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THE SOCIAL STRATEGIES AND GOALS OF CHILDREN WITH LANGUAGE
IMPAIRMENT AND CHILDREN WITH TYPICALLY DEVELOPING LANGUAGE

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

THE SOCIAL STRATEGIES AND GOALS OF CHILDREN WITH LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT AND CHILDREN WITH TYPICALLY DEVELOPING LANGUAGE

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Master of Science

Abstract

Past research has indicated that children with language impairment (LI) struggle more than children with typical language in their social interactions (Fujiki, Brinton, & Todd, 1999). The purpose of this study was to determine if the social strategies and goals of children with LI varied from those of children with typically developing language. A social goals questionnaire was used to determine the strategies the children verbally indicated that they would use. The children were then asked why they would use the selected strategy. The responses were then separated into goal categories. A chi-square analysis indicated that children with LI varied significantly from children with typical language in their selection of the strategies of adult-seeking, passive, and hostile-controlling strategies. A descriptive analysis of the social goals showed the goals to be

less relationship-oriented and less congruent with the selected strategy than typically developing peers.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	ix
Introduction.....	1
Review of Literature	4
Definition of a Social Goal	4
Social Problem Solving Models Illustrate How a Child's Goals Are Important	
Aspects of Social Interaction	6
Children's Selection of Goals During Social Interaction	9
Methodological Considerations: The Use of Hypothetical Situations.....	14
The Relationship of Goals and Strategies in Social Interactions	15
Conclusion	19
Method	21
Participants.....	21
Procedures.....	22
Results.....	27
Discussion	31
Strategies Selected by Children with LI and Children with Typically Developing	
Language.....	32
Social Goals Motivating Specific Strategies.....	33
Conclusion	36
Suggestions for Future Research	37
References.....	39

Appendix.....43

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Table 1 Social Goal Categories and Their Qualifications	25
2. Table 2 Percentages of No, Maybe and Yes Responses in Each Strategy Category for Children with LI and Typical Children	28
3. Table 3 Goal Categories for Strategies of Children with LI and Children with Typical Language	34

Introduction

Many children with *language impairment* (LI)¹ have social problems (Fujiki, Brinton, & Todd, 1996). For example, Rice, Sell, and Hadley (1991) found that children with LI are more apt to initiate conversation with adults, whereas children with typically developing language are more likely to initiate conversation with their peers. Hadley and Rice (1991) also reported that children with *specific language impairment* (SLI) have fewer peer interactions than children with typically developing language. This finding was supported by Fujiki et al. (1996), who also found that children with SLI had fewer social contacts. Consistent with these findings, Fujiki, Brinton, Morgan, and Hart (1999) reported that teachers rated children with LI as being more reticent than typical peers.

Children with LI also have difficulty with basic social tasks. For example, Craig and Washington (1993) observed children with SLI and their typical peers as they tried to access, or enter, an activity with peers. In a 20 minute play episode, three out of the five children with SLI did not access the activity and the remaining two did so with nonverbal strategies (these findings were later replicated by Brinton, Fujiki, Spencer, & Robinson, 1997; Liiva & Cleave, 2005).

¹ Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and Language Impairment (LI) are terms that describe children who have difficulty with language while other areas of development such as cognitive, sensory and motor ability appear to be typical. An IQ score of 70 or better was used in order to eliminate intellectual disability and was considered acceptable for inclusion for children with LI in this study. However, this IQ level does not match the standard IQ score accepted in the definition of children with SLI. Often LI and SLI are used interchangeably, therefore in this paper SLI will be used when SLI was the term used in the paper being cited. LI will be used in other cases.

Despite the important role played by impaired language skills in social interaction, there is evidence that the social problems experienced by children with LI are not completely explained by poor language (Fujiki et al., 1999); other variables may also impact social competence (Spackman, Fujiki, & Brinton, 2006). For example, Gallagher (1999) stated that children with LI may display emotional and behavioral problems which include “general immaturity, inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, frustration, aggression, conduct disorders, low self-esteem, low self-confidence, social withdrawal, depression, and anxiety” (p. 2). All of these behaviors affect the way in which children with LI are viewed, interfere with the quality of their social interactions, and could influence whether or not they are accepted or rejected by their peers.

The social behavior of children with typically developing language is heavily influenced by the social goals they pursue. For example, the type of goal pursued during an interaction is strongly linked to level of acceptance. The success of a social interaction depends not only on the strategies implemented but also the desired goal behind the specific strategies (Rose & Asher, 2004). Children with typically developing language who have more prosocial goals (such as building or maintaining a relationship) are more likely to be accepted by their peers in contrast to children whose goals are focused on domination or self-protection. In theoretical models that attempt to explain the relationship between children’s peer acceptance, behavior, and social-cognitive processes, social goals have frequently been given an important role (Erdley & Asher, 1999). It is of note that researchers have only begun to examine the social goals of children with LI.

Since social goals drive behavior it is important to examine the goals of children with LI. For this thesis the following questions were asked:

1. Do children with LI and their typical peers differ in the social strategies that they indicate they would use in hypothetical conflict situations?
2. Do children with LI and their typical peers differ in the social goals that they pursue in hypothetical conflict situations?

Review of Literature

The purpose of this review is to define the term *social goals* in view of social interactions, present existing social problem solving models, and discuss what may be involved in goal selection as children participate in social interaction. Social goals of children with and without LI are also examined.

Historically, social skill instruction has focused on improving strategies to help alleviate peer rejection. It may be, however, that the inappropriate behavior that leads to rejection is not the result of a lack of social strategies but due to the social goals the child is pursuing (Rose & Asher, 2004). For example, a child's withdrawal may be motivated by a goal of self protection rather than a lack of strategies for interacting with others. Thus, social goals have received increased attention in recent years (e.g., do inappropriate goals lead to social rejection?).

Definition of a Social Goal

There are various definitions of social goals, each highlighting different aspects of social interaction. Rubin and Krasnor (1986) defined a goal as "a representation of the end state of the problem solving process" (p. 17). Hence, a goal is a desired end product of a social interaction. It is of note that goals may change during the course of an interaction. Because the child has a goal, that goal enables the child to evaluate the interaction and decide whether the end state has been achieved or if the goal needs to be revised. A subgoal may consist of performing a certain strategy in order to later achieve another goal. For example, a child may have a subgoal of getting a play partner to laugh so that the goal of friendship could be achieved later, or obtaining easier access to an activity (Rubin & Krasnor, 1986).

