ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Prevention and Intervention Programs Promoting Positive Peer Relations in Early Childhood

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Introduction

Under optimal conditions, children learn core social-emotional skills during the preschool years that enable them to establish and maintain their first friendships, get along well as members of their peer communities, and participate effectively in school. 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 indicates that several intervention approaches effectively promote social-emotional development and enhance positive peer relations in the preschool years.[1,3] Universal

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(or tier 1) interventions are implemented by preschool teachers and are designed to benefit all children in a classroom. Selective/indicated (or tier 2/3) interventions are implemented by teachers or specialists and focus on remediating skill deficits and reducing the existing problems of children with social-emotional delays or behavioural disturbances. 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] A rapidly growing research base has identified multiple universal social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that effectively boost the social-emotional and self-regulation competencies of preschool children, fostering positive peer relations in early childhood classrooms.[5] The research base validating the effectiveness of early childhood selective and indicated interventions is less well-developed and an area in need of future study.[6]

Problems

To effectively promote positive peer relations, preschool programs need to target the social-emotional skills that are “competence correlates” – skills that are associated with peer acceptance and protect against peer rejection.[1,7] During the preschool years, these skills include: 1) cooperative play skills (taking turns, sharing toys, collaborating in pretend play and responding positively to peers); 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); 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); 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).[8,9] A particular goal at this age is to strengthen the self-regulation skills that can help children adapt effectively to the behavioural and social demands of the school setting.[10]

Research Context

Developmental research suggests that social-emotional competencies can be taught using explicit coaching strategies that include skill explanations, demonstrations, and practice activities.[11] Evidence-based preschool social-emotional learning (SEL) programs provide teachers with lessons, stories, puppets, and activities that introduce social-emotional skills. In addition,

positive behavioural management strategies (e.g., the systematic use of instructions, contingent reinforcement, redirection, and limit-setting) have been used effectively to reduce social behaviour problems and foster positive peer interactions. Child social-emotional development and peer relations are heavily influenced by the interpersonal dynamics of the classroom, making it important to promote a positive climate characterized by warm and responsive student-teacher and peer interactions as well as supporting skill-building opportunities in the classroom.[1,12] Randomized trials provide evidence of effectiveness for multiple preschool SEL and positive behavioural management programs;[3,13,14,15] a few examples are illustrated below.

Key Research Questions

Meta-analyses of well-controlled studies consistently conclude that preschool SEL programming has benefits, but there is considerable variability among programs in terms of the intervention approach taken, and degree and type of ouctomes.[3,14] Research is needed to better understand the short- and long-term impact of different intervention approaches and components. Universal classroom programs focus on boosting the SEL of all children, selective and indicated programs more often focus on managing behaviour problems.[16] Questions remain regarding the optimal design and focus of interventions to promote social competence for preschool children: what works best for which students under what conditions? What are the relative benefits of universal and selective/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

Several universal-level SEL curricula have proven effective in randomized trials, demonstrating that the use of explicit coaching strategies at the classroom level can promote preschool social-emotional skill development.[1,3] Intervention approaches appear strongest when teachers follow a curriculum to teach and support SEL systematically over the course of a year.[17] An example is the Preschool PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) program which provides 33 weekly lessons on friendship skills, emotional understanding, self-control, and social problem-solving skills.[18] Teachers present skills using stories, puppets, and role-plays and then support skill development throughout the day by using proactive classroom management strategies,

emotion coaching, and problem-solving dialogue. In several randomized trials, Preschool PATHS has increased child emotion knowledge and problem-solving skills and improved their social competence.[18,19,20] In another trial, Preschool PATHS was combined with additional intervention components targeting language and literacy skills (Head Start REDI) and produced sustained benefits for preschool children that included improved learning engagement and social competence with benefits still evident in adolescence.[21]

Programs that focus on structuring the preschool environment with positive behavioural management strategies also show great promise. A good example is the Incredible Years Teacher Training Program (IY) which focuses on increasing teacher use of proactive guidance and specific, contingent attention and praise to support positive behaviours; applying non-punitive consequences to decrease inappropriate behaviours; and building positive student-teacher relationships. Several randomize trials validate the efficacy of this program to reduce levels of aggressive and disruptive behaviours in preschool classrooms.[20,22,23]

The research base supporting social competence coaching programs at the selective/indicated level is weaker and an area in need of more research,[6] although several intervention approaches appear promising. Programs that coach young children in cooperative play and communication skills (e.g. initiating play, asking questions, supporting peers) may improve the social inclusion of children who are socially withdrawn or have developmental disabilities, especially when combined with classroom supports (selective reinforcement and environmental engineering of opportunities for peer play).[24] One example is the Resilient Peer Treatment program for socially withdrawn, maltreated preschool children, which trains adult coaches to scaffold guided play sessions including target children and prosocial peer partners. The coach scaffolds and reinforces positive social behaviour, thereby increasing collaborative and interactive play.[25]
 Social-emotional skill training may also help preschool and early elementary children who display aggressive-disruptive conduct problems and experience associated peer problems. For example, the small group program, Incredible Years Dinosaur Social Skills and Problem-Solving Curriculum has reduced problem behaviours and promoted social problem-solving skills in a randomized trial.[26] Individualized behavioural management programs may be particularly beneficial for preschool children with elevated aggressive and disruptive behaviours. For example, the BEST in CLASS intervention combines a classroom-level focus on positive behavioural management with individualized management for at-risk students, demonstrating positive preliminary effects on children’s social behaviour and social skills.[16]

Conclusions

The preschool years represent an ideal time for preventive and educational interventions designed to promote social-emotional development and peer interaction competencies. A number of universal and selective/indicated programs have proven effective in promoting the social-emotional competencies of preschool children, contributing to their peer acceptance and school readiness. These model programs provide evidence that systematic instruction and positive behavioural management can enhance social-emotional development and promote positive peer relations among preschool children.

Implications

Evidence-based approaches to promoting social-emotional competencies and positive peer relations need to be diffused widely into preschools and child-care centres. Additional research is needed to expand and refine available evidence-based programs, as well as to identify optimal supports for high-fidelity implementation, sustained use, and work-force professional development support. Recent research suggests added benefits when preschools develop partnerships with families to support child social-emotional development.[27] Additional research is needed to identify the optimal approaches to partnering with parents in preschool-based efforts to promote SEL and positive peer relations.

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