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## The Relationship of Peer Acceptance, Age, Gender, Ethnicity, and Appearance among Preschoolers

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The Relationship of Peer Acceptance, Age, Gender, Ethnicity, and Appearance among  
Preschoolers

The Relationship of Peer Acceptance, Age, Gender, Ethnicity, and Appearance among  
Preschoolers

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Human Environmental Sciences

By

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University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Sciences, and Rural Sociology 2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine preschool children's acceptance of peers. The term peer acceptance is defined as "the degree a child is socially accepted or rejected by his or her peer group." Johnson et al. (2002) found children between the ages of three and five were able to develop friendships and social skills that would impact their acceptance among peers. The study determined if children based their choice of peers according to a child's age, gender, ethnicity, appearance, and/or social skills. The subjects of this study were 31 children whose ages were three-, four-, and five-years-old who attended a childcare center in Northwest Arkansas. A sociometric task was used to conduct the research. When presented with a sociometric task and an interview of what makes one want to play with another, the participants tended to base peer acceptance choices on the same gender and same ethnicity. Children did not base their peer acceptance on social skills, age, or appearance. According to the interview responses children chose peers based on the nature of the activity and similarities in play of their pictured peers.

*Keywords: Peer acceptance, preschool, age, gender, ethnicity, appearance, social skills, sociometric status*

This thesis is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

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## **DEDICATION**

I want to dedicate this document to a very special lady who influenced me and impacted my life beyond what she will ever know. She taught me to get to know as many people as I could and learn everything you can about someone. You never know who you will touch or who will touch you. Without family and friendships, we would be lonely and we need to cherish the moments we have with our loved ones. I dedicate this thesis to my Grammy, JoAnn Ward. She helped me see how important it is to find the good in others and to accept everyone for who they are.

Thank you for leaving this world with such a beautiful legacy and so many beautiful memories that are shared by your family and wonderful, dear friends.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Rejection happens daily, whether a child has been told he or she cannot play with a friend or a child did not want to share a toy, or a sibling said, “Go away;” or a parent has been too busy to give attention to a needy child. For a young child, rejection can be tough. It is hurtful, and it can be damaging to a child’s development (Dodge et al., 2003). It is natural to want to be accepted, to feel part of the group, or to just be included.

Rejection occurs when a child has been excluded by another individual or by a group (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Denham & Holt, 1993; Johnson, Ironsmith, Snow, & Poteat, 2000). Rejection has been an ever-evolving issue in schools (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Dodge et al., 2003). A child who was rejected by peers can show signs of loneliness, low self-esteem, aggression, and depression (Dodge et al., 2003).

Studies showed rejected children potentially suffer in academics, suspensions, and dropping out of school (Johnson et al., 2000). According to Coie and Dodge (1983), individuals who experienced rejection as children tended to show an increased amount of psychological damage and delayed social development as they continued to develop (Dodge et al., 2003). These individuals were more likely to have antisocial behavior or to be involved in criminal behaviors later in life (Dodge et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2000). Due to these findings, preschool was an excellent time to teach children about accepting their peers (Johnson et al., 2000; Landy, 2002; Mostow, Izard, Fine, & Trentacosta, 2002).

Landy (2002) declared, teachers encourage children’s social development when they are of preschool age by forming relationships with others. Hanish, Ryan, Martin, and Fabes (2005) stated preschool children, generally between the ages of three and five, were developing at an extremely rapid pace as they learned how to build and maintain friendships, discovered which

peers were disliked and liked, established steady play partners, acquired reputations, and developed social skills. Mize, Ladd, and Price (1985) found promoting peer acceptance was a preferred choice instead of treating rejected children later on in their lives.

The goal of this study was to examine preschool children's acceptance of peers. The study began by determining if children based their choice of peers according to a child's age. The study then looked at whether children base their peer selection on gender. The third goal of this study observed whether children chose peers based on ethnicity. The final objectives were to verify if children's appearance and social skills played a part in being accepted by peers.

First, some background information was given regarding acceptance or rejection among children. Second, benefits of this study were discussed. Third, the method of collecting the data for the research project was provided. Fourth, the findings of the data and the statistical analysis were provided. Lastly, the summary, conclusion, and suggestions for future research were made.

## **Background**

Acceptance can be powerful (Landy, 2002). Children who were accepted, were admired and respected by peers (Landy, 2002). Children, especially children who were well liked by others, used peers as a resource (Landy, 2002). According to Landy (2002), children learned from peers by asking questions, observing, and modeling behaviors as well as actions. Studies discovered children who were highly accepted were seen to use leadership skills and positive social skills (Coie, 1990; Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie et al., 1982; Coie et al., 1990). As a result of these characteristics, "popular" children were approached by peers more frequently than other classmates (Coie, 1990; Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie et al., 1982; Coie et al., 1990; Dodge, 1983).

## **Benefits**

The review of literature and this study could benefit parents, teachers, and professionals. The literature informed readers about factors and reasons that may be associated with peer acceptance.

Research has been conducted on peer rejection through intervention techniques for teachers, parent surveys, and from child sociometric tasks (Coie, 1990). Research has studied characteristics regarding age, gender, ethnicity, and appearance individually (Coie, 1990; Coie & Dodge, 1983, Dodge et al., 2003; Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Mize et al., 1985). However, little research existed on preschool aged children and these characteristics, all in one study. The literature review and research project may help the reader understand the reasoning behind how preschool children relate to their peers. Therefore, this study focused on acceptance by looking at age, gender, ethnicity, and appearance.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Preschool children at this age developed at an extremely rapid pace — from learning how to build and maintain friendships, discovering which peers were disliked and liked, establishing steady play partners, acquiring reputations, and developing social skills (Hanish et al., 2005). It was critical at this point in a child's life to teach preventative techniques in order to reduce peer rejection from happening later in adolescence.

The literature showed that it was essential to learn how to address peer acceptance as early as possible in order to reduce the risk of long-term damage of peer rejection and to stop children from experiencing problems with psychological damage to their social development, as well as to help the child who was excluded from not becoming involved with criminal or antisocial behavior later in life. It was critical for teachers, care givers, professionals, and

parents to be aware of the characteristics and recognize the importance of peer acceptance in order to work together. They needed to help the children who have been “disliked” and the children who were “liked” to learn to play together in a healthy way.

The purpose of this study was to examine preschool children’s acceptance of peers. Such information could help educators and parents model various social skills to include peers during play at an early age and implement more effective intervention techniques. The study would also verify that children at a young age could recognize who they relate to and who they wanted to socialize with. The study sought to determine the correlations between gender, age, ethnicity, and appearance. The study also clarified if the thesis of children’s social skills played a part in their being accepted by peers.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Peer rejection, according to the literature, has been studied extensively, but peer acceptance is a distinct construct. The study explored factors associated with peer acceptance in young children in order to better inform teachers and parents, and to allow them to construct a learning environment that supported needed skills that promoted peer acceptance.

As children begin school, peer relationships become important (Mostow et al., 2002); thus, making preschool a perfect time to focus on peer acceptance. According to Landy (2002) and Santrock (2010), starting preschool was a big step for children. In preschool, a child could experience some challenges, failures, and successes — all without the presence of a parent (Landy, 2002; Santrock, 2010). At school children learned social skills and how to interact socially with other children as well as how to develop relationships and friendships all by themselves. For instance, Mostow et al. (2002) studied children in early elementary school to see if social skills could predict children’s peer acceptance in school. The study showed that children with emotion knowledge were able to gain peer acceptance when positive social skills were displayed to peers. Emotion knowledge is the ability to label and communicate emotions to others (Mostow et al., 2002). Children with emotional knowledge are able to label and communicate emotions, discriminate among one’s emotions, and guide others through an emotional time, while supporting and sympathizing with others (Landy, 2002; Mostow et al., 2002). According to Landy (2002) and Mostow et al. (2002), having emotion knowledge was helpful for children to be accepted.