According to Crick and Dodge (1994), “Goals are focused arousal states that function as orientations toward producing (or wanting to produce) particular outcomes” (p. 87). Thus, goals represent a heightened awareness or conscious desire regarding a certain outcome. In the context of this definition, a goal exists when the person is interacting with others, even when that goal is simply to continue what one is doing. Also, not every change in the situation will require a new goal. If, for example, a new person enters the room, the goal may still be to stay with what one is doing. Dodge and Crick indicate that there are two primary types of goals in a social situation: internal and external. Internal goals may include feeling happy or avoiding embarrassment. External goals consist of a physical outcome such as playing with the ball or being first in a game (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Chung and Asher (1996) defined a goal as: “A goal is a state of affairs that will give a person satisfaction or relief when attained” (p. 126). According to this definition a goal is closely intertwined with strategies or specific actions implemented in order to achieve the goal.

As can be seen from these definitions, there are a number of different ways in which this term can be conceptualized. It can generally be said, however, that goals become social goals when applied to a social interaction. There are also various categories of social goals that have been used by different authors. For example, Erdley and Asher (1996) used self-protection goals, antisocial goals, and relationship-oriented goals. Chung and Asher (1996) categorized their goals as relationship goals, control goals, self-interest goals, and avoidance goals. For the purposes of this paper, the Crick and Dodge (1994) definition of goals will be used because it emphasizes a heightened

awareness in obtaining a particular outcome. Added to this definition is the understanding that goals are considered social while dealing with an interaction. This indicates that depending on the goal, strategies could vary.

Social Problem Solving Models Illustrate How a Child's Goals Are Important Aspects of Social Interaction

Social problem solving models developed for typical children can provide an idea of how social goals might influence the social interactions of children with LI. The following models are reviewed to illustrate how a child's goals are included as an important aspect of social interaction.

According to Rubin and Krasnor's (1986) Social Problem Solving Model, children solve problems by selecting a goal (*e.g.*, obtaining an object, getting attention) while taking into account environmental factors such as familiarity with the persons involved. The child then selects a strategy (or what they would do) having considered this information. The strategy is implemented, and the child observes the outcome. If the strategy fails there are three options for the child: The first is to stop trying. This involves giving up on the goal. The failed attempt is stored in memory for future access and the child may then choose a new goal. The second strategy is to try the same strategy again. The third option is to modify the strategy while leaving the goal intact (Rubin & Krasnor, 1986).

A hypothetical example of Rubin and Krasnor's Social Problem Solving Model is as follows. Brittany is playing with dolls, and Erin has the goal of joining her. From past experience Erin knows that Brittany is a friendly person who likes having playmates so Erin selects a simple strategy of approximation. Erin then implements the strategy of

approaching Brittany, and awaits an invitation to join the game. Erin will revise her goal if her strategy does not work.

Dodge's (1986) original Social Information Processing model views the child as having biologically determined capabilities, a database of past experiences from which to draw, and the ability to process social cues from the environment. How a child interprets those cues will determine a child's behavioral response to the situation. Dodge describes a series of steps that a child goes through in order to interpret social cues. The first step involves the encoding of situational cues. This consists of processing sensory information and determining what is going on. The second step is a representation and integration process that involves integrating past memories to assist in understanding the cues.

Dodge states that it is difficult to separate the first two steps because any response a child gives requires that the child complete both steps one and two: encoding and interpreting cues. The third step is the response search process, in which the child attempts to determine an appropriate response to the situation. In the fourth step a child chooses a response, and in the fifth step the behavior is enacted (Dodge, 1986). Dodge states that this process does not reach the conscious level unless the child is questioned by an examiner, or if the task is either highly novel or complex.

Crick and Dodge (1994) expounded on Dodge's original model and laid out six steps describing the process the child goes through in the course of a social interaction. In steps 1 and 2 the child processes and makes sense of social cues (Crick & Dodge, 1994). During these steps the child pays attention to a specific social situation and interprets the available internal and external cues. Internal cues may consist of past interactions and could include an evaluation of whether the child's goals were met in those previous

situations. External cues may consist of what Child A perceives Child B to be doing, along with Child A's perception of Child B's goals. Child A's previous interactions with Child B are also considered as well as an examination of whether the goals with Child B had been met previously (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Steps 1 and 2 have been examined by researchers in children with LI. Children with LI have demonstrated difficulties with step 1 in that they have more difficulty identifying visual and prosodic cues of emotion than their age-matched typically developing peers (Fujiki, Spackman, Brinton, & Illig, 2008; Spackman, Fujiki, Brinton, Nelson, & Allen, 2006). Also in comparison to their peers, children with LI have been observed to have difficulty with Step 2, in that there are indications that they have difficulty inferring what emotion an individual might experience given a specific scenario (Spackman et al., 2006).

Step 3 occurs when Child A selects a desired goal. This goal may be improving a relationship, protecting oneself, or getting one's way. Child A may have had a previous interaction with Child B and the previous goal may remain in place. Goals are selected to produce a particular outcome. These goals can change during the course of an interaction.

Step 4 involves recalling past responses to similar situations. In a new situation a new behavior may be construed. At this point it is important to note that responses that come to mind may not relate to the desired goal just chosen. In the fifth step the child selects the most positive response, taking into account past experiences and the child's estimation of what will work best in the present situation. The most positive behavior is dependent on several factors; what the child expects will happen with a certain behavior, how much confidence the child has in his/her ability to properly perform the behavior,

and how appropriate the behavior is to the situation. The chosen behavior is acted out in step 6 (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Crick and Dodge (1994) emphasize that the process described above is cyclic and is highly dependent on past experiences. An example of the cyclic pattern in steps 1 and 2 of the model is as follows: If a girl is shy and has been teased every time she walks through a hallway, her main goal may be to get through the hall without people laughing at her. So, when a peer says, 'Hi,' past experiences (internal and external cues before entering a situation) may lead her to perceive she is being teased. Another girl with a history of positive interactions may walk down the hall with the social goal of maintaining friendships. When a peer says, "Hi," in the same manner as to the shy girl, the popular girl perceives it as interest in her. The perceptions of these two individuals in the same encounter are clearly based on their different past experiences.

