An Examination of Complaint Behaviours in the Context of Social Status and Gender in Preschool Education

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Article Info

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how children's complaint behaviours in preschool settings vary by social status (popular, average, rejected, neglected) and gender. The study was conducted with 19 five-year-old children attending a private preschool in Istanbul, using a descriptive design drawing on sociometric assessment and five weeks of naturalistic observation. The findings indicate that children with average social status are the most frequent complaint makers and also among the groups most frequently complained about, whereas children rejected by their peers are the most frequent recipients of complaints. Children with popular status were also observed to make complaints but not to receive complaints. In addition, girls were found to make complaints more frequently, while boys were more likely to receive complaints. A negative, statistically significant relationship was found between the frequency of making complaints and the frequency of receiving complaints. Overall, complaint behaviours appear to play both protective and exclusionary roles in peer relationships. In this regard, it is recommended that teachers treat these behaviours as a pedagogical opportunity and develop strategies to support children's problem-solving skills.

Introduction

The early childhood period has a crucial place in human life due to its short- and long-term effects (Essa & Burnham, 2019; Yogman et al., 2021). The period from birth to age eight represents a time of rapid brain development for children, as well as vital opportunities for education. When children are healthy and safe and experience a high-quality learning process at an early age, they can reach their full developmental potential as adults and participate effectively in economic and social life (UNESCO, 2023). There is rapid progress across all developmental domains in early childhood, as in other periods of development (Likhar, Baghel & Patil, 2022). Social-emotional development, one of the developmental areas in the first years of life, is defined as the entirety of young children's skills in establishing close and secure relationships with adults and peers, experiencing, regulating, and expressing emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways, and exploring and learning about the environment based on family, society, and culture (Yates et al., 2008). One of the prominent concepts in the social-emotional development process during early childhood is peer relationships. Peer relationships embody a variety of relationship types, from large social groups and casual interactions to close one-on-one friendships (Narr et al., 2019). However, peer relationships involve both positive and negative experiences. If positive interactions occur with another child, referred to as a peer, who is similar in age, skills, and knowledge, progress will be ensured in the emotional, cognitive, and social skills necessary for the rest of life (Bukowski, Buhrmester & Underwood, 2011; Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 2006). In this regard, positive peer relationships enable children to learn many skills and to feel emotionally safe. However, negative situations such as aggression and bullying in peer relationships are also evident (Jansen et al., 2012; Stotsky, Bowker & Etkin, 2020). One of the concepts that encompasses both the positive and negative aspects of peer relationships is social status. Social status refers to a social position or a hierarchical structure in which individuals are positioned higher or lower than others on the basis of a desirable characteristic or criterion. It reflects how individuals' standing within a group is perceived relative to others, based on a particular characteristic or criterion (Van Vugt & Tybur, 2015). This concept, which can confer or diminish children's prestige, reputation, and respect within their social groups, is of particular importance in the school context. Factors such as being accepted, rejected, neglected, liked or disliked by peers, the number of friends, and being preferred or not preferred by peers are important indicators of the quality of children's social interactions during learning and recreational activities (Zequinão et al., 2020). Being liked by peers is one of the developmental tasks in the preschool period and can significantly affect both current peer relationships and future social communication (Padhy & Hariharan, 2023). Conversely, being disliked by peers can increase adjustment problems and, over time, amplify the negative effects of peer difficulties. For example, one study found that children's peer rejection predicted poorer social skills one and three years later, as well as increased peer rejection and lower emotional adjustment six years later in adolescence (Murray-Close et al., 2010). Social status is typically divided into five groups: popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, and average (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Fisher Grafy (2024) suggests that popular children are characterised by superior social competencies. These children tend to have more constructive interactions with their peers, demonstrating greater proficiency in social problem-solving and lower levels of aggression than children of average status. In contrast, rejected children frequently exhibit higher levels of aggressive and disruptive behaviour, alongside more limited social interaction. Neglected children, while displaying less aggression, are generally shyer and more introverted than average children, which can lead to reduced

participation in peer relationships. Finally, controversial children display a distinct behavioural profile: they show levels of social interaction similar to popular children, but levels of aggression comparable to rejected children. Their distinguishing feature, however, is their ability to employ relatively advanced social skills to mitigate the social repercussions of their aggression.