### **Peer Acceptance**

The term peer acceptance is defined as “the degree a child is socially accepted or rejected by his or her peer group” (Slaughter, Dennis, & Pritchard, 2002). Coie et al. (1990) and Mostow

et al. (2002) declared socially accepted children were friendly, cooperative, helpful, sociable, and able to initiate and maintain social interactions. According to Braza et al. (2009), peer acceptance was important to children's social development. Peer acceptance provided a wide range of learning and developmental opportunities for children. Through peer acceptance, children were able to learn about social skills, peer problem solving, cooperation, and being part of a group (Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; Mostow et al., 2002). Parents, teachers, and other adults were good sources of social support for children; but children learned best from playing and interacting with one another (Ladd, 1990; Sebanc, 2003).

When children spent time with other children by playing, interacting, and conversing, children were usually included and accepted among peers. Ladd (1983) observed first-through-sixth graders on the playground. Ladd found that children who participated in constant play with peers were favorably accepted by others. However, when children spent his or her playtime alone, wandering around, isolated, or engaged with an adult, these children were seen as unpopular playmates (Ladd, 1983). With this study in mind, it is important to encourage preschoolers to play and continue to engage and interact with his or her peers in order to build positive peer relationships.

Being accepted by others can be difficult, especially for a child beginning school for the first time or when the child is considered to be the "new kid" in the school and/or group. It is necessary to understand a child's level of social acceptance as soon as possible, before reputations or barriers are formed (Denham & Holt, 1993; Denham et al., 1990). Once negative reputations are formed, children are stigmatized and rejected for a number of years, thus making it extremely hard to be liked by peers; Coie and Dodge (1983) found reputations can hold for five years, and many children who were viewed as rejected ended up moving to another school.

When a child developed a reputation among peers, whether it was positive or negative, the child's reputation may have influenced other children's opinions of the child's anticipated behavior (Denham & Holt, 1993; Denham et al., 1990). Thus, if a child was seen as a well-liked or friendly playmate, then this child was probably included and accepted by others. If a child was seen as disliked or mean during playtime, then the child was excluded.

Positive or negative adjustment to school hinged on peer relationships for children, especially young children. Beginning school can be stressful (Landy, 2002), and it was more stressful if a child was excluded or did not feel part of a group (Dodge et al., 2003). Therefore, if children started school being accepted or were able to be accepted earlier on, then school was a more appealing place. When children enjoy themselves, school performance improved due to the exciting environment. Ladd (1990) pointed out that the children who had friends at the start of school liked school better than children who did not have friends in the first two months of school. Ladd (1990) also found that if children made a new friend within the first two months of school, then performance rose. However, if peer rejection occurred, children avoided school, performance declined, and children had a poor perception of school (Ladd, 1990).

Peer rejection is defined as a child being excluded or not accepted by his or her peers (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Denham & Holt, 1993; Johnson et al., 2000). Children who experienced rejection at a young age had a difficult time being included and in forming relationships with their peers (Johnson et al., 2000). Researchers studied peer rejection in order to determine why children were excluded. While focusing on rejection, researchers tested assumptions of how children could be accepted by peers (Coie, 1990). Johnson et al. (2000) proposed that by teaching young children to accept others, children were then able to acquire a healthy social development.

Sebanc, Kearns, Hernandez, and Galvin (2007) studied the dynamics of best friends among children. The researchers believed that best friend relationships can be found in preschool; however, those best friendships in preschool were not as established when compared to older children. Despite preschool children's ages, best friendships are thought to be unique. This ensured these relationships were real. Characteristics that yielded a best friend were: being older, being a girl, being accepted, and having positive social skills, as indicated by Sebanc et al. (2007). A best friend was different than just being a friend, but even with the difference, both relationships required acceptance first. If a child was not accepted, a friendship did not develop.

Mostow et al. (2002) found when children began formal schooling, peer relationships become prominent. During the preschool period, children started to experience the peer group and to feel its importance in their lives (Denham & Holt, 1993; Denham et al., 1990). Johnson et al. (2000) stated preschool was the perfect time period for children to develop social skills and friendships in order to be accepted by their peers. Since children are able to develop friendships at this age and have the ability to verbalize who they like to play with, preschool was a good age to implement a sociometric status task.

**Sociometric Status.** Sociometric classification systems allowed researchers to evaluate children's perceptions of their peers. Sociometric status has been used in studies extensively (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993); this particular task gave researchers the ability to see how children rate their peers. Sociometric status also gave insight into factors that contributed to children being rejected or accepted among their peers.

The traditional two-dimensional sociometric classification system made a distinction between social preference and social impact (Coie et al., 1982; Newcomb et al., 1993). Social preference (SP) referred to social likeability, which indicated how children were liked or disliked

by their peers (Coie et al., 1982; Newcomb et al., 1993). Social impact (SI) referred to the degree to which children were noticed by their peers (Coie et al., 1982; Newcomb et al., 1993). Social impact was the sum of acceptance, plus rejection, and social preference was the difference of acceptance, minus rejection (Coie et al., 1982; Newcomb et al., 1993, p. 100). Sociometric task identified children who were popular (SP score higher than 1, liked (SI) score higher than 0, and disliked (SI) score lower than 0), rejected (SP score lower than -1, liked (SI) score lower than 0, and disliked (SP) score higher than 0), neglected (SI score lower than -1, and liked (SP) and disliked (SP) scores lower than 0), and controversial (SI score higher than 1 and liked (SP) and disliked (SP) scores lower than 0) (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie et al., 1982; Newcomb et al., 1993). The other children were referred to as average (Coie et al., 1982; Newcomb et al., 1993). Each of these rankings provided information to the characteristics each of these categories hold.

When a sociometric task was performed, children were free to pick the peers they truly wanted to play with and accept as friends. The present study utilized the one-dimensional sociometric task in order to discover who children accepted. This approach focused solely on one aspect of the sociometric classification acceptance — which children were preferred as playmates.

### **Reasons and Factors Contributing to Peer Acceptance**

Johnson et al. (2000) found children between the ages of three and five were able to develop friendships and social skills that would impact their acceptance among peers. Children who were accepted in preschool were able to adjust more successfully in kindergarten (Johnson et al., 2000). By establishing peer relationships and positive social skills, young children felt safe enough in new settings to explore and learn while in school (Denham & Holt, 1993; Johnson et al., 2000).

There were many reasons and factors that may have contributed to peer acceptance in preschoolers. Researchers have cited social skills (Denham, 1986; Keane & Calkins, 2004; Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1988), age (Johnson et al., 2000; Sanderson & Siegal, 1995), gender (Coie et al., 1990; Sebanc, Pierce, Cheatham, & Gunnar, 2003; Walker, 2005), ethnicity (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2011), and appearance (Coie, 1990; Coie et al., 1982; Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Langlois & Stephan, 1977) as being causal reasons or factors for peer acceptance (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993). This study examined social skills, age, gender, ethnicity, and appearance as characteristics that contribute to a child's acceptance among peers.

**Social Skills.** Social skills are also known as pro-social behaviors. For the purpose of this literature review, the term social skill was used. Slaughter et al. (2002) defined social skills as behaviors that show one's interest or concern for another individual such as helping, sharing, comforting, giving empathy, following the rules, and cooperating. Ladd, Price, and Hart (1988) found these skills played a significant role in the formation or the maintaining of peer relationships. According to Sebanc et al. (2003), preschool was the prime time when children practiced and learned social skills with peer groups. Children were able to develop skills within the group and use them in future relationships and interactions.

Reacting and sympathizing with others has been proven to take place as early as preschool (Strayer, 1980). Landy (2002) and Strayer (1980) found preschool children were capable of being supportive and empathic to their peers' emotions. This ability of identifying with the emotions of others was likely to predict a child's acceptance amongst peers (Denham, 1986; Denham et al., 1990). When a child displayed comforting a friend in need, this child was seen as a child who was expected to be well-liked among classmates.

It has been found that children who were well-liked by their peers have high social skills and low feelings of aggression toward peers. On the other hand, children who were disliked had high feelings of aggression and low social skills (Slaughter et al., 2002). Keane and Calkins (2004) and Ladd et al. (1988) discovered that children who were characterized as cooperative toward their peers were viewed as popular playmates, while children who are seen to be disruptive were considered unpopular among peers. Ladd et al. (1988) described disruptive characteristics as arguing, acting aggressively, and participating in rough and tumble play. On the other hand, aggression was not always a bad thing as it relates to peer acceptance. Some children accepted and included an aggressive peer. Estell, Cairns, Farmer, and Cairns (2002) revealed children could be aggressive and still be well-liked depending on the peer groups' behaviors. Therefore, if the peer group and classroom environment had an aggressive atmosphere, then the children could choose an aggressive playmate.