Goals are subject to change throughout the course of an interaction. An individual's emotions, perceptions, and beliefs will influence the goal chosen for the interaction. The end strategy chosen is affected by the child's goals, the capabilities that a child brings to a situation, past experiences, the perception of the present situation, and the expected outcome. Depending on the outcome of applying the strategy, goals can be continued, modified, or dropped.

Children's Selection of Goals During Social Interaction

As previously noted, in order to better understand children's behavior in social interactions it is necessary to examine their goals. For example, a child might want to have fun, improve skills, make someone laugh, win a game, obtain an object, or be in control. Which ever goal is selected will influence the strategies implemented (Chung &

Asher, 1996). For example, a child who wants to be in control of a game may behave more aggressively than a child whose goal is to have fun. Hopemeyer (1996) observed that it is possible for a child to have a combination of goals, such as wanting to win and wanting to have fun.

Many variables influence the eventual selection of a social goal, including the age of the child, his or her social status, and the situation the child encounters (Ladd & Crick, 1989). Consider, for example, the variable of age. Different goals are desirable for children of different ages. According to Rubin and Krasnor (1986), attention seeking goals are found in infancy. As a child develops, the social goals change to friendship initiation and information gathering. With maturity the child learns that there is a hierarchy of strategies for managing social interactions. For example, the hierarchal order for kindergartners and first grade students in an object acquisition problem consists of first employing prosocial strategies, followed by aggressive strategies, and then adult intervention, and lastly by using trade-bribe and manipulation strategies (Rubin & Krasnor, 1986).

Goal orientation is also influenced by emotions, temperament, past learning from adults, cultural influences, and the media. Affect can have a major influence on goal selection. If the child is upset, acts which would otherwise be interpreted as accidental might be interpreted as purposeful and can in turn influence the response goal. Also what the child usually chooses to do in relation to others (e.g., withdrawing, maintaining a relationship, or trying to keep control), will have an impact on what goal the child chooses (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

There are also cultural norms that dictate what goals are socially appropriate. These cultural norms may be reflected in what children are taught to do by adults. They may also be influenced by gender, age, and other variables. For example it is more acceptable for boys to exhibit hostile or coercive strategies than girls. There are restrictions on appropriate goals in the social realm and children will generally chose acceptable goals within that realm (Chung & Asher, 1996).

Children's goal and strategy selection is also dependent on what they believe they can accomplish. If children do not think that they can solve a conflict situation using a prosocial strategy then they will not try to do so. Similarly, if they have been successful using aggressive or avoidant strategies then it is more likely they will employ those strategies again. Erdley and Asher (1996) found that children with aggressive responses had greater confidence in their ability to achieve hostile goals than in their ability to achieve prosocial goals. Both withdrawn and problem-solving children had more confidence in their ability to achieve a prosocial goal than a hostile goal. Thus, these children used more problem-solving strategies than aggressive strategies, which gave them more confidence to continue using prosocial goals. The problem-solving and withdrawn children differed in that withdrawn children also employed avoidance goals. Each group of children demonstrated a greater confidence in their ability to achieve a certain type of goal (e.g., aggressive over prosocial). "Therefore, it seems that children are not exhibiting a general confidence or lack of confidence about their overall effectiveness in the social world. Rather, their confidence level appears to be more specific to the pursuit of a particular subset of goals" (Erdley & Asher, 1996, p. 1341).

A child's interpretation of an act will influence goal selection. If a child believes that another child's action was intended to intentionally harm, this belief will influence goal selection. The child might respond by selecting a retaliation or withdrawal goal. If, however, the act was viewed as accidental, then different goals that maintain a positive relationship might be selected. Erdley and Asher (1999) determined that children formulate different social goals based on many factors, including their understanding of their peers' intentions, their own experience with success and failure, their knowledge of strategy, their perception of personal self-efficacy, their expectations about the outcome of their behavior, and their beliefs about the legitimacy of aggression. The children who believed that they were responsible for a failed social interaction often adopted avoidance goals in comparison to the children who believed that failure was due to external factors. These latter children more often pursued goals that would maintain friendships (Erdley & Asher, 1999).

It is possible that children choose goals based on the strategies that they can access. According to the self-efficacy perceptions hypothesis, children are more likely to pursue the goals that they believe that they can achieve. Depending on past outcomes, children will evaluate what they believe the outcome will be and will choose the goals based on what they believe they can accomplish. For example, a child who has had little success in peer interaction might view withdrawal as the most viable option. Also, goals will only be selected if the goal can be justified in the child's mind. If a child believes that a certain type of behavior is acceptable, it is more likely to be pursued than a behavior perceived as unacceptable to the child (Ladd & Crick, 1989).

Children more often evaluate their strategies when they fail to achieve their goals. This process helps the child decide what to implement in the future. The child's emotions in response to the outcome are also interpreted and conclusions about self and peers are made (Ladd & Crick, 1989). Rubin and Krasnor (1986) hypothesized that the emotional state of the child has an impact on the reformulation of strategies if the goal was not met. For example, anger may hinder the processing of information, resulting in the same strategy being implemented multiple times. For example, Child A asks Child B if he or she can play with Child B's jump rope. Child B refuses and Child A gets angry and just grabs the jump rope. Child B holds onto it and Child A keeps trying to grab the jump rope rather than trying an alternate strategy. Anxiety may result in withdrawal as the individual tries to avoid the anxious feelings caused by the first failed event. For example, consider the following scenario. Child A approaches Child B, who is playing with blocks, and Child A asks to join. Child B says "no". The anxiety caused by being rejected may cause Child A to withdraw and play in another area rather than trying again.

A child may employ standing goals in repeatedly occurring situations. If an upcoming social interaction is relatively common, then the individual may employ a script or routine plan. For example, children that are often teased may develop scripts to avoid interactions or save face (Ladd & Crick, 1989).

In summary, there are various factors that influence goal selection. A child's past experience, how the child perceives the current situation, the child's emotional state, what the child believes he or she can accomplish, and what the child believes is appropriate along with multiple other factors which influence the goal the child chooses to implement.

Methodological Considerations: The Use of Hypothetical Situations

Determining children's social goals is a complex problem. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ask children to discuss their social goals in the middle of an actual social interaction. Thus, social goals are often assessed by an adult examiner presenting hypothetical situations. Children are asked how they would behave in response to these situations. Some of the methodological issues involved in using this procedure are reviewed as follows.