In addition to rapidly learning new skills in early childhood, some challenging behaviours are also encountered (D'Souza et al., 2019). Smith and Fox (2003) describe challenging behaviour in young children as repetitive patterns that may interfere with learning and prosocial participation with peers and adults. Challenging behaviours in early childhood education settings can disrupt activities and limit learning for both the child exhibiting these behaviours and other children. Challenging behaviours are also stressful for educators (Panthi et al., 2025). Children may encounter many challenging behaviours or problems in their peer relationships, and they develop both positive and negative strategies in response to these situations. Complaining is one of these strategies. In the present study, complaint behaviour refers to children's verbal reports to a teacher about peers' behaviours that they perceive as unfair, rule-breaking, or socially disruptive within classroom interactions. Complaining refers to making a complaint or expressing, verbally or in writing, dissatisfaction (TDK, 2025). Complaining is a common and important form of social communication, particularly during childhood (Alicke, 1992). Complaint behaviour is a form of problem-solving that can be considered normal in the early childhood socialisation process. From a psychological perspective, complaints are defined as a behaviour in which young children use the authority of a third party to resolve disagreements that they are unable to resolve themselves (Zhang, Liu & Wang, 2023). Complaining is a behaviour that preschool children can use to cope with problems in peer relationships. Complaint behaviour is also a form of communication through which children come to understand social norms and express their rights and responsibilities (Smetana, 2006). Complaint behaviour can be seen as a result of children measuring and evaluating their behaviour against moral standards. Due to individual differences and children's limited physical and cognitive development, complaint behaviour may become a common form of social communication among children (Yuan, 2021). In this context, complaining can be considered not only a conflict-related behaviour but also a way of maintaining order within the group, expressing expectations of justice, and participating in the social problem-solving process.

Complaining can have various effects on both the child who complains and the child who is complained about. When research on complaint behaviour in early childhood is considered, it can be stated that studies in the international literature are limited. While there are studies on complaint behaviours in later developmental periods and adult samples (Dowell, Small & Denyer-Simmons, 2012), studies addressing the complaint behaviours of preschool children remain quite limited. However, complaint behaviours are known to be frequently observed in preschool classrooms. For example, in a study by Gangal and Öztürk (2019), preschool teachers reported that complaining was among the most common problems in their classrooms. In this regard, examining young children's complaint behaviours in relation to gender and peer relationships may contribute to the literature on classroom management and peer relations. In addition, the study aims to make an original contribution to the social development literature by examining how this behaviour develops and differentiates across the preschool period. Children's social statuses within peer groups (popular, average, rejected, neglected) shape their behaviour and intragroup interaction styles (Coie, Dodge & Coppotelli, 1982). However, studies examining the relationship

between these statuses and complaint behaviours are limited. In this respect, the present study may contribute to the literature concerning balances in peer relationships, group dynamics, and power relations. Gender differences begin to become evident in the preschool period and affect patterns of social relationships (Fabes, Martin & Hanish, 2003). This study provides important data on gender-based social expectations, styles of emotional expression, and the use of social power. In the literature, children's social statuses have often been examined through their play preferences and peer acceptance (Rubin et al., 2006). However, the relationship between microsocial behaviours, such as complaint behaviour, and social position has rarely been analysed. This study has the potential to provide data to understand the ways children use relational power (such as gaining control through complaints, defensiveness, and exclusion). Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine complaint behaviours in preschool education classrooms according to gender and social status. The sub-purposes of the research are as follows:

- What is the distribution of making and receiving complaints in terms of gender and social status?
- Do complaint-making and complaint-receiving behaviours differ according to social status?
- Is there a relationship between the frequency of making complaints and the frequency of receiving complaints?
- What is the distribution of complaint behaviours in terms of the number of children?

Method

Study Group

The study group consists of 19 five-year-old children attending preschool education in Istanbul. All of the children live with their families, have not received any diagnosis requiring special education, and exhibit typical developmental characteristics.

