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The Safe Kindergarten:
Promotion of Communication and Social Skills among Kindergartners

Dorit Aram and Maya Shlak
Department of Human Development and Education
The Constantiner School of Education
Tel Aviv University, Israel

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Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Dorit Aram, Constantiner School of
Education, Tel Aviv University, 69978 Israel. Phone/Fax: 972-3-6341318; Email:

dorita@post.tau.ac.il

Abstract

The study evaluated the "safe kindergarten" program designed to promote kindergartners' communication and social skills based on principles of Imago marital and family counseling (Hendrix, 1990). Participants were 92 kindergartners from four kindergartens (intervention = 46; comparison = 46). Teachers in intervention kindergartens led 20 weekly small-group pre-planned sessions on communication issues and practicing children's intentional dialogues. Pre- and post-program group comparisons utilized children's audiorecorded role-played dialogue between friends in conflict, interview to map social processing, and sociometric testing. At posttest, the intervention group surpassed the comparison group regarding engagement in longer dialogues, more awareness of others' inner world, larger variety of conflict resolutions in dialogues, higher degree of mutual choice of friends, and better understanding of social processes during conflict.

The Safe Kindergarten:

Promotion of Communication and Social Skills among Kindergartners

The present study evaluated an intervention based on the Imago principles (Hendrix, 1990) for promoting communication and social relations skills among normally developing children in their kindergartens. The program developed for the purpose of the present study provided children with knowledge and tools to create safer and more effective interactions within their peer group.

At kindergarten age, children are largely dependent on the adults around them. Therefore, by definition, a major part of the relationships at this age are hierarchical, such as with parents, older siblings, or teachers. Uniquely, kindergartners' peer group relationships are non-hierarchical. Egalitarian relations with peers provide kindergartners with an opportunity to experience collaboration as well as competition. In order to communicate effectively within their peer group, children must relate to others' points of view, understand others, and at the same time effectively clarify their own positions. These social skills constitute one major source for their future social welfare (Campbell, 2002; Denham et al., 2003) and academic functioning (Dong Hwa & Juhu, 2003). For example, peer rejection in kindergarten predicted difficulties in psychological adjustment throughout childhood (Ladd, 2006) as well as lower academic skills in school (O'Neil, Welsh, Parke, Wang, & Strand, 1997).

Creating effective communication among children is a familiar challenge to kindergarten teachers. Such efficacious communication skills include waiting one's turn without interrupting others, the ability to articulate and expand one's wishes and thoughts, asking questions, listening to others, and reflecting others (Wolf, 1998). The use of

accepted communication skills in early childhood has been linked to attaining intimate relations, a healthy lifestyle, and stability throughout life (Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000), as well as to academic success (Hampton & Fantuzzo, 2003).

Conversational competence affects the extent to which children interact successfully with their peers (e.g., Black & Hazen, 1990). In a longitudinal study, Kemple, Speranza, and Hazen (1992) found that children's responsiveness to peers' speech in conversations with classmates when they were 3-4 years old predicted their social status a year later. Children may learn these communication skills with the help of an adult who equips them with positive communication techniques such as cooperation, sensitivity, self-awareness, openness, and reduction of defensiveness (Chen, 2003; Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000).

Researchers suggest that teachers and parents should encourage child-child interaction in order to promote friendship skills (e.g., Phillipsen, Bridges, Mclemore, & Saponaro, 1999) and that young children can be taught to use more effective methods of conflict resolution and to expand their store of social behaviors (Browning, Davis, & Resta, 2000). Conflicts at this age may thus provide an opportunity for practicing self-regulation and appropriate social interaction.

In the present study, we designed, implemented, and assessed a program for improving kindergartners' social and communication skills (e.g., listening, creating a dialogue, making an effort to understand others' feelings and needs). The program aimed to promote normally developing children in their kindergarten. To the best of our knowledge, this line of studies is rare in the psychological educational literature. A search for the terms "preschool children", "kindergarten children" "intervention," "program",

communication", and "social skills" in the Eric and the PsycInfo databases (peer reviewed studies from 1990) did not reveal studies promoting communication or social skills among normally developing preschoolers or kindergartners. We did find studies that dealt with these issues among young children with special needs (e.g., autism, language impairments, and deafness (e.g., Rogers, 2000; Timler, Vogler-Elias, & McGill, 2007); children at risk from disadvantaged environments (e.g., Denham & Burton, 1996; McMahon & DePaul, 2000); and children with behavior problems (Knivsberg, Iversen, Nodland, & Reichelt, 2007).