Rubin and Krasnor (1986) noted that responding to a hypothetical verbal scenario might allow reflexive reasoning. An example of reflexive reasoning is that the children may attempt to give the individual asking the questions, often an adult, what is perceived as a correct or culturally appropriate answer. This could result in different responses to real and hypothetical situations. Also, in a natural interaction the response might be more automatic thus resulting in differences between the response to the hypothetical and natural situations.

However, hypothetical situations have been used because it is believed that the child's initial reaction may fall somewhere between a response generated by reflective reasoning and what the child would actually do. When children are under the pressure of having to respond they may not have enough time to consider what response the adult is seeking, but there is enough time so that the response is not what would actually happen in the natural situation (Rubin & Krasnor, 1986).

In trying to determine children's goals, Crick and Dodge (1994) suggested that it is important to use open-ended questions, thus recognizing that it is easier for children to identify what would be an appropriate answer in a multiple choice situation than to

verbally produce it without prompting. An advantage of this method is that it allows goal categories to be produced by the children and not provided by the researcher.

Chung and Asher (1996) suggested that children are better able to explain their goal after having chosen a strategy for a particular situation. They argued that the reflection is more accurate than if the children were asked to provide a goal without having first selected a strategy.

Chung and Asher (1996) tested 52 fourth- and fifth-grade students to determine if the order in which goals and strategies were presented biased the selection process. These authors questioned whether picking goals after picking strategies would result in the children selecting goals that justified their choice of strategy. Chung and Asher reversed the order and found similar results, thus suggesting that order was not a problem and asking for goals following the strategies did not bias the goals. Chung and Asher (1996) used the hypothetical-situations methodology because it was reliable in determining the goals and strategies that would be implemented in peer conflict situations (Shantz, 1987).

Hypothetical situations in which children are provided with strategies can provide a response close to (although not exactly) what the children would do in an actual situation. Having the children select a strategy and then asking the children to report why they would do what they would do allows the children to select their own goal categories instead of the examiner producing the goal categories. Conflict situations are also studied because different goals in this type of situation have observable outcomes.

The Relationship of Goals and Strategies in Social Interactions

A number of researchers have examined children's goals and the strategies that they use to achieve those goals. Rubin and Krasnor (1986) used the Social Problem

Solving Test (SPST) to evaluate children's goals in a conflict situation. This test consisted of five pictured scenarios depicting conflicts in object acquisition in which one child wants to play with a toy that another child has. The SPST was administered to preschoolers and kindergartners. Rubin and Krasnor hypothesized that the difference in solving a situation could be due to varying social goals. These researchers found that children who were withdrawn more often suggested strategies involving an adult's intervention (e.g., asking an adult to intervene to resolve a conflict) in a hypothetical conflict situation. Rejected kindergartners suggested more inappropriate or unique strategies in comparison to the average or popular children. Based on these findings, the authors suggested that rejected children have a different way of viewing how to solve social problems.

Rubin and Krasnor (1986) found that "the distribution of children's goals, the means by which they attempt to meet these goals, and the success rates of these means varied in accord with their sociability" (pp. 48-49). Children's sociability determined status. The children with lower social status used strategies to achieve their goals that require little of those with whom they interacted. Many of the children with lower social status fell into the "isolate" children category. Isolate children were defined by Rubin and Krasnor (1986) as those who "(a) may have less confidence in themselves ... and (b) who give in," (p. 49). Isolate children had 51% of their social goals categorized as attention seeking, which is nearly twice as much as observed in typical children. Attention seeking only requires that the playmate look up and acknowledge the other's comments. Thus, this is a relatively safe goal compared to, for example, requesting an object which requires the playmate to cease an activity and initiate a new one. Even in young children,

those who had higher social status had more demanding goals and consented less to those of lower social status (Rubin & Krasnor, 1986).

Chung and Asher (1996) provided children with hypothetical conflict situations and asked the children to select the options they would use. These authors found that the strategies children selected were strongly associated with the goals they claimed to have. Children with nonstandard goals often chose nonstandard strategies to achieve their goals. Children who endorsed goals related to good peer relationships selected prosocial or passive strategies in order to maintain relationships. The children whose goal orientation was more focused on control over their environment favored hostile or coercive strategies. Prosocial, passive, and adult-seeking strategies were preferred by children whose primary goal was to avoid trouble. These strategies were probably implemented in order to lessen the possible conflict. Prosocial and passive strategies were used by children whose goal was to protect or maintain the relationship. Examining the differences between boys and girls goals in peer conflict situations also provided a clear illustration that goals affect the strategies implemented. Because of differences in goals, boys and girls respond to conflict situations using different strategies. In general, a higher number of control goals were associated with boys than girls. In conflict situations boys selected more hostile or coercive strategies. In contrast, girls chose more avoidance goals and selected a greater number of passive or prosocial strategies (Chung & Asher, 1996).

Again using hypothetical scenarios, Erdley and Asher (1996) analyzed the differences among the goals, responses, and self-efficacy of children in an ambiguous provocation situation. They found that children who believe harm was intentional

produced more aggressive responses in comparison to the children who believed that the harm was done accidentally. Children who reported aggressive responses had more hostile goals than the children who were more withdrawn or problem-solvers.

Withdrawn children were differentiated from the problem-solving children because the withdrawn children attempted to avoid protagonists whereas the problem-solving children wanted to maintain the relationship. The latter group of children was more willing to work through a problem than just avoid the other person (Erdley & Asher, 1996).

There has not been much research concerning the social strategies or goals of children with LI. However, in 1995 Stevens and Bliss studied conflict resolution strategies of children with LI, comparing performance to children with typically developing language. Two methodologies were used: an open ended hypothetical problem-solving activity was followed by a forced choice condition. In responding to the hypothetical situation children with LI had fewer types of strategies and selected fewer prosocial strategies. Children with LI also selected fewer prosocial strategies in the forced choice condition (Stevens & Bliss, 1995).

Timler (2007) studied the difference between children with typically developing language and children with LI in answering open-ended questions about conflict resolution. She attempted to determine if differences were related to language difficulties or to social knowledge. Timler examined both open-ended questions and forced choice questions to see if the children with LI generated fewer prosocial strategies in open-ended questions than in a forced choice scenario. Another question addressed whether the

children with LI could predict the reactions of others to a strategy. These findings were compared to the performance of typical children.