Data Collection Tools

Personal Information Form

This form, prepared by the researchers, includes information on the children's gender, date of birth, parents' education level, mother's age, father's age, mother's occupation, father's occupation, number of siblings, and siblings' gender.

Picture Sociometry Scale (for 5–6-Year-Old Children)

The Picture Sociometry Scale is a sociometric technique based on a 3-point Likert-type rating developed by Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, and Hymel (1979). In the scale, each child is shown photographs of their classmates one by one and is asked how much they like the peer in the photograph. Depending on the child's response, the child places their peer's photograph into one of three boxes containing pictures of a smiling face, an expressionless face, or a sad face. The reliability and validity study of the Picture Sociometry Scale for 5–6-year-old children was conducted by Gülay (2008). As part of the Turkish adaptation studies, three additional questions were added to the scale, and the final version consisted of four questions. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the four-item

scale was .91, and the test–retest reliability coefficient was .98 (Gülay, 2008). The Picture Sociometry Scale indicates children's levels of being liked (preference, acceptance) and being disliked (non-preference, rejection) within their peer group.

Complaint Behaviour Anecdote Form

The form developed for this research consists of 11 items. During its development, an anecdotal recording form was created in line with the relevant literature. Expert opinions were obtained from five specialists regarding the form, including three assistant professors and two preschool teachers with doctoral degrees. Based on these expert opinions, the form was finalised. The preschool teacher records the relevant situations in accordance with the items on the form. The form uses code numbers previously assigned to the children, and no school name, classroom name, or child name is included on any form.

Data Collection

Necessary permissions were obtained for the implementation of the research, including approval from the Sinop University Human Research Ethics Committee (22.11.2023, Decision No. 2023/199), and the data were collected in 2024. The Picture Sociometry Scale was administered in the last week of October 2024 in the preschool classroom in which the study was to be conducted. Before the sociometric assessment, the participating children became acquainted with one another and developed social relationships during a seven-week interaction period. The Picture Sociometry Scale was administered individually to each child by the researcher in the school setting, in a quiet, well-lit room with minimal distractions. Administration of the scale took 15–20 minutes. Following the sociometric assessment, one of the researchers, who is a preschool teacher, conducted observations in a preschool classroom consisting of 19 children for five weeks between November and December 2024. The Complaint Behaviour Anecdote Form was completed whenever a complaint behaviour occurred during the observation period. No intervention was made in the educational environment during the observation period. The Ministry of National Education Preschool Education Programme in Türkiye was implemented as the programme.

Data Analysis

In the data analysis, frequency analysis, sociometric calculations, the Kruskal–Wallis test, and Spearman's rho correlation analysis were conducted using SPSS and Excel. In the data analysis, calculations were first carried out to determine the children's social status. In sociometric techniques based on peer nominations, the evaluation typically allows the identification of five sociometric statuses within the group. These statuses include popular, average, and rejected, which are determined by children's social preference; and neglected, average, and controversial, which are derived from social impact (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). In this technique, positive nomination scores (Liked–L) and negative nomination scores (Disliked–D) are calculated for each child, and both scores are standardised within the group. Social Preference (SP) and Social Impact (SI) scores are then computed. Social Preference is calculated as liked most minus disliked most, whereas Social Impact is calculated as liked most plus disliked most. Social Preference and Social Impact scores are also standardized. Finally, the

scores obtained are classified into five categories according to the following criteria:

For popular children: Social Preference > 1, Liked Most > 0, and Disliked Most < 0.

For rejected children: Social Preference < −1, Liked Most < 0, and Disliked Most > 0.

For neglected children: Social Impact < −1, Liked Most < 0, and Disliked Most < 0.

For controversial children: Social Impact > 1, Liked Most > 0, and Disliked Most > 0.

For average children: all remaining group members (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Sociometric data analysis was carried out in Excel.

The Kruskal–Wallis H test was conducted to examine differences in the frequency of complaints made and received across social status groups (popular, average, rejected, neglected). Spearman's rank correlation was used to evaluate the relationship between the number of complaints made by children and the number of complaints received about them.

Results

As seen in Table 1, the class consists of 19 students, including 12 boys (63.2%) and 7 girls (36.8%).