Dodge (1983) conducted a study with seven-year-old boys. These boys were placed in play groups with other boys they had never met. After eight play sessions, Dodge (1983) found that the boys who interacted with peers more frequently had better social skills and were seen as popular peers. Social skills included cooperative play, long social interactions, good leaders, and the willingness to share things with others. The popular boys were also rated as physically attractive according to adults. Boys who spent most of their play time with adults or alone had antisocial behaviors and were unpopular. Antisocial behaviors consisted of aggressive play, insults, threats, and unwillingness to share. This study found that in order to be accepted by peers, boys needed to have positive social skills (Dodge, 1983).

Researchers revealed children were more accepted when they are able to adapt to different social exchanges (Gertner & Rice, 1994; Hazen & Black, 1989). Therefore, if children

were unable to listen or speak to others, then it would be hard to be included and accepted by others. In order to be included, one had to be able to communicate with others and acknowledge other children as well, according to Gertner and Rice (1994) and Hazen and Black (1989).

Gertner and Rice (1994) and Hazen and Black (1989) found that acceptance was difficult when a child was unable to converse with peers, such as saying a child's name or asking to join in play. Verbal abilities allowed children to build relationships with individuals (Black & Hazen, 1990; Gertner & Rice, 1994; Hazen & Black, 1989), but without this, establishing and maintaining friends may not occur. Thus, being unable to communicate with peers may have also hindered a child from being accepted and delayed one's social competence.

LaFreniere and Dumas (1996) evaluated preschool children's social competence and behaviors. A well-adjusted, flexible, socially skilled child was defined as socially competent, according to the researchers. Girls showed more social competence than boys, while boys were characterized as more aggressive. LaFreniere and Dumas (1996) assumed that boys were more boisterous and energetic due to the preschool environment not being conducive to boys' active behavior.

Keane and Calkins (2004) and Ladd et al. (1988) discovered preschoolers with good social skills had more friends and were better liked when they reached kindergarten. Denham et al. (1990) observed that children who were more skilled in understanding emotions and had better social skills and were rated as more likeable among peers. Children with a social skill deficit could obtain antisocial behavior, thus causing peer rejection (Coie et al., 1990; Dodge et al., 2003; Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, 2008; Keane & Calkins, 2004).

Landy (2002) acknowledged peers were important in a child's life. Peers help children learn various tasks and roles, according to Landy (2002) and Sebanc (2003). Peers serve as

models of aggression, sociability, and even antisocial behavior. Peers also model social skills from sharing, caring, helping others, expressing empathy and sympathy, taking turns, and being generous (Ladd, 1990; Landy, 2002, p. 528; Sebanc, 2003). Children whose peers modeled these behaviors were more likely to use these same behaviors as well. Therefore, peers were valuable teachers to other children and had a strong influence on children's behaviors.

Johnson et al. (2000) discovered it was important for early educators to take time to encourage the development of positive social skills in order to help preschool children have an easier transition into kindergarten. Social skills that could be easily taught and modeled are taking turns, helping, comforting, cooperating, communicating, and listening. Teachers can use activities, songs, books, and role-playing to demonstrate social skills to young children (Johnson et al., 2000).

The present study specifically focused on taking turns, helping, comforting, communicating, and cooperating. Strayer (1980) believed these particular social skills more likely demonstrated that a child was understanding, empathic, and in tune with others (Dockett & Degotardi, 1997). As the literature has shown, these traits were necessary for being accepted by peers. Without appropriate social skills, it was hard for children to be included by peers and/or classmates. Therefore, it was crucial that professionals and parents recognize the importance of social skills and help to foster, as well as model, these characteristics to preschool-aged children. This could be cultivated and encouraged through preschool children's environments, specifically those of the family and school.

**Age.** Another factor relating to peer acceptance was age. Most preschool classrooms consisted of children three and four years old. Preschool children had friends, but were not necessarily focused on having a best friend. Three-year-old children were still developing and learning how

to play with others, according to Walden, Lemerise, and Smith (1999). Clark (1985) and Newcomb et al. (1993) discovered children who were three generally played where they wanted to and just played with whomever was around.

According to Landy (2002), three-year-old children began to embark on pretend play with peers. Landy stated (2002), pretend play allowed children to interact with others and to work out various social roles that might come up in pretend play themes, such as compromising which character each child will play. During this stage, children also participated in cooperative play with other children. Landy (2002) declared that, cooperative play helped children understand others' perspectives. For example, if a child was not included and was upset, a three-year-old-child might ask them to join in. Three-year-old children become more aware of the emotions of others and what someone is feeling, so these children may try different ways to comfort a child in need. Children at this age are more willing to give a comforting pat, a hug, and console a child in need (Landy, 2002). Through pretend play and cooperative play children at this stage learned to problem solve with peers, worked together, and resolved conflict.

Four-year-olds, on the other hand, began to seek out a best friend, according to Landy (2002). Children at this age still may not always play with their best friends, but they were aware of this child (Sebanc, 2003). While one's best friend could change frequently, four-year-olds enjoy stating the name of their best friend, according to Sanderson and Siegal (1995). Sanderson and Siegal (1995) found that preschool friendships may last from two weeks to a year. Regardless of the duration, preschool children were able to name their best friends and these friendships served as important bonds and attachments for young children (Landy, 2002; Sebanc, 2003).

Landy (2002) explained that children, who were four years of age, had more stable friendships. Friendships allowed children to negotiate, problem solve, compromise, and learn to cooperate, stated Landy (2002). According to Landy (2002), friends acted as significant attachment figures for children. Friends helped children to feel comforted and connected to the environment. Sebanc (2003) found that children at this age became very upset if children moved away or did not come back (Landy, 2002). As stated by Landy (2002) and Sebanc (2003), friendships were important at this stage in life.

Four-year-old children spent a large amount of time in cooperative play where they were able to work through several social skills, such as listening, sharing, taking turns, conflict resolution, cooperation, and understanding others' perspectives (Landy, 2002). Near the end of this stage in development, four-year-olds gain a theory of mind (Landy, 2002). Gopnik (1990) explained that theory of mind was the idea that children were able to understand that people had their own thoughts different from themselves. Theory of mind allowed children to understand that other people have different thoughts, desires, ideas, and feelings from their own, according to Gopnik (1990) and Landy (2002). Because of this, children were more able to listen to others' points of views, feel sympathy, and give helpful responses to peers which became common. Again, confirming preschool aged children understood what a friend was and what a friend entailed.

Walden et al. (1999) found that children were more likely to interact and play with peers who were similar in age. Other researchers stated that children in preschool generally accepted others based on physical proximity and short-lived play episodes (Newcomb et al., 1993; Sanderson & Siegal, 1995). It was found young children based friendships on the enjoyment of common activities and play themes (Sanderson & Siegal, 1995; Sebanc, 2003).

A study found when children were grouped with mixed ages that there were more positive social relationships, as well as a reduction of aggression and bullying (Johnson et al., 2000). Fortunately, some preschool classes were mixed ages, which is why relationships should be more positive, and children in these classes should be more accepting of each other. Due to these reasons above, age may be a factor in peer acceptance and was included as a variable in the present study.

**Gender.** Gender roles referred to socially constructed roles, characteristics, and behaviors that a certain society considers appropriate for men and women (Landy, 2002; Santrock, 2010).

Maccoby (2004) found that society naturally divided and organized individuals by gender. Male and female gender differences are learned at a young age and some theorists stated as early as toddlerhood (Sebanc et al., 2003). Walker (2005) found in preschool that gender identities and roles were developing gradually as children began to acquire the behaviors and attitudes considered appropriate for their biological gender. As a result, boys may be accepted by peers differently than girls.

