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The Origin of Peer Relationship Difficulties in Early Childhood and their role in Children's Psychosocial Adjustment and Development

Michel Boivin, PhD, Canada Chair on Children's Social Development & Lysandre Provost, PhD student

GRIP, École de psychologie & Université Laval, Canada

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Introduction

Peer relationships are thought to play an important role in children's development.[1–3] They offer unique opportunities for getting acquainted with the social norms and processes involved in interpersonal relationships, and for learning new social skills. They also provide contexts in which capacities for self-control may be tested and refined. Childhood peer relations are also multifaceted: children experience peer interactions through their participation in group activities, as well as through their dyadic (i.e., one-on-one) associations with friends.[2] These different facets of peer experiences provide age-related developmental opportunities for the construction of the self, with peer group experiences progressively gaining in importance and

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culminating in middle childhood, before giving way to friendships as the most central feature in late childhood and adolescence.[3,4]

Problems

Unfortunately, peer relationships are not always beneficial to the child: between 10% and 15% of children experience chronic peer relationship difficulties, such as peer rejection[5], as well as peer harassment and victimization.[6] In the last 40 years, there has been substantial research aimed at understanding the nature, meaning and impact of peer relation problems.[2] Most of this research effort has been centered on school-age children. Yet a growing number of children are exposed to peers early in their life through daycare.[7] Early peer relations are thus highly relevant to social policy issues and should be an object of persistent attention.

Key Research Questions

There are at least four basic questions of relevance to the study of early peer relations:

1. What are the developmental landmarks of early peer interactions and peer relationships?
2. At what age do children start experiencing peer relationship difficulties?
3. What social behaviours are responsible for early peer relationship difficulties?
4. What are the consequences of early peer relationship difficulties?

Research Results

The developmental landmarks of early peer interactions and relationships: by the end of their first year of life, most infants will share activities with peers, mainly around objects. By the end of the second year of life, with improved locomotion and the onset of language, toddlers have the ability to coordinate behaviour in games with play partners; they can imitate each other and start to alternate roles in play.[8,9] Between the ages of three and five, there is a systematic increase in prosocial behaviours and in pretend play, as well as a decrease in aggressive behaviours, reflecting the child’s improved capacity to adopt the perspective of the play partner.[9,10] These emerging social interactive skills are the foundation of early peer relationships, which are first shown in the behavioural preference for specific peers.[9,11] These early preferences will gradually lead to preschool friendships that are mainly based on concrete exchanges and mutual play activities. In daycare settings, these friendships progressively become sex-segregated and

embedded in affiliative networks.[1,12,13] Informal and mixed-aged play groups are also formed in the neighborhood.[2,14]

At what age do children start experiencing peer relationship difficulties? Preschoolers gradually form their perceptions about their friends and peers. At least by age four, they will reliably identify best friends, peers they like and peers they dislike. The aggregation of these perceptions reveals a coherent and consistent peer status structure within the larger group, with specific children being disliked and negatively perceived by the peer group.[5,15,16] This form of peer rejection may lead to various forms of negative behaviours toward the child, such as controlling and dominating a child, excessive teasing and general peer harassment and victimization.[17,18] Peer harassment and victimization refers to a child being exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative treatment by one or more children, typically within a context of imbalance of power.[19] It has mostly been documented in middle childhood, but there is evidence that these difficulties exist in the preschool years.[20–23]

What factors are responsible for early peer relationship difficulties? Deviant physical attributes, such as speech problems, physical clumsiness or disability, may lead to peer relation difficulties. However, children's behaviour attributes have been more systematically identified as the main sources of these difficulties. Children who experience peer relationship difficulties tend to be more aggressive, hyperactive and oppositional, but also more socially withdrawn and less sociable.[1,24–26] These behaviours could be the proximal determinants, as well as the consequences, of their relationship difficulties in early childhood.[27] Aggressive behaviours, especially reactive aggressive behaviours, are the most commonly cited behavioural correlates and proximal determinants of peer rejection in school settings.[1,28,29] There is also substantial evidence that child genetic vulnerabilities partly account for this predictive association[30–34], which means that some children carry some biological risk for peer difficulties long before they encounter peers. However, this risk is not destiny, but rather point to the need for early intervention aimed at these vulnerabilities. Furthermore, some aggressive children may actually enjoy a fairly high social status,[35] especially if the group norms are supportive or neutral with regard to aggressive behaviours.[36] This is more likely the case among preschool children because instrumental and proactive forms of aggressive behaviours may be positively related to popularity.[37] Indeed, children of that age, especially boys,[38] often use aggressive means to reach high status in the social structure. A related phenomenon is that aggressive preschoolers also tend to proactively associate with or befriend each other,[29,39] a tendency that could reinforce aggressive behaviours