Table 1. Descriptive Distribution Concerning Gender, Social Status and Complaints

Child's code	Gender	Social status	Number of complaints made	Number of complaints received
1	Girl	Popular	5	0
2	Girl	Average	2	1
3	Girl	Average	7	0
4	Boy	Neglected	1	3
5	Boy	Average	1	6
6	Boy	Average	2	3
7	Boy	Popular	3	0
8	Boy	Popular	3	0
9	Boy	Average	3	6
10	Boy	Average	1	0
11	Boy	Rejected	1	8
12	Boy	Average	5	2
13	Boy	Rejected	1	12
14	Boy	Average	1	4
15	Boy	Average	3	1
16	Girl	Rejected	2	11
17	Girl	Average	6	2
18	Girl	Average	5	2
19	Girl	Average	6	3

There are four social statuses in the classroom: popular, neglected, average, and rejected. The most frequent status in the classroom is average (12 children, 63.2%). Within the group, there are 3 popular children (15.8%), 3 rejected

children (15.8%), and 1 neglected child (5.3%). With respect to gender, 1 boy (8.3%) is neglected, 2 boys (16.7%) are rejected, 2 boys (16.7%) are popular, and 7 boys (58.3%) have average status. Among girls, 1 girl (14.3%) is rejected, 1 girl (14.3%) is popular, and 5 girls (71.4%) have average status; no girls have neglected status. Thus, boys represent four social statuses, whereas girls represent three. In addition, 58 complaints were recorded as being made over the five-week period, and 64 complaints were recorded as being received over the same period.

According to Figure 1, boys made 25 (43.0%) and girls made 33 (57.0%) complaint behaviours. Boys received 45 complaints (70.3%), whereas girls received 19 complaints (29.7%).
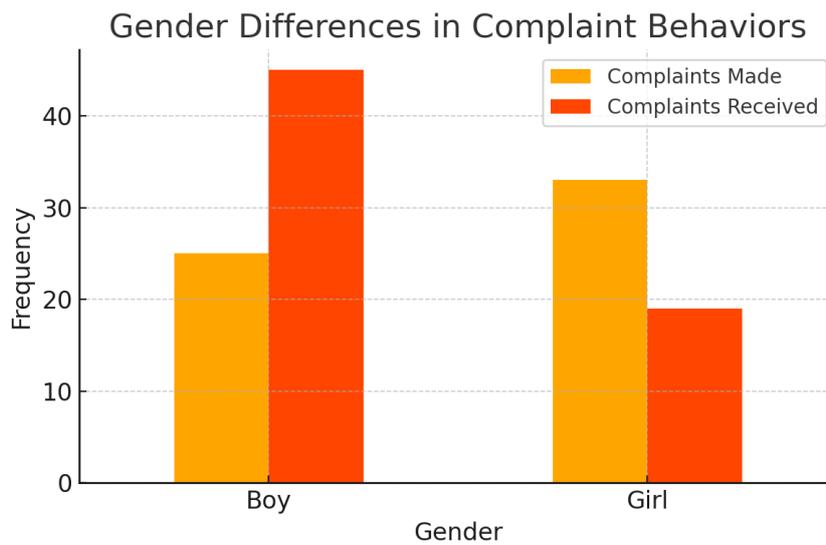