According to Sebanc et al. (2003), children used gender as a way to establish peer groups. Sebanc et al. (2003) found in preschool that children's friends were usually the same sex. Landy (2002) referred to sex as the biological characteristics that defined men and women, while gender referred to cultural roles, behaviors, and characteristics given to men and women. Sanderson and Siegal (1995), as well as Maccoby (2004) stated that, more often than not, preschoolers played with peers of the same gender due to similar interests.

Same-gender friendships occurred due to boys and girls being socialized differently and thus developing different interests and values. Girls spent their time in small, intimate groups with positive social skills while boys took part in organized, competitive, and rough play in large

groups (Clark, 1985; Hawley, Johnson, Mize, & McNamara, 2007; Ladd, 1983). Clark (1985) stated that these interaction styles began as early as preschool.

A study done by Sebanc et al. (2003) predicted dominant boys to be accepted by peers and girls with positive social skills to be accepted by peers. Dominant boys have characteristics that consisted of assertive social skills, such as being forthright and vocal. Sebanc et al. (2003) found children who used more commands and demands were ranked higher on sociometric ratings. Dominant girls were less accepted by girls, while boys were more accepted by girls when dominance and assertiveness were measured.

Assertiveness and aggression could be seen as similar characteristics (Landy, 2002). Both characteristics were viewed as forceful, bold, and even rude. While boys were favored and liked when seen as assertive and aggressive, this is not the case for girls. Walker (2005) studied preschool aged children and revealed that aggression was linked to girls not being favored by peers, whereas aggressive and disruptive behavior was more accepted among preschool boys. Thus, these findings are compatible with that of Sebanc et al. (2003). Aggressive behavior could be seen as a popular characteristic within preschool boy peer groups.

On the other hand, Coie et al. (1990) studied older boys within new peer groups, and noticed that similar characteristics emerged for popular boys. Popular boys reminded others of the rules and helped problem solve during difficult situations. Popular boys also spent the majority of their time in active play with peers and little time with adults. These results suggested boys who spend more time at play were more favored by peers.

Keane and Calkins (2004) determined toddlers' behaviors could predict problem behaviors for preschoolers and kindergarteners, especially for boys. Parents assessed children's behaviors at age two and then teachers and peers assessed children at age four. For boys, the

problem behaviors were seen to be the same as reported by parents, teachers, and even peers. These behaviors started early and continued into preschool and kindergarten. Problem behaviors included being bossy, sneaky, wild, and aggressive. Because of this, boys who exhibited these external problem behaviors as toddlers were likely to be less liked by peers in kindergarten. Girls' behaviors did not match from the age of two to four. Keane and Calkins (2004) hypothesized that girls' problem behaviors are internal instead of external, which made it harder to see internal problem behaviors (i.e. name calling or excluding peers) as toddlers. However, when girls were four years old, internal problem behaviors could be seen.

Research generally did not analyze gender differences nor did it specifically report gender differences, plus most studies of peer rejection were focused on boys. Since preschool settings were typically not segregated by gender (Landy, 2002), it was necessary to look at both boys and girls in order to understand how each gender affected peers acceptance. These reasons explain why gender was included as a factor relating to peer acceptance for the present study.

**Ethnicity.** Santrock (2010) referred to ethnicity as a group of people who identified with each other due to sharing a common ancestry, culture, language, nationality, or religion. According to Santrock (2010), biological characteristics such as same skin color, hair, and facial features may be seen in ethnic groups, but these biological characteristics did not define an ethnic group.

Innately, individuals tended to gravitate toward others who appeared similar to themselves, especially when a setting was new or unfamiliar (Clark, 1985). This could be seen with adults, as well as children. Children who shared similar biological characteristics more than likely shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. Landy (2002) recognized when a child not only appeared similar to one's self, but also shared the same language, same beliefs, or

the same neighborhood, these commonalities could comfort a child (Clark, 1985) and possibly feel part of a group.

A study done by Jesuvadian and Wright (2011) used persona dolls to explore the impact of race and ethnicity in preschool children's selection of friends. The persona dolls were used as a tool to help involve the children, aged four to six, in the story that was narrated by a dark-skinned doll named Rathi. Rathi was faced with a dilemma; the other dolls would not accept her, so Rathi was sad because she had no friends. Children were asked to choose a doll and to help Rathi figure out why she had no friends and then what she could do to make some friends. Jesuvadian and Wright (2011) discovered that by using persona dolls, children were able to voice their feelings with respect to life stories of others and to understand similarities rather than differences in others.

On the other hand, Von Grunigen, Perren, Nagele, and Alsaker (2010) found peer rejection for immigrant children was due to poor local language competency instead of ethnic background. Von Grunigen et al. (2010) reported that children with poor local language skills were less able to communicate, show positive social skills, and follow teacher instruction, which caused these children to be less accepted by peers. Swadener (1987) also suggested playmate selection was not based on racial or ethnic background and more was based on gender.

Research has not specifically looked at children's ethnicity as a factor with peer rejection. Studies have just focused on one ethnicity or have not used ethnicity as a variable at all. Clark (1985) assumed that preschool children more willingly accepted peers based on a child's skin color, not necessarily because these children were friends but because familiarity was a comforting feeling to children. Therefore, if children played with someone who looked like

themselves, it might be easier to be accepted. For these reasons, ethnicity may be a factor in peer acceptance.

**Appearance.** According to Landy (2002), adults in our society used appearances to make assumptions about others. As a result, Dion and Berscheid (1974) hypothesized, adults' cultural standards of appearance most likely were passed to children, therefore children discriminated based on physical appearance due to adults directly or indirectly demonstrating this behavior. However, Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) used the phrase "what is beautiful is good" to explain how attractive individuals are viewed positively and seen to have better characteristics than unattractive individuals. According to these researchers, attractive individuals were people who had socially desirable personalities with traits, such as friendly, warm, stable, and sincere (Dion et al., 1972).

Langlois, Ritter, Roggman, and Vaughn (1991) said that infants showed a preference for attractive faces starting at three months old. The ability to categorize and group people started early. This preference for attractive people only continued and became more elaborate and internalized as individuals continue through adulthood, according to a few studies (Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Langlois & Stephan, 1977; Smith, 1982).

Dion and Berscheid (1974) reported results that young children four to five years old based peer popularity on children who were more physically attractive. Attractiveness accounted for a child's positive social behavior, which included friendly and independent behavior. Dion and Berscheid (1974) measured physical attractiveness or appearance by using adult judges. These adults used a five-point scale to rate very attractive (5) and very unattractiveness (1). The study used pictures of the children which showed the child's face and body. The adults rated attractiveness based on the child's facial features and body build.

Langlois and Stephan (1977) gauged whether children of different ethnicities had the same ideas about other children's physical attractiveness. The results revealed that Black, Mexican-American, and Anglo children identified children who were attractive as more liked, thought to be smarter, seen as friendly, and shared more often, while unattractive children were seen to be meaner and more likely to hit others. Data suggested children from all three ethnic groups chose others by physical attractiveness and not ethnicity when looking at peers' likeable characteristics. These studies confirmed that young children associated peers who had positive social skills and traits as attractive, and they linked children who were unattractive with negative social skills and traits (Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Keane & Calkins, 2004; Langlois & Stephan, 1977; Smith, 1982). This study and others provided strong evidence that children and adults let appearance influence their decision when it came to choosing playmates.

Studies have confirmed athleticism played a factor in peer preference among boys. Boys who had an athletic body rather than a stocky body type were perceived to have more positive social skills, and this significantly influenced children's perceptions of peers (Smith, 1985; Vannatta, Gartstein, Zeller, & Noll, 2009).

Ramsey and Langlois (2002) indicated physical attractiveness was more important for females than males when information was recalled at a later time. This study looked at children three to seven years old. Smith (1985) also observed that attractive girls received preferential treatment over unattractive girls, while boys were liked and disliked regardless of being attractive or unattractive. Smith (1982) found unattractive preschool girls suffered more aggressive behavior from classmates. It is thought that media aimed at children, stresses the importance of appearance for females more so than males, and this may impact why

attractiveness is more important for females in today's society (Ramsey & Langlois, 2002; Smith, 1982; 1985).