Timler (2007) reported that the children with LI both generated and selected fewer prosocial strategies than their typical peers. This indicated that there were differences in social knowledge between children with LI and their typical peers. Children with LI generated more adult seeking strategies. The children with LI were as successful as their typical peers in identifying a positive outcome to prosocial strategies. However, in general, the children with LI predicted fewer positive outcomes. It is likely that children with LI had experienced fewer positive outcomes from past experiences with conflict situations than their peers, and so they expected less. Interestingly, both groups had self-interest goals in resolving the conflict scenarios (Timler, 2007).

Conclusion

Crick and Dodge (1994) defined goals by writing, “Goals are focused arousal states that function as orientations towards producing (or wanting to produce) particular outcomes” (p. 87). Social goals are important because they impact the social competence of children. It is thus important to understand the factors influencing goal implementation.

Social problem solving models have been developed to better understand how children interact with other children. Social goals have a place in each of these models. It is important to realize that several factors are involved in selecting a goal. Some examples are the age of the child, whether or not the child believes he or she will be successful, how the child perceives the situation, and the child’s emotional state.

Children can be separated into categories of social behavior depending on the goals they have and the strategies employed. The main categories are prosocial, withdrawn, and aggressive. Each group of children has a different view of how to solve social problems.

Evaluating the social goals of children is difficult. There are strategies, however, that can be used to obtain a reliable evaluation of social goals. One of the most frequently used is to present children with hypothetical scenarios and have them select a strategy to implement. After a child has selected a strategy, the child is asked for a rationale for the selection. This rationale is used to determine the goal behind the strategy.

The goal of this study was to determine how children with LI and their typically developing peers responded to hypothetical conflict situations. In previous work, children with LI have generated fewer prosocial strategies, more adult seeking strategies, and more self-interest goals (Timler, 2007). The goal of the current study was to extend this work by using more children who were sampled from a younger age range.

Method

This study was part of a larger project that examined the social and emotional competence of children with LI. Other aspects of the project examined the recognition of emotion conveyed by prosody, the recognition of emotion conveyed by facial expression, and knowledge of when emotion should be hidden (dissembled) for social purposes.

Participants

Forty six children provided answers for the social goals questionnaire: 23 with LI and 23 with typically developing language. The participants were selected from three school districts in Utah: Nebo, Alpine, and Jordan. The participants were sampled from regular classrooms. To estimate the socioeconomic status of participants, block group data was used from the US census bureau (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The mean percentage of participants whose families fell below poverty level was 3.58% ($SD = 3.45\%$). English was the primary language of the participants. The participants passed a pure-tone hearing screening administered by the school district audiologist or speech-language pathologist. Participants did not have a history of emotional or behavioral problems, cognitive deficits, or neurological problems requiring special services, as indicated by school records.

The Comprehensive Assessment of Spoken Language (CASL; Carrow-Woolfolk, 1999) and the Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test (UNIT; Bracken & McCallum, 2003) were administered to all participants to insure appropriate group assignment. These scores were also used as measures of language and IQ.

Participants with LI. There were 9 females and 14 males who were identified by speech language pathologists from the three local school districts. The age range for children with LI was 7:1 (year:month) to 11:0 ($M = 9:3$, $SD = 12$ months). The sample

consisted of 2 African Americans, 3 Hispanics, and 18 Caucasians. All of the participants with LI were receiving services for language difficulties at school. They scored at least one standard deviation below the mean (below 85) on the CASL. The participants also received a standard score of 70 or above for the overall IQ on the UNIT.

Participants with typically developing language skills. Participants with typically developing language were of the same gender and within eight months of age of their peers with LI. The typical group age range was 7:1 to 11:0 ($M = 9:4$, $SD = 14$ months). The participants consisted of two Hispanics and 21 Caucasians. None of these participants were receiving any type of special services from the school and each showed typical performance in language, behavior, and academics as indicated by the classroom teacher and school placement. These participants were selected from the same classroom as the children with LI. The CASL and UNIT were also administered to these participants to show proper placement and to provide constant measures of language and IQ across all the participants. These children were required to produce a score of 85 or above on both the CASL and the UNIT.

The participants were selected by first identifying all of the children who were appropriate gender and age matches for a child with LI. Permissions slips were sent home with all of these children. The child included in the study was then randomly selected from the returned permission slips.

Procedures

The project procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Parental and child consent was obtained before testing. The children were seen individually for two one-hour sessions. One session consisted of administration of the

CASL, UNIT and non-word repetition task. The other session included the emotion understanding and social goals tasks. The children were allowed to choose a prize at the end of the session for participating.

The social goals task was based on the work of Chung and Asher (1996). It consisted of two parts: determining the strategies that the children indicated they would implement and eliciting the verbalized goal that motivated those strategies. Chung and Asher presented children with various scenarios which had five possible responses, each leading to a type of strategy. The five strategies were *prosocial* (fulfilling the needs of both individuals involved), *passive* (giving up one's own interests), *hostile-coercive* (responding in an unfriendly manner), *assertive* (verbalizing what one wanted), and *adult-seeking* strategies (going to the teacher for help). Children were then asked about the likelihood of their using each of the strategies in response to the scenario. When the children responded affirmatively, the children were asked why they would employ the strategy.

The task utilized by Chung and Asher (1996) was modified to lessen the language demands on children with LI. Each child was presented with five hypothetical conflict situations after correctly responding to a training item. Instructions for the training were as follows:

Listen to this story. Pretend this story happens to you. I will ask you some questions about what you would do.

You are at school. You see some kids swinging.

I am going to read you some choices. Tell me if you probably would do that, if you might do that, or if you wouldn't do that. (The person points to cards in front of the child that correspond to the three choices.)

Okay, you are at school. You see some kids swinging. Would you

1. watch them swing.
2. swing with them.
3. ignore them because you don't like swings.

The examiner then read the first scenario to the child. With each scenario (except for the training which was simplified), there were options to respond with passive, assertive, hostile, prosocial or adult seeking strategies. After each option, the children responded with *yes* they would do it, *maybe* they would do it, or *no* they would not do it. The children indicated what they would do by pointing to a green card for *yes*, a yellow card for *maybe*, and a red card for *no*. On any response that the children indicated that they “would do it,” the follow-up question was asked, “Why would you do (say) that?” Both the girls and the boys were given the same scenarios but the gender was changed to match the gender of the child being tested. There were pictures corresponding to each scenario to aid the understanding of the scenarios. These pictures were gender neutral. The scenarios can be found in Appendix A.