Figure 1. Gender Differences in Complaint Behaviours of Preschool Children

According to Figure 2, in terms of social status, 42 complaints (72.4%) were made by children of average status, 11 (18.9%) by popular children, 4 (6.9%) by rejected children, and 1 (1.7%) by the neglected child.
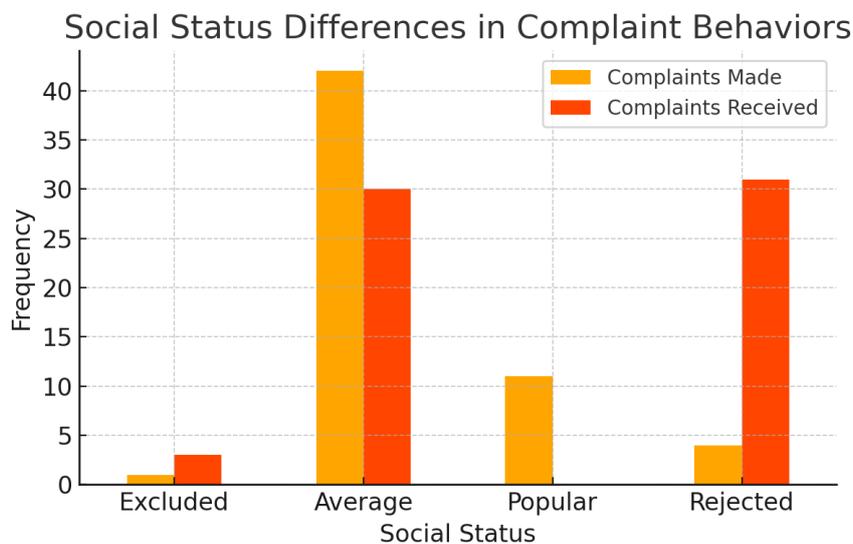

Figure 2. Social Status in Complaint Behaviours of Preschool Children

In terms of complaint receipt, rejected children received complaints 31 times (48.4%), average children received complaints 30 times (46.9%), and the neglected child received complaints 3 times (4.7%). It is evident that popular children made complaints but did not receive complaints. This pattern is also reflected in Table 1, in which popular children received no complaints. Children of average status frequently engaged in both making and receiving complaints. Complaints were most commonly directed towards rejected children. The neglected child made a relatively small number of complaints but received a comparatively higher number of complaints.

Results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in the number of complaints made across social status groups ($\chi^2(3) = 5.10$, p = .165) (see Table 2). However, there was a statistically significant difference in complaints received ($\chi^2(3) = 11.19$, p = .011).

Table 2. Comparison of Complaint Behaviours according to Social Status Using the Kruskal-Wallis Test

Complaint Variable	Social Status	N	Mean Rank	Kruskal-Wallis Test (χ^2, df, p)
Complaints Made	Popular	3	12.67	
	Average	12	11.13	
	Rejected	3	5.00	
	Neglected	1	3.50	$\chi^2 = 5.10$, df = 3, p = .165
Complaints Received	Popular	3	3.00	
	Average	12	9.58	
	Rejected	3	18.00	
	Neglected	1	12.00	$\chi^2 = 11.19$, df = 3, p = .011*

*p<.05

Children with rejected status were more frequently targeted by complaints, whereas popular children were the least frequently targeted, and in this sample received no complaints (see Table 2), suggesting meaningful differences in peer relationship dynamics associated with social positioning. However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size and the small number of popular children.

Spearman's rank correlation was used to assess the relationship between the number of complaints made by children and the number of complaints received (see Table 3). A statistically significant negative correlation was found, ($\rho = -.482$, p = .037, n = 19), indicating that children who made complaints more frequently were less likely to be targets of complaints. The findings suggest that active social behaviour may play a potential protective role in early peer dynamics.

Table 3. Spearman's Rho Correlation between Number of Complaints Made and Received

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (ρ)	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Complaints Made – Complaints Received	-.482*	.037*	19

*p <.05

According to Table 4, the most common complaint situation involved one child complaining about one other child

(f = 33, 56.9%). Complaint episodes involving one complainant and more than one recipient accounted for 12 episodes (20.7%), whereas episodes involving more than one complainant were less common than one-to-one episodes (f = 13, 22.4%).

Table 4. Distribution of Complaint Episodes by the Number of Complainants and Recipients

Child who made complaints → Child who received complaints	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1 child → 1 child	33	56.9
1 child → 2 children	4	6.9
1 child → 3 children	5	8.6
1 child → 4 children	3	5.2
2 children → 1 child	3	5.2
3 children → 1 child	2	3.4
4 children → 1 child	2	3.4
3 children → 2 children	2	3.4
3 children → 4 children	2	3.4
5 children → 2 children	2	3.4

According to Table 5, the highest number of complaints were observed during free-time activities (f = 30, 51.7%). Art activities (f = 6, 10.3%) and activity transitions (f = 5, 8.6%) were also common times for complaints.

