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PEER RELATIONS

Promoting Young Children's Peer Relations: Comments on Odom, Manz and McWayne, and Bierman and Erath

Michael J. Guralnick, PhD

University of Washington, USA

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Introduction

Establishing relationships with peers constitutes one of the most important and challenging developmental tasks of early childhood. These relationships not only make an important contribution to current and future interpersonal well-being, but also promote various other aspects of development.[1] Children must draw upon all of their developmental resources to establish the social-information and emotion-regulation processes that enable them to function in a socially competent manner with peers.[2] Yet this developmental task is highly vulnerable to disruption. Disruptions in any developmental domain (e.g., cognitive, affective) or difficult family circumstances (e.g., poverty, maternal depression) are likely to affect relevant processes and interfere with the proper development of peer-related social competence and, in turn, adversely affect the quality of relationships with peers.[3] In contrast to parents and other supportive adults, the fact that a child's peers will readily detect peer competence difficulties in others and respond

accordingly (through rejection, ignoring or avoidance) potentially creates a cycle of difficult relationships for vulnerable children. The challenge for our field is to understand the diverse and complex forces influencing children's peer-related social competence and to utilize this knowledge to develop appropriate prevention and intervention programs.

Each of the authors of the papers addressing peer relations has provided important perspectives on this issue. Manz and McWayne focus on the special problems facing low-income children; Bierman and Erath inform us about a range of program models to promote children's socio-emotional development; and Odom considers the special problems of young children with disabilities. Taken together, these articles provide a thoughtful summary of the state-of-the-art of young children's peer relationships and encourage the field to address this complex problem.

Research and Conclusions

In their paper on interventions to improve the peer relationships of low-income children, Manz and McWayne present a compelling argument for giving high priority to this area of development. They also correctly point out the failures of many intervention efforts, whether didactic or more cognitive in orientation, to produce desired effects. The failure to achieve generalization of skills to different and more natural settings is highlighted.

For many low-income preschool children, Manz and McWayne suggest that this situation can be improved by creating interventions more sensitive to the cultural backgrounds and goals of children. This is an important point, rarely considered by the field. They also suggest that a combination of partnerships with key individuals (e.g. parents) formed to create culturally meaningful intervention approaches and thoughtfully utilizing the abilities of other more skilled children can be of value. Their suggestion to involve families is critical, especially given increasing knowledge of family-peer linkages.[4] Early results support their position. Yet when interventions involving more socially skilful peers are carried out in natural contexts, care must be taken not to create an irregular relationship between children: one that is not compatible with the egalitarian nature of peer relationships.[5,6] Moreover, to complement this approach, it is important to consider the needs of these young low-income children in an even broader developmental and ecological context. Clusters of family characteristics can increase the risk of poor peer relationships by creating stressors that are non-optimal for development in this area.[3] Sensitive assessments can identify these stressors and lead to the development of comprehensive family/community and child interventions.

The article by Bierman and Erath asks the field to think broadly about programs to promote the socio-emotional development of preschool-age children. They make the important distinction between universal programs designed to promote socio-emotional competencies intended for all children, and programs designed for children at risk or those already exhibiting problems in this area of development. Both universal programs and those targeted to children at risk for socio-emotional problems are preventive in nature, whereas those programs focusing on children already exhibiting peer relationship problems are best conceptualized in the context of early intervention. Clearly, this important organizational suggestion presents a major challenge to our educational and related service systems. The costs and benefits for implementing universal programs must be analyzed, and risk factors must be carefully identified in a developmentally and culturally appropriate manner.[7] As these authors point out, numerous research questions remain unanswered that can inform educational and clinical practice. Important intervention research on aggression and peer rejection has been carried out,[8] but additional randomized clinical trials are desperately needed, especially for preventive interventions involving young children.[9] This is equally true for children whose peer competence problems are less apparent, such as socially withdrawn preschoolers. Once again, key issues focus on the generalization of outcomes and the importance of comprehensive programs, including those involving parents.

Odom's article thoughtfully orients us to the numerous problems children with disabilities experience in developing appropriate social skills and competencies as well as establishing friendships. An important point that Odom makes is that it is essential for our field to recognize the enormous diversity of this group of children with identified disabilities. To better understand this variability requires attention to programs focusing on carefully identified subgroups of children. Yet the absence of randomized clinical trials for most subgroups of children with disabilities and the inherent limitations of single-subject research designs in this area make firm conclusions regarding effectiveness difficult to draw at this time. Nevertheless, as Odom points out, there are many encouraging findings. Odom also suggests that interventions to promote competence with peers and to support friendships are best carried out in the context of inclusive programs. This makes good sense from a philosophical perspective, as well as reflecting the fact that typically developing children are able to stimulate a higher level of social interaction on the part of children with disabilities.[10] At the same time, however, improving the peer-related social competence of young children with disabilities (as opposed to increasing their levels of social interaction) has been more elusive. A broader developmental-ecological orientation may well be needed for the substantial number of children with disabilities experiencing peer competence

problems. A knowledge base drawn from the developmental science of normative development and the developmental science of risk and disability now exists to permit meaningful randomized clinical trials for subgroups of children with disabilities. Preliminary evidence suggests the value and feasibility of such an approach.[11]

Implications for Development and Services

These three articles on children's peer relations have done a masterful job in highlighting the importance of this domain of development in children's lives, the many problems encountered by young children in developing competencies that allow them to establish meaningful relationships with their peers, and the prospects for designing and implementing effective prevention and intervention programs. This awareness makes it abundantly clear that our field must devote far more of its intellectual and material resources to this domain of development. Substantive systems issues must be addressed to design community-based service programs that are valued from a prevention perspective, as well as more intensive programs for those exhibiting peer interaction difficulties. Measurement, identification of at-risk children, program design and implementation issues are considerable, as are the many practical and resource problems that exist in terms of embedding these programs in the early childhood system. An awareness of the critical role of families presents an additional challenge, as comprehensiveness is a critical element for success. Accordingly, systems of services may well benefit from the establishment of a general developmental framework that is applicable to children with and without disabilities; one that fully recognizes the broad ecological influences on children's peer relations and the social-information and emotion regulation processes that are relevant. Within this framework, critical research questions can be addressed utilizing an array of methodologies that will ultimately bring about both feasible and effective prevention and intervention programs to promote children's peer relations.

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