After responding *yes* to a strategy, the children were asked why they would employ that strategy. This was done to probe the social goal that might motivate the strategy the child selected. The responses were categorized into six categories: *cooperation*, *response to bad behavior*, *back off*, *get what I want*, *higher authority*, and *other*. The categories were determined as follows in Table 1.

Table 1

Social Goal Categories and Their Qualifications

Category	Motivation	Example statements:
Cooperation	Mutual satisfaction	Then both of us can play together
	Being nice	Because it's nice to share
	Working things out	So we wouldn't get in a fight or anything
Response to bad behavior	Event or behavior justified response; without explanation	Because he took the crayon away from me
		Because she is being mean
		That's a fair idea
Back off	Withdraw from or avoid potential conflict	Cuz if I do something else like watch the other kids play Because it would be better, if you are bothering them, you should leave them alone I don't like basketball
Get what I want	Meet own needs, self interest	Cuz I need it
Higher Authority	Defer to higher authority, seek adult intervention	The teacher can always help work it out Because it's better to get an adult
Other	Change the scenario	Cuz I like having another blue crayon
	Off topic	I share with my sister a lot
	I don't know	I don't know

If for example, a child responded affirmatively in the first scenario to the strategy of asking a teacher, the child was asked why. If the child gave the response, “Cuz that would be mean to just take the crayon away,” this response would then be categorized as “response to bad behavior.” Or if the child responded with, “Cuz it would be a lot more nicer,” that response would fall in the category of “cooperation.” From the same scenario a “get what I want” response would be, “so he won’t take it away from me.” In that manner the verbalized responses (following the selection of the strategies) were categorized according to the goals they seemed to represent. Reliability for categorization of the verbalized goals was 90% agreement between two investigators, examining 18 subjects.

Results

Group differences in the use of the various types of strategies (e.g., adult-seeking, prosocial, passive, etc.) were examined using a chi-square analysis. Each strategy had three possible answers: the child would not do it, the child might do it, and the child would do it. Table 2 presents the percentages of *no*, *maybe*, and *yes* responses in each strategy category for children with LI and the typical children.

Children with LI differed significantly from children with typically developing language in selecting strategies at the .05 alpha level for the strategies of adult-seeking ($\chi^2 = 17.85, p = .0001$), passive ($\chi^2 = 9.46, p = .009$), and hostile-controlling strategies ($\chi^2 = 7.50, p = .024$). Significant differences were not observed regarding prosocial strategies ($\chi^2 = 1.65, p = .438$) or assertive strategies ($\chi^2 = 2.482, p = .289$).

There were significant differences between groups in the response to the option of asking the teacher. The difference was related to the large number of affirmative responses by the children with LI. These children responded that they would ask the teacher 70% of the time, compared to the 43% for typical children. With regard to passive strategies, the children with LI also had a higher percentage of affirmative responses (37% LI compared to 27% typical) and a lower percentage of *maybes* (11% LI versus 27% typical) leading to the significant difference between groups. For hostile-controlling strategies the difference in affirmative responses (10% LI compared to 2% typical) also influenced the significant group difference between children with LI and children with typically developing language.

Table 2

Percentages of No, Maybe, and Yes Responses in Each Strategy Category for Children with LI and Typical Children

	No		Maybe		Yes	
	LI	Typical	LI	Typical	LI	Typical
Adult-seeking	14%	32%	16%	25%	70%	43%
Passive	52%	46%	11%	27%	36%	27%
Hostile-controlling	86%	90%	4%	8%	10%	2%
Prosocial	4%	6%	4%	8%	91%	86%
Assertive	79%	78%	10%	15%	11%	7%

Note: The percentage is based on 115 trials given for each category

The affirmative responses from the strategy categories (e.g., adult-seeking, prosocial, passive, etc.) were then categorized into social goals. Each strategy category had a different number of affirmative responses. Children with LI had a total of 80 affirmative responses in the “adult-seeking” category, 42 passive, 11 hostile, 13 assertive, and 105 prosocial, while the children with typically developing language had a total of 49 affirmative responses for adult-seeking, 31 passive, 2 hostile, 8 assertive, and 99 prosocial. The number of responses in the goal categories (e.g., cooperative, back off, response to bad behavior, etc.) was then divided by the number of affirmative responses from each strategy category to calculate the percentages seen in Table 3. The table indicates the relationship between the types of strategies the children indicated they would implement and the verbalized goals they gave for choosing those strategies. In general the children with LI had a lower percentage of cooperation goals in comparison to children with typically developing language. The goals of children with LI were also more spread across the various goals than the goals of children with typically developing language.

Table 3

Goal Categories for Strategies of Children with LI and Children with typically developing language

	Ask		Passive		Controlling/Hostile		Prosocial		Assertive	
	LI	TY	LI	TY	LI	TY	LI	TY	LI	TY
Total yes responses	80	49	42	31	11	2	105	99	13	8
Cooperation	9%	12%	39%	68%	--	--	79%	80%	15%	--
Response to bad behavior	37%	35%	2%	--	54%	--	4%	9%	38%	50%
Back off	--	--	51%	29%	--	--	2%	5%	--	--
Get what I want	17%	14%	--	--	18%	50%	4%	3%	31%	50%
Higher Authority	19%	27%	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Other	17%	12%	7%	3%	27%	50%	11%	3%	15%	--

Note: The strategies are along the top in columns and the categorized goals are on the side. The percentages are calculated based on the total number of yes responses which is given at the top of the table.

Discussion

A person's interaction is motivated by social goals. This is particularly evident in situations where there are conflicts. The purpose of this study was to determine what strategies children with LI might employ in social conflicts and to probe the social goals that motivated those strategies.

In this study, each child was presented with descriptions of five hypothetical situations in which a peer initiates a potential conflict (e.g., a peer takes a crayon that the child needs). The participant was then presented with five possible strategies that could be used to deal with the conflict. The strategies included asking an adult for assistance (adult-seeking), finding a mutually agreeable solution (prosocial), retreating from the situation (passive), asserting one's rights (assertive), and reacting aggressively (hostile-controlling). After the child was presented with a strategy, the child was asked whether he or she would use that strategy. If a child indicated he or she would use that strategy, the examiner probed for the social goal that might underlie the child's choice of that strategy by asking why the child selected that strategy. The child's responses were then classified into six different categories targeting six different types of social goals: to cooperate, to satisfy one's own needs, to withdraw from conflict, to appeal to a higher authority (to seek help from someone like a teacher), or simply to respond to bad behavior. Responses were assigned to the "respond to bad behavior" category when a child seemed to think that the response was self-evident and did not provide justification or explanation. In these instances, children simply restated the peer's action (e.g., "because he just took a crayon away from me") or indicated that the behavior had been inappropriate (e.g., "because it's rude to cut in front of people").