Table 5. Distribution of Complaint Behaviours according to the Times They Occur

Time	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Free time activity	30	51.7
Art activity	6	10.3
Activity transition	5	8.6
Reading and writing preparation activity	4	6.9
Story reading activity	3	5.2
At the toilet	2	3.4
Play activity	2	3.4
Switch between activities	2	3.4
While queuing	1	1.7
During mealtime	1	1.7
Arrival to school	1	1.7
After school	1	1.7

Findings in Table 6 regarding the reasons for complaining indicate that the most common reason relates to sharing materials or toys (31.0%). This is followed by experiences of social exclusion, such as being mocked or being left out of activities (24.1%). Physical violence (10.3%) and violations of physical boundaries (6.9%) are also among the common reasons. The findings suggest that children tend to protect both physical and social boundaries, and that their complaint behaviours are linked to sensitivity to violations of these boundaries.

Table 6. Distribution according to the Reasons for Complaints

Reason for Complaint	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Inability to share materials/items/toys	18	31.0
Mocking	7	12.1
Not be included in the game/activity	7	12.1
Physical violence (pushing and knocking, hitting)	6	10.3
Touching one's body without one's permission	4	6.9
Scribbling one's book	3	5.2
Taking/looking at items/materials/toys/activities without permission	2	3.4
Cutting off one's hair by the ends	1	1.7
Wetting one's clothes at the toilet	1	1.7
Entering the toilet without knocking the door	1	1.7
Wanting to hide the activity	1	1.7
Mixing two meals in one dish	1	1.7
Being scolded by one's friend	1	1.7
Some children don't help when the group tidies the toys	1	1.7
Bumping into friend's arm while dancing	1	1.7
Stepping on one's foot and making his/her shoes dirty	1	1.7
Constantly being asked for help	1	1.7
Threatening	1	1.7

When the reactions of the complaining children on Table 7 to the situations they experienced are examined, the most frequently observed reactions are those containing emotional intensity. While 44.8% of the children exhibited a tearful/sad behaviour, 24.1% became angry, 17.2% reacted by shouting, and 8.6% cried. Remaining calm was observed only at 5.2%.

Table 7. Distribution according to the Complaining Child's Reaction to the Situation

Complaining child's reaction to the situation	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Being tearful/sad	26	44.8
Being angry	14	24.1
Shouting	10	17.2
Crying	5	8.6
Remaining calm	3	5.2

Table 8 is based on the 64 complaints received, whereas Tables 4–7 are based on the 58 complaint episodes (complaints made). When the reactions of the children who receive complaints on Table 8 are considered, it is evident that the most frequently used strategy is to explain oneself (46.9%). Remaining unresponsive or calm (21.9%) is also common. Being angry (7.8%), being upset and regretting (7.8%), laughing (6.2%), insisting on the behaviour (4.7%) and denying (4.7%) are also among the other reactions.

Table 8. Distribution according to the Reaction of the Child Receiving the Complaint

Reaction of the child receiving the complaint	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Explaining oneself	30	46.9
Remaining unresponsive/calm	14	21.9
Being angry	5	7.8
Being upset and regretting	5	7.8
Laughing	4	6.2
Insisting on the behaviour that is complained about	3	4.7
Denying	3	4.7

Discussion and Conclusion

As a result of five weeks of observations in a preschool classroom attended by nineteen children, the complaint behaviours made and received by the children were analysed according to gender and social status (popular, average, rejected, neglected). According to the sociometric findings, four social statuses were identified in the classroom overall: three for girls (popular, average, and rejected) and four for boys (popular, neglected, average, and rejected). In this respect, social status within the boys' group varies compared with the girls' group. The findings also indicate that there were no children with controversial status in the classroom and that there were no neglected children in the girls' group. While the most common social status in the class was average, the same pattern was observed with respect to gender.