Studies observing fourth grade boys had looked at physical appearance and had not found significant results but found persuasive evidence. Coie et al. (1982) found support for physical attractiveness being a condition of peer acceptance; however, behavior traits accounted for a larger amount of inconsistency than attractiveness (Coie, 1990). Coie (1990) theorized children are less preferred due to their socially unacceptable behavior and not their appearance. Coie (1990) believed children who were considered unattractive had undesirable behaviors and that is the reason, instead of their appearance, that these children tend to be less accepted (Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Dodge, 1983; Langlois & Stephan, 1977; Smith, 1982).

Dion and Berscheid (1974) suggested physical appearance was everything for adults. Some adults based first impressions of others only on one's physical appearance (Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Landy, 2002). Landy (2002) indicated physical appearance allowed an individual to find out basic knowledge of a person from gender, age, race, height, and weight. Unfortunately, individuals allowed these predictions and guesses to affect attitudes, beliefs, and even actions toward others (Landy, 2002). Because adults make first impressions based on physical appearance, it was safe to assume children will do the same.

Landy's (2002) conclusions suggested that society seemed more focused on fashion, appearance, and body image than ever before and it appeared to be starting with very young children. Appearance was thought to be a factor in peer acceptance based on the mentioned explanations.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

**Ecological theory.** Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theoretical perspective used a process, person, context, and time model to observe continuity and change in the biophysical characteristics of human beings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The first proposition of the theoretical model incorporated the child's development in various contexts — family, school, and peer groups — with relationships and interactions that took place over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this study, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theoretical perspective was discussed as related to peer acceptance in preschool children. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), children were influenced by a number of different environments, as well as adult behavior.

Various environments can have profound effects on children's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Three of these settings include family, school, and peer group interaction. In a family environment, children had daily interactions with family members. They were usually closest to the child because the child saw them on a day-to-day basis and, as a result, had the most influence on the child. Therefore, if parents only accepted people who are the same age, same gender, same ethnicity, and pretty appearance, then the child would probably do the same. On the other hand, if a child was not accepted by their parents, then it was likely the child would have difficulties developing relationships with a teacher or peers; thus making acceptance hard for a child to develop.

School was another important environment in a child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Children have face-to-face contact with teachers and children saw these individuals usually in more formal settings and interacted with them closely. Teachers served as models in order to help children develop social skills and behaviors. Thus, if the child's teacher or peers only

accepted others based on age, gender, ethnicity, and appearance, then the child would pick others based on these characteristics to play with as well.

Peers were a part of a child's environment within family and schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Peers provided a direct connection for children to interact without adults, usually within formal settings. With the absence of close adult supervision, children were able to gain and experience independence. Independence allowed children to get a sense of who they were and what they could do. Peers provided companionship and support, as well as learning experiences in cooperation and role taking. As a result, children who were accepted by their peer group gained a positive social development.

**Strengths-based approach.** Research has a long history of focusing on children's deficits and problem behaviors. Within the last decade, researchers within the fields of education, mental health, psychology, social work, and child welfare have begun to question the deficit-based approach and move toward a more holistic model of development (Trout, Ryan, La Vigne, & Epstein, 2003). Instead of focusing on individual and family weaknesses, strength-based professionals and researchers collaborate with families and children to determine individual and family strengths (Laursen, 2000). At the base of the strength-based approach is the belief that children and families have unique talents, skills, and life events (Olson, Whitebeck, & Robinson, 1991, as cited in Epstein, 1999).

A reliable tool used to assess strengths and competencies, strength-based assessment provides professionals with a positive way to approach intervention with children and families. "Over time we have learned that asking the right question often has more impact on the client than having the correct answer" (Miller, 1994, as cited in Clark, 1997, p. 98). Professionals

working from a strength-based approach emphasize the importance of asking youth and families the “right questions”.

Several validated assessments for children have relied on a deficit-oriented assessment model. For example, validated assessment tools, such as the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991), document children’s deficits and problems. While these tools have proven useful for understanding what is wrong with children, they provide little insight to the strengths children may have in overcoming some of their problem behaviors. Researchers working from a strength-based approach suggest that using assessments that focus on strengths allow professionals to develop partnerships with families and children and that may contribute to the child’s enhanced performance and motivation.

When applied to peer acceptance, the strengths-based framework in the present study used a definition of peer acceptance that focused on the positive nature of children’s relationships, rather than the identification of unsatisfactory relationships (peer rejection). The present study also looked at characteristics related to peer acceptance, such as ratings of positive social skills.

Strengths-based approach drew on studies of rejected children to inform professionals and teachers about how accepted children could be affected when rejection took place (McLoyd, 1990, 2006). Acknowledging the problems created by rejection, while at the same time highlighting factors that contributed to acceptance, created a positive approach for sorting out the negative issues (McLoyd, 1990, 2006). When observing the behavior of the most selected children, it was thought that the characteristics of accepted children would be discovered by their peers’ selection through the sociometric task. Therefore, this study focused on what was

working when children accepted others, and it used what worked to stop children from being rejected in peer groups.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### **Purpose and Hypotheses**

The purpose of the study was to examine preschool children's acceptance of peers. The study determined if children based their choice of peers according to a child's age, gender, ethnicity, appearance, and/or social skills. Directional research hypotheses were written to target each variable.

Age: It was hypothesized that children would be more likely to choose older classmates within this sample of preschool children.

Gender: It was hypothesized that children would be more likely to choose same-gender peers within this sample of preschool children.

Ethnicity: It was hypothesized that children would be more likely to choose playmates who share their ethnic background within this sample of preschool children.

Social skills: It was hypothesized that children would be more likely to choose playmates that portray positive social skills within this sample of preschool children.

Attractiveness: It was hypothesized that children would be more likely to choose playmates that were perceived as more attractive within this sample of preschool children.

#### **Design of Study**

The design of the study was a descriptive correlational study (Campbell & Stanley, 1966) that assessed two preschool classes which consisted of preschool children who were three- to five-years-old by using a sociometric task to determine peer acceptance. The participants, instrumentation, procedures, and data analysis were discussed below.

## **Participants**

The subjects of this study were 31 three-, four-, and five-year-old children from a child care center in Northwest Arkansas.

The population used in the study was all children for whom consent was gained. The children's ages ranged from three- to five-years-old of age and all were currently enrolled in a child care center in Northwest Arkansas. Eighteen of these children were female and thirteen children were male. The sample varied in age, gender, ethnicity, and appearance. Demographic surveys were passed out to all parents of children who were three- to five-years-old and enrolled at the center to determine ethnicity and language.

## **Instrumentation**

**Sociometric task.** To answer the research questions, a sociometric task was used.

Positive nominations assessed peer acceptance through a modified sociometric task. Children were asked, "Who do you like to play with the most outside?" and "Who else do you like to play with the most outside?" Subsequent research has found this measure to be valid and reliable for teachers and especially school-aged children; however, the use of pictures with preschool children improved reliability (Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, & Hymel, 1979; Black & Hazen, 1990; Coie et al., 1982; Dodge, 1983; Hazen & Black, 1989; Newcomb et al., 1993).

Sociometric status measurement was tested in the field to establish validity. A meta-analytic review of sociometric status showed that the Coie et al. (1982) modified measurement was used in 25 studies across the United States (Newcomb et al., 1993). The results were determined to be consistent and stable.

The use of pictures to conduct sociometric status tasks have found that young children's reports of who they liked to play with agree with observational measures of children's frequent

playmates (McCandless & Marshall, 1957; Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1988; Sebanc, 2003). Hartrup et al. (1988) found observation and sociometric relationships to be significant for boys and girls ( $p < .001$ ), which showed criterion validity. Children who were among each child's positive choices on the sociometric test were observed playing with those children more often, according to Hartrup et al. (1988).

Coie and Dodge (1983) looked at children's social status over five years in a longitudinal study. Coie and Dodge (1983) found that social status in year five significantly related to the status in year one of the study  $\chi^2(16) = 42.05, p < .001$ .

Sebanc (2003) discussed that the sociometric status had moderate test-retest reliability after three weeks for positive and negative nominations (Olson & Lifgren, 1988). McCandless and Marshall (1957) created a modified sociometric measure to appropriately test preschool children by using pictures (Asher et al., 1979). Internal consistency was found using Cronbach's alpha  $r(17) = .56, p < .05$ , for positive nominations and  $r(17) = .42, p < .10$ , for negative nominations (Asher et al., 1979).