Strategies Selected by Children with LI and Children with Typically Developing Language

Overall, children with LI indicated that they would use a greater variety of strategies in response to conflict situations than did children with typically developing language. Children with LI responded *yes* 251 times when asked if they would use specific strategies. In contrast, children with typically developing language indicated 189 times that they would use specific strategies. This was true across strategies as children with LI indicated they would use each of the 5 strategies more often than did children with typically developing language. This reflected the fact that children with LI more often indicated that they would use multiple strategies in response to a single scenario. It may have been the case that children with LI did not understand the task as well as the children with typically developing language and might have responded *yes* as a default. This seems unlikely, however, because most children provided reasonable answers when asked why they would use a strategy. It was the case, however, that there were three children with LI who produced 15 affirmative responses, more than any child with typical language. These children with LI may have been less focused or less sure of what types of strategies might be effective. The high degree of variability in strategies that children with LI said they would use is concerning in light of the work of Asher and Renshaw (1981). They concluded that in response to conflict, unpopular children are likely to use more varied strategies than are popular children.

Children with LI indicated they would use three strategies significantly more often than did children with typically developing language. Those strategies were adult-seeking, passive, and hostile-controlling.

The most dramatic difference between the two groups of children was in their choice to go to an adult as a strategy for dealing with conflict. Children with LI produced 80 affirmative responses, whereas children with typically developing language produced 49 affirmative responses. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that children with LI are more apt to go to an adult than are children with typically developing language (Rice et al., 1991). Again, this strategy can have a negative influence on peer acceptance for children with LI because peers often look down on adult-seeking strategies (Chung & Asher, 1996; Asher & Renshaw, 1981).

In addition to the dramatically higher rate at which children with LI indicated they would go to an adult in a conflict scenario, there was also a significant difference in their selection of both passive and hostile-controlling strategies. In general, children did not often select hostile-controlling strategies, but children with LI selected more of these strategies than did children with typically developing language. This finding is reminiscent of Brinton, Fujiki, and Robinson's (2005) observation that children with LI who are usually reserved may sometimes aggress in stressful situations.

Social Goals Motivating Specific Strategies

In addition to identifying the strategies children adopted to deal with conflicts, this study also probed the social goals that motivated those strategies. Whenever a child indicated he would use a strategy, he was asked to explain why. Of interest were the types of explanations children provided as well as the correspondence between the strategies children said they would use and the justifications they provided for using them. It was hypothesized that the reasons that children provided would reflect their

social goals. For organizational purposes, child goals are discussed below in relation to the types of strategies (e.g., prosocial, assertive, etc.) that motivated them.

Prosocial strategies. Both groups reported that they chose prosocial strategies because they wanted to cooperate and find mutual satisfaction the majority of the time. The children seemed to understand that the prosocial strategies would preserve relationships and used those strategies to do so. The majority of responses children with LI produced (other than the goal of cooperation) were categorized as “other,” and most of those were the response, “I don’t know.” Thus, a few children with LI indicated that they did not know why they selected a prosocial strategy.

Assertive strategies. Children in both groups very seldom reported that they would use assertive strategies (11 LI versus 8 typical). The children with typically developing language said they would use assertive strategies in order to get what they wanted or as a response to bad behavior. Children with LI provided similar explanations of why they chose assertive strategies. Two children with LI, however, indicated they would use an assertive strategy to be cooperative. This was a clear mismatch between goal and strategy. For example, in response to the puzzle scenario one child chose the strategy, “I need the puzzle piece, give it back,” because, the child said, “It would be helpful because you are asking politely.” Although he indicated cooperative intent, the assertive strategy did not seem to convey that intent. This mismatch could prove to be problematic as the action might be perceived as harsh when the child did not intend to be so.

Hostile-Controlling strategies. Children with LI more frequently selected hostile-controlling strategies (totaling 11 responses) compared to children with typically

developing language (totaling 2 responses). One of the two selections of hostile-controlling strategies by the children with typically developing language demonstrated that the child knew why he was using the strategy – to get what he wanted. One child with LI said he would use a hostile-controlling strategy in order to be cooperative. This seemed to be a clear mismatch between goal and strategy. Half of the responses of children with LI fell into the “response to bad behavior” category indicating that these children seemed to think that a hostile reaction required no explanation. Hostile controlling behavior has a high impact and does not have to be implemented often in order to make enemies, which could be problematic for children with LI and the increased number of selections. If the responses of the children with LI reflected their behavior in real interactions, their occasional use of hostile-controlling behavior could have a negative impact on their relationships with peers.

Adult-seeking strategies. Children with LI reported they would seek help from an adult more often than did children with typically developing language. In general, the strategy of adult-seeking was motivated by several goals for both groups. The children with typically developing language gave reasons which were most often categorized as higher authority or response to bad behavior, whereas children with LI gave fewer responses categorized as higher authority. When children with typically developing language chose to go to an adult, they more often indicated a cooperative goal (e.g., “then we could figure out the problem without any fight”). In contrast, children with LI produced more self-interest goals for going to an adult than did children with typically developing language, indicating that they would go to an adult in order to get what they wanted (e.g., “so I can get it back and play with it”). Children with LI reported fewer

relationship-oriented goals motivating their appeal to an adult for help. Again, if this finding reflects their behavior in real situations, it could potentially diminish their peer acceptance.

Passive strategies. Children with LI reported they would use passive strategies more often than did children with typically developing language. In this case, the strategies seemed to reflect the underlying goal. Children with LI indicated they would use a passive strategy to back off (avoid interaction) 51% of the time. Children with typically developing language reported they would use a passive strategy to back off less often (29%). Children with typically developing language more often reported they would use a passive strategy to cooperate. In other words, children with LI more often used passive strategies to avoid interaction while typical children used them to accommodate peers. The children with LI seemed to use passive strategies to accomplish a self interest/self protection goal, a goal that is inherently antisocial. The responses that the children with LI selected were consistent with other findings indicating that children with LI are reticent. In contrast, children with typically developing language exhibited more relationship-oriented goals; they seemed to resort to passive strategies in order to preserve relationships.