In terms of complaint behaviours, 58 complaints were recorded as being made and 64 complaints were recorded as being received over the five-week period. Smetana (2006) and Zhang, Liu, and Wang (2023) emphasise that complaining is not only a matter of reporting a problem but also serves the functions of expecting justice and protecting group norms. In early childhood, children's complaining behaviour is seen as a natural and common part of peer relationships. In the first years of life, children often respond to norm violations (especially when directed at them) by reporting them to an adult (Ingram & Bering, 2010). Preschool teachers have stated that children immediately report peers who do not comply with classroom rules to the teacher and tend to inform the teacher even about the smallest incident. Teachers also underlined that children often make these minor complaints to increase interaction with the teacher or to attract his or her attention. These findings suggest that preschool children's complaint behaviours may be related not only to rule enforcement but also to seeking teacher attention (Gangal & Öztürk, 2019).

With respect to gender, girls made more complaints than boys, whereas boys received more complaints than girls. The fact that boys received complaints more frequently may be considered an indicator of power struggles within the classroom. The higher level of complaint behaviour among girls may be interpreted as reflecting a tendency to establish social superiority through relational power strategies (e.g., through complaints). These findings can be viewed as clues to gender-based social struggles. The finding that girls tend to prefer relational strategies, whereas boys tend to prefer more physical conflict strategies, is also supported by Fabes, Martin, and Hanish (2003). Studies focusing on young children, however, may yield mixed results. Some studies indicate that girls

use relational strategies (such as gossip and threats of relationship withdrawal) more often, while others report very small gender differences (Lansford et al., 2012; Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009).

The results revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in the number of complaints made across social status groups. However, a statistically significant difference was observed in complaints received. With respect to social status, popular children make complaints but do not receive complaints. It can be considered that popular children may instrumentalise the complaint mechanism in order to maintain their social status. While being popular protects these children from receiving complaints, it may also strengthen them in the role of the complainer. The fact that popular children are not targets of complaints may indicate the protective effect of social acceptance; however, it may also suggest that these children are generally not complained about because the balance of power is in their favour within their peer groups. While the neglected child in the group made fewer complaints, he/she also received complaints at a higher level, which was interpreted as reinforcing social exclusion. However, interpretations regarding neglected status should be made cautiously, as this category was represented by a single child in the sample. It is evident that children with average status show higher levels of complaint behaviours and are frequently represented in both the complainer and the complained-about groups. In this respect, children of average status appear to constitute an active group in both making and receiving complaints. It can be stated that average children may play a balancing role in classroom interactions. The children who received complaints most frequently were those with rejected status. It was observed that these children received high levels of complaints and also became the most salient social targets in classroom interactions. The fact that rejected children initiated complaints less frequently but were targeted more frequently indicates that this group remains relatively passive in interactions and is more readily made the "subject of complaints" by peers in other social positions. These findings indicate that social status significantly shapes complaint behaviours during the preschool period and that social acceptance or exclusion plays a central role in peer relationships. While children's social statuses do not significantly affect the frequency of making complaints, they do significantly affect the risk of receiving complaints. Children who are rejected and neglected, in particular, appear to be at higher risk of receiving complaints than those with higher social status. It is known that popular children generally show higher levels of prosocial skills, whereas rejected children may exhibit more aggressive and exclusionary behaviours (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). In this regard, it can be suggested that rejected and neglected children may display more negative behaviours and therefore become targets of complaints. It has been noted that teachers and adults can sometimes unknowingly reward such complaints and the use of relational power, because complaints expressed to the teacher may be indirectly validated by adults when they help to maintain classroom order (Coyne et al., 2012). It can be observed that some socially competent children in the preschool period attempt to gain dominance in the social environment by manipulating the teacher's authority (for example, by complaining about their peers to the teacher), rather than engaging in direct physical or verbal aggression against their peers. This situation is consistent with the view that children at the lowest level of social status may be pushed into a passive victim position by their peers, as reported in the studies of Coie and Dodge (1983). With respect to children of average status, Bukowski, Buhrmester, and Underwood (2011) underline that average children may maintain group balance by using both prosocial strategies and, from time to time, relational aggression strategies.

A negative relationship was observed between the number of complaints made by a child and the number of complaints made about them. This result suggests that children who complain more frequently are less likely to be targets of complaints. This, in turn, suggests that complaining in early peer dynamics may serve a protective role against receiving complaints. In the present study, more frequent complaining was associated with a lower likelihood of being targeted by complaints, suggesting that complaining may function as a form of social defence in early peer dynamics. By contrast, Friman et al. (2004) found that, among adolescents, peer-rejected individuals were more often perceived as complainers and that complaint behaviour was inversely related to popularity. Nevertheless, this association should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size and the correlational nature of the data.