Imago Principles

The current intervention was designed on the basis of the principles of Imago (Hendrix, 1990), a method aiming to promote conscious relations between couples, between parents and children, or within any other interpersonal interaction. Imago focuses on building trust in relationships by teaching communication skills that create a feeling of safety. The basic assumption underlying this approach is that human beings are naturally connected and that they perceive conflictual situations as an existential threat. This sense of danger, like persons' sense of security, derives not only from objective physical threats to life, but also from subjective perceptions based on life experiences. The brain stem and limbic system, the parts of the brain responsible for the body's life systems and basic emotions, label every life event as roughly "dangerous" or "secure." By nature, the automatic reactions to dangerous situations are characterized by fight or flight, which are both rigid, ineffective reactions for resolving conflicts and achieving stable security in a relationship. The Imago approach attempts to encourage adaptive coping that is conscious of the motives behind one's behavior and that of others – coping that helps

create a safe space in which all individuals involved can express themselves and obtain a response to their needs.

To achieve this goal, Imago suggests a basic model for dialogue. In this framework, one participant adopts the role of "sender" and the other adopts the role of a "receiver." In the first stage, the receiver reflects what the sender says, asks for feedback on the reflection, and encourages the sender to continue speaking until he/she has nothing more to add. In the next stage, the receiver summarizes all that he/ she heard, asks the sender for confirmation and tries to understand the sender in light of what has been said. Hendrix and Hunt (1997) argued that maintenance of conscious and effective communication is important even with preschool-age children. Acknowledging that small children lack a broad vocabulary and ability to express abstract ideas, Hendrix and Hunt cited clinical evidence attesting to the possibility that such children can nevertheless engage in intelligent dialogue that includes reflection and empathy. Reflection of what children say legitimizes their words and helps them develop the consciousness and skills required for safe interaction with the environment.

The "Safe Kindergarten" Program

The intervention program in the present study adapted the principles of the Imago method and its central tool (the pair dialogue) to the abilities and needs of kindergartners. The program's central aim was to teach the children to dialogue effectively in general, and even more so after a disagreement. It aspired to train the children to convey their thoughts and feelings in an orderly manner and to listen attentively to their friends when expressing their thoughts and feelings, mainly after a disagreement. In this framework, the children learned about the nature of social relations and communicative behavior.

They were trained in effective communication that enabled them to learn and understand their own and their friends' motives for reactive or considerate behavior.

To adapt the Imago principles to kindergartner's realm, 20 units were constructed, each comprising Imago issues and exercising the dialogue tool. Sessions followed a cumulative, developmental curricular progression (for examples of two sessions, see Appendix A). The two teachers in the intervention group led the program sessions as part of the overall program taught in their kindergartens from December to May, in weekly sessions of 20-30 minutes.

Each teacher led the sessions in fixed small groups of about six children within her kindergarten. Each session had a 4-part structure consisting of the opening, presentation of a theoretical issue, systematic practice of the intentional dialogue, and closure.

1) *Opening*. Each session began with about 2-3 minutes of guided imagery. Using texts and music adapted for this purpose, the teacher guided the children in gradual relaxation of their bodies and in preparing themselves for sharing their feelings and thoughts with others as well as containing what their classmates would say. Over the course of the year, once the children became familiar with Imago's primary psychological concept of "safe place," an inner, quiet, secure place, they were guided during the relaxation to imagine themselves in their own "safe place."

2) *Presentation of a theoretical issue*. The theoretical part of the session lasted about 10-15 minutes. The content matter was presented according to difficulty level and theoretical sequence. Subjects included familiarization with various emotions (e.g., anger, fear, love); understanding the brain structure and its adaptive functions (the "old automatic brain" and the "new thinking brain"); acquaintance with typical behavior

patterns when feeling endangered (fight, flight, freeze, surrender) or safe (playing, relaxing, creating); understanding one's own and others' needs; when do I feel in danger and why; the concept of containment (How does it feel to be contained, when a friend who hurt you hears your frustration, reflects your words, and tries to understand you? How does it feel when you try to contain a friend's frustration? How can one make space for others in one's surroundings, to see and hear them?); the feeling of connectedness – to each other and to the universe; the contribution of appropriate communication to personal functioning; and more. The teacher used different developmentally-appropriate means to present these central issues of social-emotional understanding according to the Imago approach. For example, she used games to practice concepts like mirroring; stories and songs to discuss emotions, conflict resolutions, and friendship; films like the "Ice Age" (Meledandri & Forte, 2002) to demonstrate connectedness; metaphors like the "shark" that attacks and the "sardine" that runs away to illustrate fight and flight responses, and the "dolphin" that listens to explain our "old" and "new" brain's functioning; creative activities like molding cups and bowls from clay to illustrate containing; experiments to check the capacity of a receptacle (What can be contained and what spills over? What happens when you fill a vase too much?).

