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Early Peer Relations and their Impact on Children's Development

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Introduction

Students of child development have always drawn attention to the importance of peers, especially in adolescence, when peers may facilitate each other's antisocial behaviour. It has often been assumed that peers are less important in early childhood, when relationships with family members are more influential. However, recent research shows clearly that even infants spend time with peers, and that some three- and four-year-olds are already having trouble being accepted by their peers. Early problems with peers have negative consequences for the child's later social and emotional development. To understand why some children find it hard to relate to peers, it is important to study the early development of peer relations.

Subject

The topic of early peer relations is relevant to policy-makers and service-providers in the educational, social-service and mental-health sectors. In Western society, virtually all children are educated in the company of their peers; in some countries, such as the U.K., statutory

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education begins as early as four years of age. Problematic peer relations may have adverse effects on the transition to school, with subsequent consequences for academic success. Furthermore, even younger infants and toddlers often spend time with peers through informal arrangements between parents or formal child-care provision. There is considerable interest in the impact of early child care on development, but relatively few studies that actually investigate the quality of peer relations in the child- care context. It is especially important to study peer relations for children with special educational needs. The principle of “mainstreaming” children with special needs is based on the assumption that it is beneficial for such children to spend their days with typically developing peers; however, if those experiences are highly negative, experience with peers may interfere with educational goals.

Problems

There are several important problems to address, which may be framed in terms of the following research questions:

- 1. When do children first develop the ability to relate to other children their own age?
- 2. What skills promote early peer relations?
- 3. Why are some young children less likely to be accepted by their peers?
- 4. Do early peer relations have a long-term impact on the child’s development?

Research Context

The information comes from a diverse group of studies. These include experimental and observational studies of infants’ and toddlers’ interaction with their peers; longitudinal studies of children’s social development; educational and psychological studies of children’s adjustment to child care and nursery school classrooms; social, psychological, sociometric and ethological studies of young children’s social networks and dominance relationships.

Recent Findings Addressing the Key Research Questions

1. *When do children develop the ability to relate to their peers?* Most infants and toddlers meet peers on a regular basis, and some experience long-lasting relationships with particular peers that start at birth.[1] By six months of age, infants can communicate with other infants by smiling, touching and babbling. In the second year of life, they show both

prosocial and aggressive behaviour with peers, with some toddlers clearly being more aggressive than others.[1-4]

2. *What skills promote early peer relations?* Although many investigators have described early peer relations, relatively little attention has been paid to the emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills that underlie the ability to interact harmoniously with peers. I have proposed that early peer relations depend on the following skills that develop during the first two years of life: (a) managing joint attention;(b) regulating emotions; (c) inhibiting impulses; (d) imitating another's actions;(e) understanding cause-and-effect relationships; and (f) linguistic competence.[5] Deficits in these skills may be compensated for when children interact with competent adults, such as their parents or teachers, or with tolerant older siblings; however, peers who are also only gradually developing these skills may be less forgiving, and so the peer environment may be especially challenging. Children with developmental disorders who are impaired in joint attention skills[6] and imitation[7] and children with limited vocabularies[2] may be at special risk, which may account for some of the problematic peer relations in mainstreamed preschool classrooms.[8]
3. *Why do young children accept some peers and reject others?* A great deal of research on peer relations in early childhood has used *sociometric* methods, in which children name those peers they like and (sometimes) dislike. These methods show that some children are accepted by their peers, whereas others are either actively rejected or ignored. Peer acceptance is affected by many factors in a child's life, such as their relationships at home with parents and siblings, the parents' own relationship and the family's levels of social support.[5] However, peer acceptance is most directly affected by children's own behaviour. Studies show that highly aggressive children are not accepted by their peers[9] but this may depend on gender.[10] Furthermore, it may actually be the absence of prosocial behaviour, not the presence of aggression, that promotes peer rejection.[11,12] Under some circumstances, aggressive behaviour is positively associated with social competence.[13] Shy children also experience problems in gaining acceptance in their peer groups. Shyness in the early childhood years has been linked to the child's temperament and earlier emotional reactions to novel situations and to attachment relationships; shy preschoolers are more likely than other children to have mothers who experience social phobias.[14-16]
4. *Do early peer relations have a long-term impact on children's development?* There are clear links between very early peer relations and those that occur later in childhood. For example, toddlers who were able to engage in complex play with peers were more

competent in dealing with other children in the preschool years and in middle childhood.[17] Peer acceptance in early childhood is a predictor of later peer relations. Children who were without friends in kindergarten were still having difficulties dealing with peers at the age of 10.[18] It is not clear, however, whether early problems with peers actually cause the later problems, or whether both are caused by other risk factors at home and school and the behavioural tendencies and skill deficits that make it hard to gain acceptance by one's peers. However, the roots of peer rejection lie in the earliest years of childhood, and peer rejection is associated with educational underachievement, even when many other causal influences are taken into account.[19] Put another way, having friends in early childhood appears to protect children against the development of psychological problems later in childhood.[19]

Conclusions

Peers play important roles in children's lives at much earlier points in development than we might have thought. Experiences in the first two or three years of life have implications for children's acceptance by their classmates in nursery school and the later school years. Children who are competent with peers at an early age, and those who show prosocial behaviour, are particularly likely to be accepted by their peers. Aggressive children are often rejected by their peers, although aggression does not always preclude peer acceptance. It is clear that peer relations pose special challenges to children with disorders and others who lack the emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills that underlie harmonious interaction. The risk for children with early behavioural and emotional problems is exacerbated by the peer rejection they experience. Conversely, early friendships and positive relations with peer groups appear to protect children against later psychological problems.

Implications for Policy-Makers and Service-Providers

The evidence just reviewed challenges long-held beliefs about the importance of peers in early development. Whereas once we may have thought that peers began to have an influence on children during the primary school years and adolescence, it now seems possible that very early interactions with peers at home and in child-care settings could set the stage for later problems. At the same time, these findings suggest that it is possible to act early to prevent later problems. Because peer acceptance is associated with better psychological adjustment and educational achievement, programs that support early competence with peers will have implications for

educational and mental-health policy. The findings also raise challenging questions about "mainstreaming" policies for children with special educational needs. Problems that have been noted in mainstreamed preschool classrooms may derive from underlying deficits that could be addressed directly. It is therefore important for policy-makers and service-providers to consider ways to facilitate young children's positive relations with their peers.

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