Conclusion

Overall, the responses of children with LI indicated that they would not only implement more strategies than would children with typical language abilities, but would also be more likely to ask an adult to resolve conflicts. This strategy does not lend itself well to positive peer acceptance as asking an adult is generally looked down upon by peers.

The other two strategies that children with LI chose more frequently (passive and hostile-controlling) also have negative consequences in peer interaction. Passive strategies distance a child from peers and promote isolation. In addition, it was concerning that the explanations offered by children with LI for passive strategies more often reflected underlying goals that were not prosocial. These observations supported earlier findings of reticence in this population. By the same token, hostile-controlling strategies are not prosocial. These strategies can damage relationships and do not have to be implemented often before children make enemies.

Peers can often perceive the social goals that motivate behavior (Rose & Asher, 2004). It follows that, prosocial strategies that are motivated by relationship-maintaining goals enhance peer acceptance (Chung & Asher, 1996). In contrast, strategies that stem from goals that are not prosocial may contribute to peer rejection. Even if anti-social strategies are motivated by prosocial goals, the negative strategies may draw negative attention from peers. Considered in this light, the performance of children with LI on the tasks employed in this study is concerning.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study elicited responses from children to hypothetical situations. It is not clear to what extent these responses reflected children's behavior in actual social conflicts. It may be easier to respond positively to a story scenario than it is to handle a real conflict with a peer. Further investigation should consider what strategies children with LI employ in more naturalistic contexts. In addition, further research might examine why children with LI differ from children with typically developing language in both the strategies they employ and the goals that motivate those strategies. For example, do children with LI

have less focus and direction in choosing strategies? Do they adopt fewer prosocial goals because they lack confidence or because they do not appreciate the effects of their actions on others? Finally, what are the clinical implications of such findings? How should conflict resolution strategies be addressed in intervention? It seems clear that social goals cannot be taught explicitly (see Asher reference for this), but what kinds of experiences might foster the adoption of positive social goals?

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Appendix

Social goals task.**Materials:**

Three cards to represent "probably do that," "might do that," and "wouldn't do that," with YES in green, MAYBE in yellow, and NO in red.

Pictures for each scenario (e.g., a swing, crayons, some DVDs, line of kids, basketball, puzzle)

Adjust the gender in the story to match the gender of the child.

Training:

Listen to this story. Pretend this story happens to you. I will ask you some questions about what you would do.

You are at school. You see some kids swinging.

I am going to read you some choices. Tell me if you probably would do that, if you might do that, or if you wouldn't do that. (point to cards in front of child)

Okay, you are at school. You see some kids swinging. Would you

1. watch them swing

2. swing with them

3. ignore them because you don't like swings

(after each choice say "ok").

If the child performs the task correctly say, "ok, now I'm going to read you some more stories."

If the story is not performed correctly, repeat.

Scenario 1:

Listen to this story. Pretend this story happens to you. I will ask you some questions about what you would do.

Tell me if you would do that (point), if you might do that (point), or if you would not do that (point).

You are finishing your art project. You need to color a picture of a park. Another girl/boy in your class is working on her/his picture. You need the green crayon. The boy/girl needs the green crayon too. You pick up the green crayon. The boy/girl takes it away from you.

Would you

go find the teacher, ask the teacher for help, (ADSK)

say, "We can take turns using the green crayon," (PROS)

say, "I need the green crayon. Give it to me,"(ASSERT)

stop working on the art project, (PASS)

grab the crayon back. (H/C)

For each goal that the child indicates that they would do, the examiner asks, "Why would you do (say) that?"

Scenario 2

Tell me if you would do that (point), if you might do that (point), or if you would not do that (point).

You finish all your work. You have some free time. The teacher says you can watch a movie. You pick out a movie to watch. Another boy/girl wants to watch a different movie. You say, "I want to watch my movie." The boy/girl says no.

Would you

take his movie out. Put my movie in the machine, (H/C)

go find my teacher, ask her to help, (ADSK)

let him watch his movie. (PASS)

say, "Let's watch your movie, then we will watch mine after," (PROS)

say, "I need to watch my movie." (ASSERT)

For each goal that the child indicates that they would do, the examiner asks, "Why would you do (say) that?"

Scenario 3

Tell me if you would do that (point), if you might do that (point), or if you would not do that (point). (This instruction can be dropped if it is clear that the child understands the task.)

You are standing in line for lunch. You are first in line. A classmate is at the back of the line. He comes up to the front of the line. He cuts in front of you. He doesn't go back to his place in line. He is in front of you now.

Would you

let him/her go first, (PASS)

say, "I was here first, give me my spot back," (ASSERT)

shove him back to his spot. (H/C)

go find the teacher, ask the teacher for help, (ADSK)

say, "you can stand right beside me, we can both be first." (PROS)

For each goal that the child indicates that they would do, the examiner asks, "Why would you do (say) that?"

Scenario 4

Tell me if you would do that (point), if you might do that (point), or if you would not do that (point). (This instruction can be dropped if it is clear that the child understands the task.)

It's recess. You really love to play basketball. You get the last basketball. A classmate comes up and steals the basketball from you.

You would

go find the teacher, ask the teacher for help, (ADSK)

say, "I need the ball back, give it to me," (ASSERT)

grab the ball back. (H/C)

say, "you want to play with me? We can play basketball together," (PROS)

do something else (PASS).

For each goal that the child indicates that they would do, the examiner asks, "Why would you do (say) that?"

Scenario 5

Tell me if you would do that (point), if you might do that (point), or if you would not do that (point). (This instruction can be dropped if it is clear that the child understands the task.)

You are at school. You are putting a puzzle together. You are almost finished. A classmate comes over and grabs a piece of your puzzle. You ask him to give it back so you can finish the puzzle. He says "no."

You would

say, "I want to play with you, let's do the puzzle together," (PROS)

grab the puzzle piece back, (H/C)

say, "I need the puzzle piece back, give it to me," (ASSERT)

quit working on the puzzle, (PASS)

go find the teacher, ask the teacher for help. (ADSK)

For each goal that the child indicates that they would do, the examiner asks, "Why would you do (say) that?"