Summary

Social skills play an important role in child development and are usually learned spontaneously in the home and at school. Some children, however, have difficulty learning social skills. This can be caused by factors within or outside of the child. One aspect of social skills development is found in learning to cope with situations with a social limit in it. These are situations one has to cope with every day in dealing with other people. In these situations behaviour is regulated by implicit or explicit rules, norms and values. Overstepping these rules (social limits) has been often associated with the emergence of problem behaviour. Understanding how youngsters cope with social limits is one of the aims of Reaction Pattern Research (RPR). The present research project is part of this line of investigation.

This thesis consists of two parts: the first part describes an exploratory analysis of the target group (youngsters in cluster 4 schools), the second part describes the evaluation of a training program called: Coping with social limits. The aim of the first analysis section is to extensively describe the research group. Data on the pupils of the Th. Hart de Ruyterschool were used in the analysis. This is a secondary school for special education, attended by pupils with severe behaviour problems and/or psychiatric disorders. Diverse descriptive data were collected from various informants.

Analysis of the pupils’ school records shows that there are far more boys than girls attending the Th. Hart de Ruyterschool. Over half (60%) of the pupils has been diagnosed with a psychiatric diagnosis, 40% of the pupils were not diagnosed, or had an unknown diagnosis. ADHD and autistic spectrum disorders are the prevalent psychiatric diagnoses. A majority of the pupils (86%) receive or have received mental health assistance from an institution other than school, most of them through the Dutch agency for Mental Health (GGZ). Half of the pupils live in an unbroken home with two biological parents, the other half has broken families or foster families. From the demographics one can see that the school’s target group, namely youngsters with severe behaviour problems and/or psychiatric disorders, presently attends the Th. Hart de Ruyterschool.
Pupils’ behaviour problems were measured using the CBCL and the TRF. Analysis of both questionnaires shows the average Th. Hart de Ruyterschool pupil to score in the clinical range on the two broadband syndromes and on the total problems score. Furthermore, the average pupil scored in the borderline-clinical range on three out of eight syndrome scales of the CBCL and four out of eight syndrome scales of the TRF. Teachers at the referring school reported more problem behaviour than did parents at a statistically significant level. Pupils without a diagnosis generally show more evident behaviour problems as measured with the CBCL and the TRF.

The time spent by parents on performing rearing tasks is measured by the Questionnaire Rearing tasks for Parents (QTP). Analysis shows that parents of the Th. Hart de Ruyterschool pupils scored a higher average on the QTP than parents in the reference group, they spent more time on rearing tasks. When sex-differences are examined, mothers score higher on rearing tasks than fathers.

Youngsters’ attitude towards social limits was measured using the ASL. The Th. Hart de Ruyterschool pupils differed with the reference group in that they choose to overstep social limits more often and negotiate less on social limits. Furthermore, their knowledge of what to do in a situation involving a social limit was, on the average, less than the knowledge of the reference group. The average pupil did not differ from the reference group with respect to motivations.

Inability to generate a sufficient amount of behaviour alternatives, could explain problem behaviour (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Slot and Spanjaard (2000) agree with this when they describe problem behaviour as a consequence of lacking social skills. This lack of social skills makes it impossible to develop a full range of behaviour alternatives in social situations. In general, children who are lacking in social skills are given a social skills training to expand their repertory of behaviour alternatives and become more socially competent. The Th. Hart de Ruyterschool pupils’ lack of knowledge on coping with social limits can be viewed as a gap in their ability to generate sufficient behaviour alternatives. A social skills training aimed towards filling this gap, may help remove this deficit and aid the pupils in producing socially acceptable behaviour.

The second aim of this research is to evaluate whether pupils’ knowledge on coping with situations with a social boundary can be expanded by training them to deal with social limits. With this aim in mind the program Coping with social limits was developed. The training program was based on a meta-analysis of the
literature on conditions that possibly influence the effectiveness of social skills training. Several conditions were deduced based on the literature search. First, training must be intensive and take place during a longer period of time before one can realize generalisation. During the same time period it is necessary to practice in daily life situations in order to come to a full generalisation. Second, the young person should be treated in conjunction with his social network. Parents should receive training and the training at school should take place within the classroom. Third, social skills training should take place within heterogenous groups. This way, youngsters are able to profit from the training in a group condition and learn from each other as well. Last, the meta-analyses showed the only effective programs are (cognitive) behavioural programs. These programs teach both social cognitive and problem solving skills.

In order to evaluate the training *Coping with social limits* and to be able to draw internally valid conclusions, a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest follow up control group design was set up. Two mentor groups of the Th. Hart de Ruyterschool were asked to participate in the training. They made up the experimental group. Subsequently, two comparable groups were asked to participate as the control group.

During the school year 2003-2004 data were collected from the experimental and control group on their development of knowledge on coping with social limits. The experimental group received the training *Coping with social limits* once a week during a seven week period. Then the mentors of the experimental group conducted 5-minute interviews about situations with a social boundary over a period of four weeks. The ASL was administered in both the experimental and the control group before and directly after the training. Six months later the ASL was once more administered during the follow-up measurement.

The ASL data collected during these three measurement points were analysed to answer three sub questions of the research project. First, the differences in averages of both groups on the four known reactions over time were calculated. In order to do so, a (2 groups x 3 time) MANOVA was carried out for the known reactions. The MANOVA indicated no statistical significant effect between groups (experimental- or control-group). There did appear to be a statistical significant interaction-effect of group over time, indicating the experimental group learned more known reactions over time than the control group. Univariate tests showed only the Known reaction Overstepping contributed towards this interaction-effect.
Independent sample t-tests were carried out in order to analyse the difference in both groups of total known reactions on each of the three measurements. No differences in experimental- and control-group were found at the pre- and post-test measurement points. However, a statistically significant difference between both groups was shown at follow-up. The experimental group showed a higher average in total known reactions than the control group.

To explore individual progress of each student, the Reliable Change Index (RCI) was calculated. In the experimental group six students made progress, ten students showed no change, and one student recognized fewer total known reactions as time passed. In the control group the RCI showed progression in one student, 15 students showed no change, and one student recognized less total known reactions. This indicates a greater rate of progress in individual pupils from the experimental group than in those from the control group.

Second the differences in average of both groups on the four preferred reactions over time were calculated. This was performed with a (2 groups x 3 time) MANOVA for the preferred reactions. No statistically significant effect between groups (experimental- or control-group) was found. Also no statistically significant interaction-effect was found. This indicated that the training had no effect on the preferred reactions. The experimental- and control-group showed no statistically significant differences over time.

Third the differences in average of both groups on the two motivational aspects over time were calculated. The conditions for a MANOVA were not met, therefore only differences of both groups in total motivation over time were analysed. Independent sample t-tests on each of the three measurements were performed. Experimental- and control-group showed no statistically significant differences in known motivations on the three measurements.

This research project has shown that knowledge of the Th. Hart de Ruyterschool pupils about coping with situations in which social limits are involved is less adequate than the knowledge of students in regular education. In addition, Th. Hart de Ruyterschool pupils were shown to more often overstep social limits and to negotiate less than pupils in the referencegroup. The social skills training *Coping with social limits* did reach the goal of expanding the students’ knowledge on coping with social limits. However, this knowledge did not result in a change in preferred reactions or motivations. To make the training more effective it is
advisable to expand the training to the entire school and to emphasize the 5-minute interviews.
Grensverleggend