3) *Systematic practice of the "intentional dialogue."* After the theoretical part, 10 minutes of each session were devoted to practicing central skills for maintenance of an intentional dialogue (expressiveness, reflection, and information processing). Using the pair dialogue tool, children spoke about conflict situations that they had experienced. One child (the sender) told another about his/her frustration in their relationship, and the listening child (the receiver) reflected what the friend said. The dialogue was gradually

relayed such that the sender spoke about two sentences and the receiver reflected them, and then the sender spoke another two sentences and the receiver reflected them, until the sender finished telling about his/her frustration. Then, the receiver tried to summarize the sender's words in a few sentences and to understand his/her frustration. Acquisition of containment skills was gradual. In the first sessions, children were asked to mirror a single sound, movement, or word of their partners, and only in later sessions were they asked to reflect whole sentences as part of a complete dialogue. At first, the dialogue was held between two children who volunteered to present their role play in front of the group, with close guidance from the teacher. At a later stage, all the children in the group engaged in dialogues simultaneously, with the teacher moving among pairs and helping where needed.

4) *Closure*. Every session ended with the children standing in a circle to share feelings or thoughts while holding hands. In this part, which lasted about 2 minutes, each child in turn was asked to relate to the circle's defined theme for that session. For instance, at the end of a session on danger and safety, every child was asked to name a dangerous animal.

Beyond the sessions, within the kindergarten, the teachers encouraged the children to dialogue after conflicts (not at the time of the conflict), speak the "Imago language" by using expressions like "please mirror my words" or "do not be a shark." In the standard circle meetings held for all children, the teachers frequently mirrored (repeated) children in discussions.

Prior to the beginning of the study, the teachers of the intervention group participated in a 12-hour workshop at the university, where they learned the Imago ideas

in general and their applications via the program to kindergartners in particular. The teachers asked questions about theory and practice, exercised the dialogue tool, and actively contributed to adapting the program for kindergartners. In addition, they received the book of Imago principles on which the program was based (Hendrix, 1990). During the school year, monthly meetings were held with the two teachers at the university to provide theoretical clarification, feedback, and consultation. Regular weekly conversations with each teacher were maintained, for the purpose of follow-up and guidance.

A month after the beginning of the program, parents in each of the intervention kindergartens participated in a 2-hour workshop that introduced them to the Imago ideas and to the program's aims and means. This allowed parents an opportunity to report on what they had already heard from their children and ask questions in light of the theoretical background presented.

Method

Participants

Participants comprised 92 kindergarteners from four kindergartens in neighborhoods of upper-middle socioeconomic status in central Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Kindergarten teachers were told by their superintendent about the program, and the four first kindergarten teachers who volunteered participated in the study. This study received consent from the Israeli Ministry of Education, the four kindergarten teachers, and all parents. Two of the kindergartens were randomly chosen for implementation of the program, and the other two served as a comparison group. For ethical reasons, the teachers in the comparison groups were introduced to the program

and implemented it in their kindergartens when the current study ended. The intervention group comprised 46 children, 20 girls and 26 boys, aged 5½ years ($M = 64.72$ months, $SD = 3.45$). The comparison group comprised 46 children, 22 girls and 24 boys, aged 5½ years ($M = 65.65$ months, $SD = 2.83$). The four kindergarten teachers (all females in their 30s) held bachelor degrees, and each had around 6 years of teaching experience at the time of the study. All kindergartens employed the standard national Ministry of Education curriculum.

Measures

Children's skills were evaluated before (December) and after (June) the intervention within each of the four kindergartens. To obtain a wide and varied assessment we utilized three methods: a role play to assess communication skills; a structured interview and a sociometric test to assess social skills.

Communication skills. To evaluate communication skills, we audiotaped a role play of a dialogue between friends. We decided to use this instrument because research shows that students' role play is an effective means for structuring practice and assessing communication and social skills (e.g., Committee for Children, 1991; Staub, 1974).

Teachers were asked to utilize their knowledge of the children's social relationships to divide the class into pairs of friends. These same pairs were audiotaped twice, at pretest and posttest, while enacting the same role-played dialogue. This dialogue was presented as: "R. approached O. because he wanted to play with him, but O. was busy and didn't want to play with R. R. was insulted. Now R. and O. have an opportunity to talk about what happened, and R. begins."

The situation for the role play was presented verbally to each pair by the researcher using gender appropriate wording (two girls, two boys, or a girl and boy). The children within each pair decided themselves which roles to take (sender or receiver). Each pair conducted only one dialogue, so each child was assessed as either the sender or the receiver, and data were analyzed accordingly. The instructions were: "This is what happened between two children and now they want to talk about what happened between them. Each one of you will play his/her part. Please converse and discuss this situation, and when you decide that you have finished and have nothing more to say to each other, stop."