**Social Skills.** Social skills were evaluated according to the assessment of the child based on the benchmarks of the Arkansas Frameworks for Three and Four-Year-Olds, developed by Arkansas Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (ADCCECE, 2004). Each child was assessed by his or her teacher twice a year. The benchmark strands used in this study were: 1.3 demonstrated ability to play independently, 1.10 sought out adults and children, 1.15 understood and respected differences, 1.16 helped others in need, 1.17 stood up for rights, 1.18 shared and respected the rights of others, 1.19 worked cooperatively with others on completing a task; 1.20 used compromise and discussion to resolve conflicts, and 5.6 used words to communicate ideas and feelings (ADCCECE, 2004). Each social skill was rated for each

individual child by giving a rating level. Rating levels were assessed by how consistent the skill was demonstrated during a semester, but the rating levels were not yet emerging or consistent. Each level was assigned a score of one, two, or three respectively and a summary score was created by finding the sum of all nine questions.

The Arkansas Early Childhood Education Framework Handbook was developed and written by teachers and educators throughout the state that are recognized as professionals. These professionals used developmentally appropriate assessments to develop a rating scale used in the Arkansas frameworks (ADCCECE, 2004). An internal consistency (alpha) was calculated for the nine social skill items pulled from the Arkansas frameworks. The Cronbach's alpha = .807, demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, which confirmed all nine items could be grouped together to reflect the same construct - social skills.

**Demographics.** Parents were given a short questionnaire to answer basic questions about each child. The questions asked the parent to report the child's gender, ethnicity, and language spoken at home and school.

## **Procedures**

The children were assessed based on their attendance of either the morning or afternoon session of the preschool classes to which the child attended. After all the consent forms were returned, the sociometric task was administered. This study used the positive nomination measure, following Asher et al. (1979), Black and Hazen (1990), Coie and Dodge (1983), Dodge (1983), Hazen and Black (1989), and Sebanc (2003). The measures were administered to both morning and afternoon groups. Both classroom groups were well-established when data were collected, which allowed the groups to be stable. The stable groups gave children familiarity with each other including ample time to develop peer preferences in the classes.

At the UA Nursery School, the children were asked individually to join the test administrator in the reading room to play a game. Each child was asked to write his or her name or make a mark acknowledging that they would participate in the game. All 31 children were tested in this manner.

Once the child was in the reading room, the examiner displayed photographs of all the children in the child's class. The child was asked to name each classmate after the examiner pointed to a child's picture. If the child was unable to name a classmate, then the examiner provided the name of the child. The pictures were cues for recalling the names of the children as well as an indication that the child was aware of the photographs which gave each classmate an equal chance of being nominated.

The examiner began the procedure by instructing the child to "Point to the picture of someone you like to play with outside." After the child pointed to the picture, the examiner removed that picture from the table. Then, the examiner repeated the positive question two more times by asking the child, "Who else do you like to play with outside?" Each child selected three "liked" classmates.

The examiner then placed one positively nominated picture on the table and continued by asking, "What is it about (pictured child's name) that makes you want to play with him or her?" The child's response was recorded verbatim on a sheet of paper and on a digital voice recorder. Then, the examiner removed the picture from the table. The process was repeated two more times. At the end of the procedure, a total of three pictures had been removed from the table. The child's positive responses were documented on a summary sheet.

Once gathered, the data were analyzed using SPSS 20.0 to describe the sample and to answer research questions. Sociometric status nomination scores were obtained with a weighted

score for accepted children. The weighted scores were: first child chosen = 3, second child chosen = 2, and third child chosen = 1. If a child was not nominated at all then a score of 0 was given. For each child, all nominations were summed and divided by the number of nominators. Once the average was calculated, it was standardized to create a z-score. This standardized peer acceptance score was correlated with all variables (social skills, age, gender, and ethnicity) to determine the results.

Appearance was not directly measured or assessed quantitatively. Appearance was evaluated based on each child's anticipated response to the open-ended questions following the peer acceptance task. The open-ended questions that followed the peer acceptance task should have included attractiveness as a feature of each child's response. Therefore, attractiveness was defined by the children. Appearance data were collected post hoc, based on interview responses from the children and analyzed using qualitative software QSR N\*Vivo 9. The interview data were then analyzed using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), meaning that concepts or interpretations are "derived from the data so as to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (p. 13). The children's responses to the open-ended questions provided some recurrent themes that emerged from the data, and those were used to provide insight into children's peer acceptance choices.

## **IV. Results**

Pearson correlation, *t* tests, and chi-square tests were used to report the findings. A summary of the sample description and research measure data is found in Tables 1, 2, and 3. On the whole, 31 children (100%) of potential participants at the facility participated in the study. There were 13 boys and 18 girls. Three of the children were three years old, 16 children were four years old, and 12 children were five years old. The mean age was 56.7 months with a S.D. of 6.8 months. Statistical significance for each of the correlations was determined using an alpha level of  $p < .05$  for all null hypotheses.

### **Analyses of Research Hypotheses**

A summary of the research measures was reported in order to give a description of the study. Research measures consisted of the child's language, ethnicity, and the number of times children were chosen as playmates. Most parents reported English as the child's first language ( $n = 26$ ) and the language spoken at home ( $n = 26$ ). Parents most commonly identified ethnicity was Caucasian ( $n = 19$ ), with ( $n = 1$ ) identifying as Hispanic/Latino, East Asian ( $n = 5$ ), and ( $n = 6$ ) identified as Multiethnic which included, Caucasian-Hispanic/Latino, Caucasian-East Asian, Caucasian-Central Asian, and Caucasian-African American.

All of the preschool children chose and identified someone with whom they would play with. The average amount of times chosen was ( $n = 3$ ) with a S.D. = 2. The average amount of children who were chosen first to play with was ( $n = 1$ ) with a S.D. = 1.1, chosen second ( $n = 1$ ) with a S.D. = 1.1, and chosen third ( $n = 1$ ) with a S.D. = .9.

**Age.** There will be no significant difference between whether or not children would be more likely to choose older classmates. Although five-year-olds ( $M = 3.50$ ) were chosen more

often than those under 5 ( $M = 2.68$ ), the null hypothesis failed to be rejected,  $t(18) = 1.01$ ;  $p = .33$ .

**Gender.** Children will not be more likely to choose playmates matched in gender. The null hypothesis was rejected, same gender observed = 73.1%, same gender expected = 51.3%,  $X^2(1) = 17.72$ ;  $p = .001$ .

**Ethnicity.** Children will not be more likely to choose playmates matched in ethnicity. The null hypothesis was rejected, same ethnicity observed = 65.6%, same ethnicity expected = 54.2%,  $X^2(1) = 4.85$ ;  $p = .028$ .

**Social Skills.** There will be no significant difference in children's choice of playmates based on positive social skills within this sample of preschool children. The null hypothesis was slightly positive, but failed to be rejected, Pearson  $r = .11$ ,  $p = .55$ . However, there was a significant difference between children's first language and social skills on the amount chosen by peers  $t(5.51) = 2.74$ ,  $p = 0.04$ . These results indicated higher levels of social skills scores were related to speaking English. More children spoke English as their first language (83.9%) and at home (80.6%), which may have contributed to these findings.

**Attractiveness.** It was hypothesized that children would be more likely to choose playmates that are perceived as more attractive within this sample of preschool children. This hypothesis was measured using qualitative analysis. By using qualitative interview-based data, different perceptions, themes, and relationships were discovered. Analysis of children's interview responses from this study indicated that attractiveness was not an identifiable theme. Out of 31 children's responses, only one child indicated appearance as a factor in choosing peer relationships in her response,

“Researcher: What is it about (her) that makes you want to play with her?  
Child: She's beautiful and she's my friend.

Researcher: Aww

Researcher: What is it about (him) that makes you want to play with him?

Child: Because he's handsome and he's funny.

Researcher: What is it about (her) that makes you want to play with her?

Child: Because she has super long hair and she likes and she always doesn't play with her little brother."

This particular child solely concentrated her responses to focus on personal characteristics to specifically include other children's physical features.