as a means of reaching social goals[40,41] Finally, shy and withdrawn children are also likely to experience peer relation difficulties.[42] However, in this latter case, the relational problems are more likely to occur at a later age because these forms of social reticence are less salient and obvious to preschoolers.[24,43]

What are the consequences of early peer relationship difficulties? There is a consensus in the field of childhood peer relations that children experiencing peer relationship difficulties are at risk for a variety of future adjustment problems, including dropping out of school, delinquency and emotional problems.[29,44] However, the developmental processes leading to these later problems are still open to question: are early peer relation difficulties really causing these adjustment problems or are these problems resulting from enduring child characteristics?[1,45] Enduring peer relationship difficulties in childhood have been found to predict internalized problems such as loneliness, depression and anxiety, as well as physical health and school problems.[44–46] The evidence with preschool children is more limited, but points in the same direction.[39,47,48] However, it is not clear whether these early peer relationship problems are causing long-term consequences. Peer rejection in kindergarten may also strengthen reactive aggressive behaviours among children initially disposed toward aggression, possibly because the experience of peer rejection induces and promotes hostile attributions and expectations about social situations.[49] As stated earlier, mutual affiliation among aggressive children may also reinforce their aggressive behaviours during early childhood. Indeed, peer interactions among aggressive children during preschool years are sometimes occasions for coercive interchanges, which may, under some conditions (e.g., child's submissiveness, adult and peer tolerance of aggression), serve as learning opportunities and provide training grounds for aggressive behaviors.[50,51] This process, labelled "deviancy training," has received substantial empirical support.[52,53] Preliminary evidence seems to indicate that time spent in daycare is associated with higher rates of aggression,[54,55] and deviancy training processes might partly be responsible for this.[50,56] Finally, it should also be noted that friendship relations (e.g., affiliation with aggressive children;[57] having a protective friend[58]) may also play an important protective role with respect to negative peer experiences and the impact of these negative experiences. These processes may also operate in preschool.

Conclusions

The social lives of preschoolers are quite elaborate and refined as they face a variety of positive and negative peer experiences throughout their early years. Individual differences in peer

adjustment may be noticed as soon as peer groups are formed. At least by age four, a significant proportion of preschoolers will experience peer relationship difficulties such as peer rejection and peer harassment, and these negative experiences could have an impact on their social-emotional adjustment and development. The developmental dynamics of these difficulties are multifaceted and involve genetic vulnerabilities that are expressed early in development, as well as bi-directional and differentiated associations with preschoolers' behaviour tendencies. Among these, inappropriate social behaviours, such as aggressive behaviours are clearly involved, but in complex ways. Not only are they significant genetically influenced proximal determinants of peer relationship difficulties, but they are also embedded in an emergent social matrix that could maintain and promote aggressive tendencies. Starting in kindergarten, hostile aggressive behaviours appear associated with, and perhaps augmented by, peer rejection. However, most aggressive toddlers are not marginalized, but rather tend to associate with each other in the preschool years. This could lead to some forms of deviancy training.

Implications for Policy and Services Perspectives

It is not clear whether early positive and negative early peer relationships are causing long-term benefits or liabilities. However, given the evidence reviewed herein, it is obvious that this question should be of concern to policy-makers and service-providers. Undoubtedly, many adjustment problems can be traced back to early peer relationship problems. The challenge of the research community is to more clearly understand the origin, development and causal impact of healthy and problematic peer relationships in early childhood. Early developmental and genetically-informed prospective studies are crucial to this endeavour. These fundamental questions are all the more important because a growing number of children experience peer relations early through a variety of public and private daycare arrangements. These services also intervene earlier than ever in the lives of children. It will be important to evaluate how various daycare arrangements may or may not promote healthy peer relationships. These research efforts should also help in the design and evaluation of appropriate and efficient prevention programs. For instance, it is now clear that we should not group toddlers displaying aggressive behaviours for the purpose of treatment.

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