The dialogues were transcribed word for word (for examples of two dialogues, see Appendix B). Based on analysis of the written transcriptions, the following five categories and criteria for coding were developed:

1. *Number of turns*. The number of turns the children took during the dialogue.
2. *Number of emotional expressions*. The number of emotion words (e.g., insult, afraid, sad, angry) used in the dialogue.
3. *Number of cognitive expressions*. The number of cognitive words (e.g., understand, notice, promise, thought, intended, decided) used in the dialogue.
4. *Sender's score*. A criterion that evaluated the degree to which the sender of the frustration succeeded in manifesting and explaining his/her frustration. The score assessed the child's expression of her/his feelings in the situation, giving the cognitive reason for the feeling and communicating his/her personal understanding of the situation on a 4-point scale: (1) No expression of emotion – Sender did not talk about his/her feelings in the frustrating situation (e.g., saying, "You did not want to play");

(2) Limited expression of emotion – Sender referred only to his/her emotion in the situation (e.g., "It hurt me"); (3) Expression of emotion with a cognitive explanation – Sender referred both to his/her emotion in the situation and the reason for this feeling (e.g., "I felt bad because you didn't want to play with me"); and (4) Full communication – Sender referred to his/her emotion in the situation, the reason for this feeling, and his/her personal understanding of the situation (e.g., "I wanted to play with you ... It really insulted me ... It is as if you are ignoring me").

5. *Receiver's score.* A criterion to evaluate the degree to which the receiver, the child whose task was to listen and contain his/her friend's frustration, succeeded in providing an empathic response to what the friend said along a 4-point scale: (1) No response at all – Receiver ignored the situation or feelings of the sender; (2) Matter of fact response – Receiver gave a very limited response with a short reference to the situation but not to the sender's feelings (e.g., "I was too busy"); (3) Reference to the situation accompanied by emotional response (e.g., "I am sorry that I didn't pay attention to you"); and (4) Full empathic response (e.g., "I am sorry....I did not play with you..... and I understand that I hurt you").

Inasmuch as this instrument was developed specifically for the purpose of the present study, its inter-rater reliability was examined. Two students underwent training and coded 10 randomly selected dialogues according to the five-category index described above. Agreement rates were sufficiently high in all categories: number of turns (90%), cognitive expressions (100%), emotional expressions (100%), sender's score (90%), and receiver's score (70%).

Social skills: Structured interview to map social information processing. To examine the level of social information processing among children, we employed Turkaspa and Bryan's (1994) structured interview, developed according to Crick and Dodge's (1994) model. The interview included reference to four conflictual social situations. For instance: "Dan is swinging on a swing in the yard. Suddenly a child comes and pushes him off the swing. This child climbs onto the swing and starts swinging". For each of the four situations, the interviewed child was asked to (a) repeat what he/she remembered from the story presented; (b) explain the problem depicted in the situation "What is the problem in the story?"; (c) suggest a possible reason for the children's behavior in the story (e.g., "Why did the child push Dan off the swing?"); and (d) suggest ways to resolve the situation (e.g., "Please tell me all the things that Dan can do"). For the coding of the interview, the following four categories and criteria were extracted:

1. *Number of information units recalled.* The number of information units recalled by the child, on a scale of 0-5 for each situation. The five units for the example above were: (1) Dan is swinging on a swing in the yard. (2) Suddenly a child comes and (3) pushes him off the swing. (4) This child climbs onto the swing and (5) starts swinging." Scores consisted of the mean number of units across the four situations.

2. *Number of conscious references to the inner world.* The number of instances that the child interpreted a character's behavior based on awareness of that character's needs, feelings, and considerations, summing the four situations (0-4). For example, in the situation described above, a reference to the character's needs could be "He was violent because he also wanted to swing."

3. *Number of solutions generated.* The mean number of solutions that the child generated for each situation across the four situations.

4. *Percentage of effective solutions generated.* The mean percentage of effective solutions out of the total number of solutions that the child generated across the four situations. Effective solutions were defined according to Tur-Kaspa and Bryan's (1994) manual. For example, an effective solution in the situation described above could be for Dan to ask the child why he pushed him off the swing, or to seek help from an older brother or mother.

Two students underwent training and coded 5 randomly selected interviews according to the four-category index described above. Agreement rates were sufficiently high in all categories: number of information units recalled (100 %), number of conscious references to the inner world (90 %), number of solutions generated (100 %), and percentage of effective solutions generated (90 %).