The other 30 children chose peers based on what they liked to play whether it was different games (e.g., kitties, ball, monster, chase, or zombie) or just playing (e.g., fun, game, run, running, toys, and works). Below are responses from three different children,

"Researcher: What is it about (her) that makes you want to play with her?

Girl 1(4 years old): Because we like to play princess and she likes to play.

Researcher: What is it about (her) that makes you want to play with her?

Boy 1 (3 years old): Ugh we play, we play zombie.

Researcher: Play zombie, oh. You do that a lot?

Boy 1: Yes

Researcher: What is it about (her) that makes you want to play with her?

Girl 2 (5 years old): Cause she's nice.

Researcher: She's nice.

Girl 2: She's fun.

Researcher: She's fun, anything else?

Girl 2: And she's good at playing kitties.

Researcher: Do you like to play kitties?

Girl 2: Yeah, I'm the momma and she's the baby.

Researcher: What is it about (him) that makes you want to play with him?

Boy 2 (4 years old): Superheroes

Researcher: Anything else?

Boy 2: Monster!

Researcher: Anything else?

Boy 2: Monster.

Researcher: Anything else?

Boy 2: That's all."

The next overall theme that was acknowledged was various social skills (e.g., makes, want, like, friend, and help). Below are two accounts how children articulated these social skills,

“Researcher: What is it about (her) that makes you want to play with her?

Girl 1 (5 year old): She’s likes to go on the slide with me over and over again.

Researcher: Fun.

Girl 1: And she always works with me at the ‘rock store.’ She helps me out.

Researcher: She helps you out?

Girl 1: She’s my assistant.

Researcher: What is it about (her) that makes you want to play with her?

Boy 1 (5 year old): Well she plays with a lot, I like her, she likes me and we run around a lot. Also we play with each other and that’s it.

Researcher: What is it about (her) that makes you want to play with her?

Boy 1: Well, she does neat stuff and good stuff when we play zombies. She protects people. I just like her. They are both interesting (Talking about the girl above too.)

Researcher: What is it about (him) that makes you want to play with him?

Boy 1: Well he’s nice to me. He’s very nice to me. He doesn’t play with me a lot but he’s still nice. He plays with me for a little bit; he’s always looking for “so and so”.”

After reviewing these interviews, the hypothesis was not supported. There was no identifiable support found between children’s acceptance of peers and peer selection based on children’s appearance. The majority of the children (30 out of 31) chose whom they wanted to play with most outside by what and how children liked to play instead of basing their decision solely on a child’s appearance.

## **V. Discussion**

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to examine preschool children's acceptance of peers. One objective of this study was to determine if children based their choice of peers according to a child's age. The next objective looked at whether children based their peer selection on gender. The third goal of this study determined whether children chose peers based on ethnicity. The final objectives were to verify if children's appearance and social skills played a part in being accepted by peers.

This study showed no significant difference between children's acceptance of peers and choice of older peers. The present study contradicted results found in previous research. Walden et al. (1999) found that children were more likely to interact and play with peers who were similar in age. These findings could be due to the fact that children similar in age are developmentally at the same stage which allowed these children to enjoy the same activities.

According to this study, there was a significant difference between children's acceptance of peers and peer selection based on a child's gender. In other words, children were more likely to choose playmates who were matched in gender. This could be due to the fact that girls prefer more intimate play while boys participate in more rough and tumble play. The results of this study agree with Sanderson and Siegal (1995), as well as Maccoby (2004), that more often than not, preschoolers played with peers of the same gender due to similar interests. Teachers should make sure there is a balance of play throughout the day and to incorporate times of play that allow children to play in small intimate activities as well as allow for play that is physical so that children are able to exert their extra energy.

There was also a significant difference found between children's acceptance of peers and peer selection based on a child's ethnicity. Previous research assumed that preschool children more willingly accepted peers based on a child's skin color because familiarity was a comforting feeling to children (Clark, 1985; Landy, 2002), and this was consistent with the findings of this study. Von Grunigen et al. (2010) reported that children with poor local language skills were less able to communicate which caused these children to be less accepted by peers. Even though children chose peers of the same ethnicity more often it was significant by a slim margin. This finding is believed to be significant because of the language barrier more so than ethnicity. There were four children who spoke another first language besides English. This could account for these children not being chosen instead of their ethnicity. Many of the children in this sample came from various ethnic backgrounds; therefore those children were familiar with many differences and seemed to adapt easily.

Not only was this particular sample of preschool children small and diverse, but also the preschool teachers supported diversity in an active manner. The early childhood program used in this study modeled and taught children to be anti-bias by focusing on the strengths and differences of all children in order to make everyone feel a sense of belonging, as well as support and encouragement of one's identity and cultural ways (Derman-Sparks, Edwards, & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2010).

No significant difference was found between acceptance of peers and peer selection based on children's social skills. Earlier research states that young children associated peers who had positive social skills and traits as attractive and they linked children who were unattractive with negative social skills and traits (Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Keane & Calkins, 2004; Langlois & Stephan, 1977; Smith, 1982). Ladd et al. (1988) found positive social skills played a

significant role in the formation or the maintaining of peer relationships. This study provided evidence that preschool children preferred playmates with similar interests rather than appearance.

Children chose whether or not to accept and/or play with others based on similar likes and dislikes. Many of the children in this study preferred playmates that shared the same play themes such as princess, zombies, kitties, monsters, or superheroes. Therefore, children did not judge peer selection based solely on a child's appearance.

Findings in this study did support evidence found by Sanderson and Siegal (1995) and Sebanc (2003) that children seem to base friendships on common activities and play themes. Teachers should help facilitate children's play by incorporating activities and play themes that many children enjoy. Doing this may help to ensure the acceptance of children during play. Incorporating a plethora of shared activities and centers could place children in different play groups than the usual group or playmate. Again, this may help children learn to play and accept children regardless of other characteristics.

**Summary.** When presented with a sociometric task and an interview of what makes one want to play with another, the participants tended to base peer acceptance choices on the same gender and same ethnicity. Children did not base their peer acceptance on social skills, age, or appearance. According to the interview responses children chose peers based on the nature of the activity and similarities in play of their pictured peers.

### **Limitations**

A few adjustments could make this study more valid. Improvements to this study could be accomplished through 1) increasing the sample size, and 2) conducting the sociometric task once during the beginning of the school year and then again at the end of the school year.

Implementing these changes could reveal strengths and existence of the variables on preference not shown in this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The overall message that seems to be the most important when reviewing past research and the results of this study, is that children just want to play. Children picked playmates based on playing common activities and play themes (Sanderson & Siegal, 1995; Sebanc 2003). It would be recommended that all adults view this study to be informed that young children choose playmates based on common activities.

Parents, teachers, guardians, and society have such an impact on children that it is their social constructs of how they choose friends that eventually pattern on children (Landy, 2002). This study would bring that to one's attention by informing adults that children just want to play and they do not need to focus on the physical characteristics. The important issue to this age group of children is having common interests. Therefore, future studies should focus on popular play themes and activities and what makes children so interested in these events.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this study provided insight on preschool children's acceptance of peers. Young children were able to identify the child they related to and who they wanted to socialize with and were able to give a rationale for their choices. These preschoolers' peer choices were related to such characteristics as gender, ethnicity, or social skills related to evidence in the research literature. Interestingly, when questioned in an open-ended fashion, children gave reasons for their peer choices based in similarity of play interests rather than indications of appearance.

This study provides insight into the unique learning environment that a laboratory preschool provides for children and adults. Laboratory preschools operate in association with a university or college in order to train future teachers and professionals. Many laboratory schools engage children's interests and personal characteristics by following an experimental education or a project approach (Perry, Henderson, & Meier, 2012). This allows the children and adults to investigate topics of interest in their community. Within this preschool study, it is believed that the social and emotional lives of young children develop best in a setting in which teachers and the environment support play and exploration including the child's construction of relationships and ideas. Children are able to enjoy opportunities, to take initiatives, make friends, experience a sense of belonging, expand language, and develop social awareness. Within this preschool community, children learned to share ideas, listened to each other, and experienced being a member of a group. All of these opportunities help peers to be accepted, feel part of something, and to feel the sense of belonging.

