

PEER RELATIONS

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 school¹ 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

(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.^{4,5}

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.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 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);⁷ 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);^{8,9} 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).^{4,6} 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. Randomized trials provide evidence of effectiveness for a handful of model preschool SEL and positive behavioural management programs, described below.

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 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} Examples include the “I Can Problem Solve” Program (ICPS)¹² and Al’s Pals.¹³ The most well-studied is the Preschool PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) program. In a first randomized trial, Preschool PATHS increased child emotion skills and promoted teacher and parent ratings of social competence.¹⁴ In a second, independent trial, Preschool PATHS was combined with on-line professional development supports, and improved child social competencies (frustration tolerance, assertiveness skills, task orientation, social skills) as rated by teachers.¹⁵ In a third trial, when Preschool PATHS was combined with additional intervention components targeting language and literacy skills in the Head Start REDI project, sustained benefits for preschool children included improved learning engagement and social competence after the transition into kindergarten.¹⁶

Programs that focus on structuring the preschool environment with positive behavioural management strategies also show great promise. For example, in an initial randomized trial, the Incredible Years Teacher Training Program (IY) led to reduced levels of aggressive and disruptive behaviours in preschools serving low-income children.¹⁷ In a subsequent study (the Chicago School Readiness Project), IY was supplemented with teacher mental health consultation, and reduced classroom levels of aggressive-disruptive behaviour as well as enhancing learning.¹⁸ A recent large-scale U.S. national trial contrasted the effectiveness of Incredible Years and Preschool PATHS in preschools serving low-income children and found that, relative to usual

practice, both programs promoted improved social problem-solving skills and social behaviour.¹⁹

At the selective/indicated level, social competence coaching programs have also proven effective for preschool children with low levels of peer acceptance and social-behavioural problems²⁰ and developmental disabilities.²¹ For example, in the Resilient Peer Treatment program for socially withdrawn, maltreated preschool children, target children and prosocial peer partners have play sessions guided by an adult coach who scaffolds and reinforces positive social behaviour, thereby increasing collaborative and interactive play.²² 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, reducing problem behaviours and promoting social problem-solving skills in a randomized trial.²³ 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.²⁴

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. Additional research is also needed to identify the role of parent training in social-competence promotion programs for preschool children.

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