According to the findings, the most common complaint situation involved one child complaining about another child. In addition, group complaints were also observed at certain rates. Therefore, the findings indicate that children develop both individual and group-based social strategies, and that their complaint behaviours reflect not only individual but also collective interactions. Complaints were observed mostly during free-time activities, suggesting a higher likelihood of conflict among children during unstructured periods. The findings also indicate that complaint behaviours tend to occur more frequently during transition activities and in areas involving individual preferences. The increased frequency of conflict and complaints during unstructured time periods has also been noted by Jansen et al. (2012) as a result of the relatively greater number of social encounters during free activities.

Findings concerning the reasons for complaining indicate that the most common reason relates to sharing materials or toys, followed by experiences of social exclusion, such as being mocked or being left out of activities. Physical violence and violations of physical boundaries are also among the common reasons. The findings suggest that children tend to protect both physical and social boundaries, and that their complaint behaviours are linked to sensitivity to violations of these boundaries. When the reactions of the children who complain to the situations they experience are examined, the most frequently observed reactions are those characterised by emotional intensity. While children exhibited tearful or sad behaviour when making complaints, they also became angry and reacted by shouting. It was determined that the least common response when making a complaint was remaining calm. These data show that children often display heightened emotional reactions to the social problems they encounter and indicate that emotional regulation skills need to be supported developmentally. When the reactions of the children who receive complaints are considered, it is evident that the most frequently used strategy is to explain oneself. Remaining unresponsive or calm is also common. Becoming angry or showing regret, laughing, insisting on the behaviour, and denying are also among the other reactions. These findings suggest that children develop a range of social defences and response styles in complaint situations, and that these situations may be related to social problem-solving skills.

In conclusion, the findings reveal that preschool children's complaint behaviours are, on the one hand, part of their moral and social development and, on the other hand, may have both protective and risk-creating implications for peer relationships. Complaining behaviour reflects children's efforts to express their sense of justice and to enforce norms; however, depending on how it is used, it can influence their relationships with peers both positively

and negatively. Therefore, in light of these findings, it is important for teachers and parents to listen to and evaluate children's complaints carefully, while also supporting children's problem-solving, empathy, and direct communication skills. In this way, children can learn to resolve problems independently when appropriate and to seek adult support in genuinely serious situations.

Recommendations

This research focused on a preschool classroom of 19 children. The data were limited to sociometry and a five-week observation period. Potential mediating factors, such as family variables, socioeconomic status, previous friendship experiences, or personality traits, were not considered. The findings provide guidance for developing support programmes for group dynamics in preschool settings, boys' conflict management, and children with rejected status. Teachers play a key role in responding to children's complaint behaviours during the preschool period. Teachers should implement strategies that help children learn to manage minor disagreements. In particular, rather than immediately punishing every complaint, children should be given guidance that supports the development of problem-solving skills. For example, teachers can encourage a child who comes with a complaint to first describe the situation in their own words and then speak to the other party appropriately. Teachers can also explain, in pedagogical terms, the distinction between "tattling" and "reporting" in the classroom. That is, children should be told that if a behaviour is hurting someone, they should definitely inform the teacher, but for minor disagreements, they should first try to resolve the issue among themselves. In the education of preservice teachers, theoretical and practical preparation should be provided on managing relational problems and supporting children's social skills. In this way, teachers will be prepared to turn the situation into a learning opportunity rather than immediately suppressing or ignoring the child who is complaining. In line with the findings, longer-term observations conducted in multiple classrooms and schools, across different regions, may shed light on the development of social status and complaint patterns. Experimental studies could also be conducted, such as examining the effects of empathy, problem-solving, and relational aggression reduction programmes. How children perceive and understand complaining could be explored in greater depth through qualitative interviews and focus group studies. Professional development programmes can be designed to strengthen teachers' intervention skills during free-time and transition activities. Finally, the universality of gender-based strategies can be examined by conducting similar studies in different sociocultural contexts.

Notes

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