Summary of Results

Regression analyses were used to determine if executive functions as measured by the BRIEF, or language competence as measured by the CELF-4, were better predictors of social problems and behavior problems as measured by the SSRS.

A regression analysis using CELF-4 and BRIEF scores as independent (predictor) variables showed that only executive function scores (specifically the Behavior Regulation Index of the BRIEF) predicted social skills ($R^2 = .62, F (1, 20) = 38.1, p < .0005$).

Language was not a predictor of social skills ($p > .05$).

Conclusions and Implications

- Our results indicate that executive skills, not language skills, may mediate social skills and behavioral regulation in this population.

- Riggs et al. (2006) found that executive functions can influence social skills development through three main areas: moderating social skills development; as mediating (or influencing) the development; and through executive skills as being the outcome of intervention.

- In a longitudinal study (Hawkins et al., 2005) on the mediating effects of teaching executive function skills during elementary school, the impact on children's social, emotional and mental health, including crime and substance use at age 21 years of age was dramatized (p.25).

- Results of three early, long-term, curriculum-wide interventions were that it “put children on a more positive developmental trajectory that is maintained into early adulthood” (Hawkins, 2005, p.30).

Intervention Ideas based on Research

- Though language was not a good predictor of social difficulties, it can be used to directly teach executive function skills necessary for good social behaviors. According to McIsaac et al. (2009, Commentary CD) “Language is an effective cognitive tool that can be co-opted for use in teaching deficient executive function processes.” An example is through the use of “self talk.”

- Indirectly teach self-regulation through non-contingent reinforcement (Gilmore, 2007). Through the use of times during social activity, children can learn to check-off specific behaviors that occur. Once identified at achievement, the process is followed by “contingent reinforcement for increase in positive behaviors and a decrease in negative behaviors” (p. 31).

- Provide a “surrogate narrative” (Cox, 2007, p. 224). This is a narrative you model for self-regulation skills. Additional suggestions are to provide a “roadmap” for problem solving (p. 237).

- Use group role play, then reinforce skill production. Ignore disinterested reactions, fade cueing and reinforcement over time (Dawson & Guare, 2004).

- Use reflective journals and cognitive problem solving to teach executive function skills (Gaffney, 2005).

- Employ school-wide curricula like “I Can Problem Solve” (Shure, 2016) or “Tools of the Mind” (Barnett et al., 2008). These are curricula for teaching prosocial skills via problem solving activities or emphasis on self regulation.