Social Skills: Sociometric Test. To assess their degree of social understanding, we asked the children to name their four best friends in the kindergarten, and then we calculated the number of mutual nominations by peers. It was assumed children with greater sensitivity to others would better know which children considered themselves a friend and thus would reveal more mutual namings of friends. For each child, we counted the number of times he or she chose a friend who also chose him/her; thus, the scale ranged from 0 to 4 matches, with higher scores indicating greater correspondence. To maximize differences, we narrowed the scale to a 3-point scale: (1) no matches; (2) one or two matches; (3) three or four matches.

Results

Communicative Skills

To examine the effectiveness of the intervention program with respect to communication skills, a series of two-way ANOVAs was conducted on the dialogue role plays, for 2 (Time: pre/post) by 2 (Group: intervention/comparison) with repeated measures.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and differences in communicative skills between the intervention and the comparison groups, before and after the intervention. Results indicated that the sample exhibited sufficient variance in all the communicative skill measures at the pretest and the posttest intervals.

Significant time effects emerged across the board, with children in both groups (intervention and comparison) progressing significantly from pretest to posttest in all the communicative skills assessed in the present study: number of turns in dialogue, $F(90, 1) = 8.12, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, number of emotional expressions, $F(90, 1) = 40.02, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .31$, number of cognitive expressions, $F(90, 1) = 8.69, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$, senders' scores, $F(90, 1) = 14.89, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .29$, and receivers' scores, $F(90, 1) = 15.90, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .30$. However, significant interactions emerged between time and group showing that the children in the intervention group progressed significantly more than those in the comparison group in most categories (all except receivers' scores): in their number of turns in dialogue, $F(90, 1) = 5.09, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, number of emotional expressions, $F(90, 1) = 11.61, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$, number of cognitive expressions, $F(90, 1) = 5.08, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, and senders' scores, $F(90, 1) = 7.75, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$. Thus, compared with their age

mates, pairs of friends in the intervention group learned over the course of the year how to engage in longer dialogues between themselves, to be more emotionally and cognitively expressive, and to more clearly describe their difficulties and feelings in a situation of being hurt, relative to their counterparts in the comparison group.

-----Insert Table 1 about here-----

Social Skills

Structured interview to map social information processing. To examine the two groups' progress in social information processing skills, a series of two-way ANOVAs was conducted for 2 (Time: pre/post) by 2 (Group: intervention/comparison) with repeated measures. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and differences in the social skills between the intervention and the comparison groups, before and after the intervention. Results indicated that our sample exhibited sufficient variance in the social skills measures assessed by the interview at the pretest and the posttest intervals.

Significant time effects emerged, where both groups (intervention and comparison) progressed from pretest to posttest on two categories: number of information units recalled, $F(90, 1) = 80.24, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .65$, and percentage of effective solutions generated, $F(90, 1) = 6.77, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .07$. Thus, the children in both groups progressed over the school year in their ability to recall information from social situations presented to them and in their ability to identify effective solutions to conflicts between children. Nevertheless, the significant interactions between time and group show that the children in the intervention group progressed significantly more than those in the comparison group in their number of conscious references to the story characters' inner world, $F(90, 1) = 4.41, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$, and in the number of solutions that the

children generated for the conflictual social situations, $F(90, 1) = 4.24, p < .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .05$.

-----Insert Table 2 about here-----

Sociometric test. Table 3 presents the sociometric test's distribution for the three categories of matches (none, 1-2, or 3-4) in the two groups at the two intervals. The chi-square test indicated significant differences between the groups, $\chi^2(2) = 8.26, p < .05$. Prior to the intervention, the distribution was almost identical in both groups. Most of the children in both groups had only 1-2 matches (59% in intervention and 57% in comparison groups). However, the posttest revealed a sharp increase in the number of children in the comparison group who had 1-2 matches (57% to 74%) compared to a slight decline in the intervention group (59% to 46%). At the same time, the children in the intervention group progressed from 17% to 26% in matching 3-4 choices with their friends', whereas children in the comparison group slightly declined from 19% to 8.5% in their achievement of 3-4 mutual friendship nominations.

-----Insert Table 3 about here-----

Although the hypotheses did not refer to gender differences, a series of three-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) was performed for 2 (Time: pre/post) by 2 (Group: intervention/comparison) by 2 (gender: girls/boys) with repeated measures for all the communication and social skills. No significant interactions emerged between time or group with gender. In both the intervention and the comparison groups, no differences emerged between boys and girls before or after the intervention, between or within the groups.

