



Prevention and Intervention Programs Promoting Positive Peer Relations in Early Childhood

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Topic

Peer relations

Introduction

Under optimal conditions, children learn core social-emotional skills during the preschool years that enable them to establish and maintain their first friendships and get along well as members of their peer communities. Children who are delayed in their acquisition of these social-emotional competencies are at heightened risk for significant peer problems and behavioural difficulties when they enter grade school,¹ which can escalate to more serious emotional difficulties and antisocial behaviours in adolescence.² Hence, promoting social-emotional development during the preschool years is a priority.

Subject

Empirical evidence provides support for the positive impact of two kinds of programs designed to promote the social-emotional competencies of preschool children. *Universal* programs are teacher-taught and directed toward the entire classroom to promote social-emotional learning and positive peer relations. *Indicated* programs focus on remediating skill deficits and reducing the existing problems of children with social-emotional delays or behavioural disturbances.³ Prevention research suggests that the coordinated nesting of universal and indicated preventive interventions may provide an optimal “continuum” of services, making appropriate levels of support available to children and families who vary in their level of need.⁴

Problems

To be effective in promoting positive peer relations, preschool programs need to promote the social-emotional skills that are “competence correlates” – skills that are associated with peer acceptance and protect against peer rejection.⁵ During the preschool years, these skills include: 1) *cooperative play skills* (taking turns, sharing toys, collaborating in pretend play and responding positively to peers);^{6,7} 2) *language and communication skills* (conversing with peers, suggesting and elaborating joint play themes, asking questions and responding to requests for clarification, inviting others to play);^{8,9} 3) *emotional understanding and regulation* (identifying the feelings of self and other, regulating affect when excited or upset, inhibiting emotional outbursts and coping with everyday

frustrations),^{6,7} and 4) *aggression control and social problem-solving skills* (inhibiting reactive aggression, managing conflicts verbally, generating alternative solutions to social problems and negotiating with peers).^{10,11}

Research Context

Developmental research suggests that social-emotional competencies can be taught via the systematic use of: 1) instructions, models and rationales to illustrate skill concepts; 2) multiple opportunities to practice skills with guidance and support; 3) performance feedback, including specific praise and redirection to enhance self-monitoring and social awareness; and 4) support for the generalized use of skills in peer settings.¹² Randomized trials suggest these techniques can promote social-emotional competencies and positive peer relations when used as part of universal classroom programs taught by teachers, and/or indicated programs designed for children with existing peer problems.

Key Research Questions

In general, more randomized, controlled trials are needed to identify model programs to support the positive peer relations of preschool children. In addition, a number of research questions remain regarding the optimal design and focus of interventions to promote social competence for preschool children. What are the relative benefits of universal and indicated early intervention strategies? How might indicated programs be nested within universal programs? What intervention strategies optimize engagement and learning? What environmental arrangements promote generalization of skills to the naturalistic peer context? What is the value of linking social competence promotion programs at school with parent-focused early intervention programs?

Recent Research Results

Randomized trials reveal positive effects for preschool curricula that use skill presentation lessons (with modelling stories, puppets and pictures) and guided practice activities (role plays and games) to teach social-emotional skills in the classroom. For example, in a randomized trial, the “*I Can Problem Solve*” Program (ICPS)¹³ led to sustained improvements in the social problem-solving skills of preschool and kindergarten children, especially the ability to think about multiple alternative solutions to social problems, and improvements in teacher-rated levels of impulsivity, coping skills and withdrawal.^{14,15} A preschool version of the *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)* program, a comprehensive social-emotional learning program, produced improvements on standardized assessments of emotion, understanding and teacher and parent ratings of social competence in the context of a randomized trial.¹⁶

Indicated social competence coaching programs have also proven effective for preschool children with low levels of peer acceptance and social-behavioural problems¹⁷ and developmental disabilities.¹⁸ These programs suggest that coaching young children in cooperative play and communication skills (e.g. initiating play, asking questions, supporting peers) may have positive effects on their social behaviour, and further suggest that generalization activities in the classroom context (selective reinforcement and environmental engineering of opportunities for peer play) play an important role in promoting improvements in peer acceptance. In addition, the *Incredible Years Dinosaur*

Social Skills and Problem Solving Curriculum has been developed specifically for preschool and early elementary children with aggressive-disruptive conduct problems and associated peer problems.¹⁹ A randomized trial of the program revealed positive effects on externalizing behaviour problems and social problem-solving skills.¹⁹

Conclusions

The preschool years represent an ideal time for preventive and educational interventions designed to promote social-emotional development and peer interaction competencies. Preschool children are motivated to establish their first friendships and to explore the cooperative and shared fantasy play offered by peers.^{20,21} In turn, positive peer interactions provide a source of entertainment and companionship, support the development of social skills and interpersonal understanding, and foster feelings of social self-competence.²²

Universal and indicated programs have proven effective in promoting the social-emotional competencies of preschool children, contributing to their peer acceptance and school readiness. Effective programs target social-emotional skill domains linked empirically with peer acceptance during the preschool years, with instructions and modelling to illustrate skill concepts, opportunities for skill practice, supportive performance feedback and strategic classroom arrangements to support the generalization and maintenance of skills in naturalistic peer contexts. Additional research is needed to refine programs, but existing evidence strongly supports policies that encourage the systematic promotion of social-emotional competencies in preschool programs.

Implications

Model programs provide evidence that systematic instruction and support can enhance social-emotional development and positive peer relations among preschool children. Social competence coaching programs with empirical evidence of effectiveness provide a basis for improving current standards of practice and a foundation for future research and refinement. Additional research is needed, specifically to evaluate the impact of nesting universal and indicated interventions, to identify strategies for skill instruction and practice that optimize engagement and learning, and to identify strategies that enhance the generalization and maintenance of child skill use across contexts and over time. Given that teachers are important sources of socialization and support for preschool children, best practices for teacher training and mentoring need to be developed so that teachers may effectively implement social competence training programs. Additional research is also needed to identify the role of parent training in social-competence promotion programs for preschool children.

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