This research also adds to the knowledge of how children as young as three- to five-years-old may not accept all peers. Increasing the awareness of peer acceptance and how young children sometimes exclude peers for lack of similar interests, may aid parents, school administrators, elementary school teachers, and preschool teachers. This research may help professionals find ways to implement activities that aim to find commonalities among peers to include everyone. One way this may be accomplished during outside play is by mixing children into different groups. Each group should consist of children of all ages, genders, ethnicities, appearances, and social skill levels. This could help the children to get to know each other and learn to accept one another. By doing this, all children can have a chance at finding a common interest with another child, thus helping everyone feel accepted at some point. Not only should

preschool be fun and make everyone feel included, but centers and playgrounds should be built to offer a variety of interests, so that most children have the desire to play and feel part of the group. Professionals should work toward developing ways to implement and explore common interests to ensure that each child finds his or her niche within the classroom while also helping all children to accept one another as they are.

This study gave evidence that when given the chance children are able to verbalize who they choose to play with and why. Children prefer playmates who have similar interests in play, gender, ethnicity, and social skills. It is important that all adults who are in a child's life need to be just as accepting as these young children, so that these young children can continue this acceptance and tolerance as they become adults.

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## **Appendices**

Appendices include: parent consent letter and form, parent survey, data collection sheets, IRB approval letter, sample demographics, and a variable descriptive statistics table.

**APPENDIX A:  
Parent Consent Letter and Form**

Dear Nursery School Parents,

My name is Kora (Kody) Stuffelbeam and in order to fulfill the requirements of a Master's Degree in Human Development I am conducting a study regarding preschool-aged children and how they relate to one another in the classroom. All of the children at the Nursery School are being invited to participate in the study. I am asking you to consider allowing your child to participate in the study if he or she chooses to do so.

The purpose of this study is to determine how preschool-aged children relate to one another in a classroom setting. The study will also examine children's characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and social skills.

The child who receives permission from his or her parent will be asked to participate in an activity with me. Your child's participation is strictly voluntary, and there is no penalty if he or she starts to participate and decides not to finish. The children who have their parent's consent and who give consent themselves will have their pictures taken, and be asked (one at a time) to go with me to the reading room of the Nursery School to participate in an activity using classmates' pictures. This activity will take about 10 to 15 minutes. Parents will also be asked to answer a few survey questions about their child's language, gender, and ethnicity. The parent survey may take about 5 minutes to complete.

Participation in this research study does not guarantee any benefits to you. However, possible benefits include the fact that you may help to promote research about the benefits of children relating to one another in the University of Arkansas Nursery School classroom.

The data from this study will be used to support and complete a Master's Degree for Kody Stuffelbeam. The researcher is not interested in individual responses, only the average responses. All information will be collected anonymously. There will be no connection between this consent document and your child's results or your survey responses. The picture of your child will be returned to you and not be published. All information collected will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy.

This research study is being conducted at the University of Arkansas Nursery School, by Kody Stuffelbeam, under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Henk. If you have questions or concerns about your participation you may call Kody Stuffelbeam at (870) 404-4503 or by e-mail at [kstuffe@uark.edu](mailto:kstuffe@uark.edu).

You may obtain information about the outcome of the study in the summer by contacting Kody Stuffelbeam.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Ro Windwalker, Compliance Coordinator Institutional Review Board (479) 575-2208 or by e-mail at [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

Below is a consent form for you to sign if you agree to participate. Please deliver the signed forms to the teachers at the Nursery School. Thank you for your cooperation and contribution to this research project.

You will be provided with a blank, unsigned copy of this consent form at the beginning of the study.

By signing below, you attest that you are 18 years old and the legal guardian of your child. By signing below, you are indicating that you freely consent to participate and to allow your child to participate in this research study.

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B:  
Parent Survey**

Participant Number \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex: \_\_M \_\_F

Child's ethnicity: (select all that apply)

- Caucasian
- African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American

- East Asian (for example:  
Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese,  
Korean)
- Central Asian (for example:  
Indian, Pakistani)

Child's First Language:

- English  Vietnamese
- Spanish  Korean
- Mandarin  Chinese
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

Language spoken at home:

- English  Vietnamese
- Spanish  Korean
- Mandarin  Chinese
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation. It is greatly appreciated! Please return to lead teacher today.

**APPENDIX C:  
Data Collection Sheet**

Scoring key for instrument

1. What is it about (pictured child's name) that makes you want to play with him or her?
2. What is it about (pictured child's name) that makes you want to play with him or her?
3. What is it about (pictured child's name) that makes you want to play with him or her?

Social Skills	Not Yet	Emerging	Consistently
1.3 demonstrates ability to play independently	1	2	3
1.10 seeks out adults and children	1	2	3
1.15 understands and respects differences	1	2	3
1.16 helps others in need	1	2	3
1.17 stands up for rights	1	2	3
1.18 shares; respects the rights of others	1	2	3
1.19 works cooperatively with others on completing a task	1	2	3
1.20 uses compromise and discussion to resolve conflicts	1	2	3
5.6 uses words to communicate ideas and feelings	1	2	3

**Appendix D:  
IRB Approval Letter**

April 2, 2012

MEMORANDUM

TO: Kora Sutffelbeam  
Jennifer Henk

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 12-03-602

Protocol Title: *The Relationship of Peer Acceptance, Age, Gender, Ethnicity, and Appearance among Preschoolers*

Review Type:  EXEMPT  EXPEDITED  FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 04/02/2012 Expiration Date: 03/27/2013

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Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

**This protocol has been approved for 31 participants.** If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

**Table 1:  
Sample demographics and descriptive variable statistics**

Table 1. Sample demographics and variable descriptive statistics

% Female	58.1%
% Age	
3 year old	9.7%,
4 year old	51.6%,
5 year old	38.7%
<i>M</i> Age in Months	56.7 (6.8)
% First Language	
<i>English</i>	83.9%,
<i>Spanish</i>	3.2%,
<i>Mandarin</i>	3.2%,
<i>Vietnamese</i>	3.2%
<i>Chinese</i>	3.2%,
% Language Spoken at Home	
<i>English</i>	80.6%,
<i>Spanish</i>	6.5%,
<i>Mandarin</i>	3.2%,
<i>Vietnamese</i>	3.2%,
<i>Chinese</i>	3.2%
% Ethnicity	
<i>Caucasian</i>	61.3%
<i>Hispanic/Latino</i>	3.2%
<i>East Asian</i>	16.1%
<i>Multiethnic</i>	19.4%
<i>Caucasian-Hispanic/Latino</i>	6.5%
<i>Caucasian-East Asian</i>	6.5%
<i>Caucasian-Central Asian</i>	3.2%
<i>Caucasian-African American</i>	3.2%
<i>Sum</i> Social Skills	21.9 (3.2)
<i>M</i> Chosen 1 <sup>st</sup>	1.0 (1.1)
<i>M</i> Chosen 2 <sup>nd</sup>	1.0 (1.1)
<i>M</i> Chosen 3 <sup>rd</sup>	1.0 (.9)
<i>M</i> Chosen total	3.0 (2.0)

**Table 2***Comparison of Mean Number of Times Chosen by Demographic Variables*

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect Size <i>d</i>
Gender	Female	18	3.39	2.15	1.29	28	.21	.45
	Male	13	2.46	1.85				
Ethnicity	Caucasian	20	3.55	2.28	-2.62	28	.01	.81
	Other	11	2.00	1.00				
Language	English	26	3.27	2.09	-2.55	10	.03	.76
	Other	5	1.60	1.14				
Age	Under 5	19	2.68	1.77	1.01	18	.33	.40
	5 years	12	3.50	2.43				

**Table 3***Comparison of Percentages Chosen by Same and Different Gender, Ethnicity*

Variable	Observed N / %	Expected N / %	$\chi^2(df = 1)$	<i>p</i>
Gender				
Same	68 / 73.1%	47.71 / 51.3%	17.72	.001
Different	25 / 26.9%	45.29 / 48.7%		
Ethnicity				
Same	61 / 65.6%	50.42 / 54.2%	4.85	.028
Different	32 / 34.4%	42.58 / 45.8%		