Discussion

The study examined the effectiveness of a program designed according to the Imago principles for promoting kindergartners' communicative and social skills. The intervention included weekly pre-planned small-group sessions. Children learned the main Imago communication ideas and systematically practiced Imago structured dialogues with their peers. Findings showed that beyond the general progress noted for all of the children in both the intervention and comparison groups over the course of the year, children who received the intervention progressed more on various communication and social measures than their counterparts who did not participate in intervention. In terms of communication skills, kindergartners in the intervention group engaged in longer dialogues, which included more changes of turns between the participants and more attention to emotions and thoughts. Moreover, in role-played dialogues, the children who chose the role of the injured party (the sender) succeeded in expressing themselves better. As for social skills, the kindergartners in the intervention group demonstrated an advantage over the comparison group in terms of awareness of the inner world of others, repertoire of conflict resolutions, and synchronicity in choice of friends (social acceptance).

The findings regarding the program's impact on communicative skills are encouraging and appear to imply that young children can be guided in improving communication with their peers. The challenge of enabling effective communication among children is felt clearly in kindergartens, especially when attempting to manage a discussion among the entire group. In this common situation, most children find it difficult to express themselves and listen to others effectively. Kindergarten teachers also

find it challenging to help young children communicate efficiently when trying to resolve misunderstandings or conflicts. Evidence has previously been lacking to indicate that it is possible to train such young children in communicative abilities. As noted, the present study suggests that program's curriculum and repeated practice of dialogue skills facilitated this improvement. Perhaps the unique structured framework provided by the Imago pair dialogue provided the appropriate conditions for practicing communication skills. This interaction, which maintains a sense of confidence and clear rules, seems to have contributed to the children's ability to express themselves, as predicted by Hendrix in his work on communication within adult couples (Hendrix & Hunt, 1997). The strict rules of the Imago dialogue help maintain equality between partners, hence enabling senders to be articulate without the need to state their arguments quickly and loudly in order to be heard. Senders also learn and practice emotional and cognitive expressions to facilitate expression of their feelings and to become more articulate. We assume that such practice led children in the intervention group to develop higher communication skills.

Nevertheless, regarding communicative and social skills, although the children in the intervention group were better senders than the children in the comparison group toward the end of the year, they were not better receivers (the injuring party). They did not outperform the comparison group in being empathic toward their "injured" friends' frustration. Although they produced more solutions to conflict situations in the social information interview, they did not produce a higher rate of effective solutions than the children in the comparison group. In the current study, the receiver's score evaluated the degree to which he/she contained the friend's frustration and succeeded in providing an empathic response to what the friend said. Despite the finding that the receivers in the

intervention were more active than the receivers in the comparison group (showing greater progress in the number of turns in the dialogue), they did not show more empathic responses.

This result can be attributed to the kindergartners' developmental stage (e.g., Osterman & Biokqvist, 2001). Piaget (1967) claimed that children at the preoperational developmental stage cannot see the other's point of view and as a result observe continuity between their own desires and point of view and that of the others. On the other hand, Researchers of Theory of Mind claim that at the age of four children understand that people might have different feelings or thoughts about the same reality (e.g., Fongay & Target, 1996; Slomkowski & Dunn, 1996). Astington and Jenkins (1995) found that three to five year old children show awareness of others that enables participation in role play. In psychological terms, young children were found able to distinguish between 'reality mode' and 'pretend mode'. This kind of social understanding allows preschoolers to participate in pretend play.

In the present study we suggest that, the currently assessed dialogue's characteristics should be considered. This dialogue involved peer rejection during play, an uncomfortable situation in which the sender accused the receiver (his/her friend) of being unfair and insensitive to his/her needs and feelings. There is evidence that even adults find it difficult to be empathic in general situations where they are being accused of something and even more so when they are accused by a friend or someone to whom they feel close (e.g., Pocock, 1997). Thus, perhaps the accusatory nature ("you did not play with me") of the situation precluded receivers' ability to reveal empathy toward their friends. On the other hand, as a less emotionally charged dialogue (e.g., the sender tells

the receiver about a bad experience at home) might have elicited some progress in the receivers' scores after intervention. Inasmuch as social understanding is derived from social involvement; that is, involvement in social activity (Carpendale & Lewis 2004), perhaps future research should expose children to more practice as receivers in dialogues in order to promote empathic responses in a wide spectrum of scenarios of varying discomfort levels.

The outcomes regarding the program's impact on children's social skills indicate that the Safe Kindergarten Program contributed to participants' social understanding. Kindergartners in the intervention group tended to better understand the inner motives of others and succeeded in offering more solutions to conflicts than their counterparts in the comparison group. They also succeeded in achieving more matches in choosing friends in the sociometric test. It can be assumed that the practice of conflict resolution helped the children progress in these skills. These findings are in line with studies showing that discussing different strategies for conflict resolution with children in first and second grade contributes to their ability to suggest positive solutions to problems (Browning et al., 2000) as well as to their awareness of and consideration toward others (according to school staff reports) (Johnson & Reed, 1996). The current study revealed that even younger children, aged 5 to 6, are able to consider the motives and needs of others and that this ability can be enhanced through continued discussions of social relationships and practice of effective dialogues.

