peer acceptance. Future research should also ideally include more diverse samples and a broader population.

Finally, yet importantly, follow-up research with the same population would provide crucial information on the longer-term effects of the variables influencing peer acceptance. It is important that such studies continue, and with the knowledge gained, that we make recommendations to parents and teachers on how to strengthen social relationships among children and how to prevent the isolation of unwanted children from their peer groups, while focusing on strengthening cohesion within groups and building healthy social relationships from basic levels of education and onwards, thereby contributing to the creation of conditions for proper and healthy development of the child's personality.

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