With respect to our findings on the sociometric test, the increase in the number of maximum matches (3-4) among the children in the intervention group is important in light of evidence presented in previous research whereby preschoolers' social acceptance

influenced their later adjustment, emotional welfare, and scholastic achievement (Dong Hwa & Juhu, 2003). Maguire and Dunn's (1997) longitudinal study on children aged 3 to 7 revealed relationships between friendship among young children and their later ability to understand mental and emotional situations at an older age. In addition, the ability to use more effective behavior patterns rather than automatic patterns of aggression or bashfulness was found to contribute to peer acceptance among 5 and 6 year olds (Phillipsen et al., 1999). It may be assumed that the growing awareness of the children in the intervention group to their own feelings, likes, dislikes, and behavior patterns in various situations improved their ability to form mutuality and recognize those who felt they were friends. The findings of the present study are encouraging from the standpoint of prevention. Difficulties in first relationships with peers may lead to stigmatization of certain children as unsocial. Therefore, peer relations are likely to be significant in predicting social problems (Campbell, 2002). Intervention in interactions among young children is essential, then, in order to teach positive techniques of communication and prevent the later development of pathologies (Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000).

It is important to consider the limitations of the present study. First, this is a first attempt to implement the Imago couple method in communication among children. The study is preliminary in its nature and was conducted only among children from middle-upper socioeconomic status in four kindergartens. A wider study that includes a larger sample and refers to children from different socioeconomic backgrounds is needed. Furthermore, including a third group that implements a different program aimed to promote communication and/or social skills will help to further examine the merits of the "Safe-kindergarten" program. Second, the program was evaluated at only two points in

time, before its introduction and immediately after it ended. It may be instructive to evaluate the children after a longer period of time, to follow up on whether the progress of the children in the intervention group remains valid, increases, or perhaps disappears. Moreover, in the present study only a few communication and social understanding measures were applied. Further assessments the children's social and academic achievements are recommended. It will also be very interesting to reveal the teachers' as well as the parents' impressions, beliefs, and behaviors with the children before and after the intervention.

In light of existing knowledge regarding the crucial role of peer relationships in child development and the encouraging results of the present study, we recommend continuing this initial study by further investigating Imago methods for the welfare of young children. The program's methods can be used by counselors in early education, who are playing a growing role in promoting intervention programs and in guiding kindergarten teachers and parents of young children.

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Appendix A

Examples of Two Study Units from the Safe Kindergarten Program

Session 4 – The Feeling of Love

Opening (2 min.): Relaxation by means of guided imagery and music.

Work on the subject of feelings (15 min.): The teacher reads the lyrics of a popular children's song (Gefen, 1978) that discusses different things that children love (e.g., "I love chocolate", "I love my sister," "I love myself") and plays the song for the children. (The teacher's materials include the lyrics and the song on a relaxation cassette/compact disc.) After hearing the song, a discussion is held on all aspects of the feeling of love: love of things compared with love of people, differences in love for different people, and the importance of loving oneself.

Dialogue exercise (5 min.): The children practice reflection of sentences. Each child, in turn, says a short sentence, and the child on his/her right reflects it.

Closure (3 min.): The children stand in a circle and hold hands. A volunteer chooses to say one positive thing about a member in the group. That member then says something positive about a third child and so forth until each child has spoken.

Possible continuation: The "positive flooding" exercise can be included in birthday parties held in the kindergarten. In this exercise, the birthday child sits on a chair, while one or more children walk circles around the birthday child and name one of his/her good qualities with every turn. This may begin with external qualities (you have a lovely smile, your eyes are beautiful) and then move on to more internal qualities (you dance nicely, you care about others). The "positive flooding" exercise can be held on other occasions as well.

Session 16 – Containment

Opening (2 min.): Guided imagery of a safe place.

Work on the subject of containment (15 min.): The teacher draws the connection between the concepts of containment and reflection, explaining that when we reflect what someone else says, we serve as a container that receives and holds their words. Such reflection of containment is true listening to the other person. The art of containment is very important in dialogue with others. The teacher may ask what happens to tangible things like water, flour, a flower, and the like if they have no vessel and connect this to the feeling of people when no one "contains" them. The children are encouraged to talk about different feelings that arise when they are/are not listened to.

Dialogue exercise (5 min.): The children (with the help of the teacher) choose a situation from kindergarten life on which the dialogue will be based (e.g., sharing toys). All the children arrange themselves in pairs to work simultaneously, with the teacher passing among them. The teacher ensures that pairs of children sit opposite one another without any barrier and maintain eye contact. To help the children prepare for the role of reflector/receiver, the teacher explains how each child must "empty his/her inner container of thoughts and feelings" by guided imaginary techniques that help the children get into their own "safe place."

Closure (3 min.): The children stand in a circle and hold hands. Each child, in turn, is asked to complete the sentence: "When I listen to someone else, I" The teacher elaborates. Next a volunteer chooses to say one positive thing about a member in the group. That member then says something positive about a third child and so forth.

Possible continuation: The concepts of reflection, containment, and listening can be used on different occasions in the kindergarten.

Appendix B

Pretest and Posttest Dialogues between Same Pair of Two Girls in the Intervention Group

Pretest: Shahar as sender, Tal as receiver (27 seconds)

Shahar: I was very hurt by what you did to me.

Tal: Because I didn't see you. You should have said something before you came to me.

Shahar: So...so do you want to play with me?

Tal: I still need to continue what I'm doing.

Shahar: So can I help you?

Tal: Yes.

Posttest: Tal as sender, Shahar as receiver (128 seconds)

Tal: Ah...I didn't feel nice that you were busy and didn't let me participate.

Shahar: I heard you saying that...that it wasn't nice that I was busy and you couldn't participate. And... I want to say that it wasn't nice for me either to hurt you. I didn't want to hurt you. It just that what happened was that I was busy and couldn't play with you at that time.

Tal: Shahar, Shahar, I lost you.

Shahar: So say it again.

Tal: Ah...you were busy and it wasn't ah...and it wasn't nice for you either, but that's the way it was (silence).

Shahar: Ah...I didn't want to hurt you, and it wasn't nice for me either because I looked at you and saw you were sad and I understood that I hurt you, but I didn't know that I have to decide to do something.

Tal: Ah...so you wanted to tell me... ah...that you can'tand you thought that I'm....and then at the end, and at the end you didn't get to tell me.

Shahar: Yes.

Tal: Now it's my turn to say. And at the end I was hurt, so I went to the drawing corner and drew all kinds of houses (laughing) and...(Shahar also laughs) houses and flowers and stuff. It was a lot of fun.

Shahar: You said that you went to draw. I remember that...I wanted to go with you but,
and, at the end it didn't happen.

Tal: Then I did all the.... (laughing) I can't say.

Shahar: OK.

Table 1
Comparing Growth in Communicative Skills: Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance
(Time X Group)

		Intervention		Comparison		<i>F</i>	
		group		group			
		<i>n</i> = 46		<i>n</i> = 46			
Skill	Range	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Time	Time x
		<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>		group
		(<i>SD</i>)	(<i>SD</i>)	(<i>SD</i>)	(<i>SD</i>)		
Number of turns	0-	5.26	8.26	6.57	6.91	8.12**	5.09*
		(4.26)	(5.76)	(4.32)	(4.89)		
Emotional	0-	1.70	2.57	1.43	1.70	40.02***	11.61***
expressions		(0.55)	(0.78)	(0.58)	(0.46)		
Cognitive	0-	2.39	3.04	2.39	2.48	8.69**	5.08*
expressions		(1.02)	(0.92)	(0.88)	(1.1)		
Sender's	1-4	1.65	2.74	1.52	1.74	14.89***	7.75**
score ^a		(0.57)	(0.91)	(0.85)	(0.75)		
Receiver's score ^a	1-4	2.05	2.83	1.52	1.96	15.90***	0.20
		(0.72)	(1.03)	(0.59)	(0.71)		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

^a $n = 46$ (Each child took the role of either sender or receiver in the dialogue.)

Table 2

Comparing Growth in Social Information Processing Skills: Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (Time X Group)

		Intervention group <i>n</i> = 46		Comparison group <i>n</i> = 46		<i>F</i>	
Skill	Range	Pretest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Posttest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Pretest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Posttest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Time	Time x group
Information units recalled	0-5	2.62 (1.09)	3.58 (0.86)	2.14 (1.1)	3.29 (0.72)	80.24***	0.65
Attention to inner world	0-4	1.78 (0.55)	2 (0.67)	1.74 (0.57)	1.65 (0.48)	0.81	4.41*
Number of solutions	0-	8.56 (2.74)	9.24 (2.92)	7.22 (2.82)	6.52 (2.39)	0.00	3.71*
% effective solutions	0-100	60.26 (24.38)	66.6 (21.77)	55.23 (28.13)	66.43 (27.37)	6.77**	0.52

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Chi-Square Distribution of Mutual Friendship Nominations by Time and Group

Number of mutual nominations	Intervention group <i>n</i> = 46		Comparison group <i>n</i> = 46	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
0	11	13	11	8
1-2	27	21	26	34
3-4	8	12	9	4