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Social Skills Intervention and Peer Relationship Difficulties in Early Childhood: Comments on Bierman and Erath, Manz and McWayne, and Odom

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Introduction

Watching any group of preschool children, it is obvious to the observer that most reap great joy from playing with their peers.[1] For a few children, though, peer relationships are already challenging and not much fun because they are withdrawn from or rejected by their age mates. Having nobody to play with makes children miserable, but having peer relationship problems is significant for another reason. Children who do not form positive peer relationships are more likely to have problematic relationships later on.[2,3] The predictive power of early peer relationships seems to derive, at least in part, from a transactional social system[4] in which early difficulties become exacerbated and early competencies become strengthened. Early in the year, preschoolers who play cooperatively with peers become better liked over time,[5] whereas

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preschoolers who engage in aversive behaviour with peers subsequently become rejected and victimized.[4,6] Children tend to affiliate with peers with whom they share interests and behavioural characteristics, and peers then reinforce these patterns of behaviour.[7] Thus, it makes sense to offer programs to enhance children's peer relationships and social skills during the preschool years.

There are a number of additional reasons to initiate interventions to improve children's social skills during the preschool years. Many models of development suggest that early intervention, compared to intervention at older ages, holds special promise because developmental trajectories are most malleable early in life.[8] This malleability exists both within the child and within the child's relationships. Entry to formal schooling after preschool may act as a switch point, a time of reorganization with opportunities to renegotiate trajectories.[9,10] Children who have not developed social skills during preschool may become further marginalized in kindergarten and associate with other marginalized peers, so that deviant patterns are strengthened and the risks of developing more serious problems in later childhood and adolescence increase. Although problems in adolescence may seem far removed from the preschool playground, follow-up of early intervention programs indicates that they can have long-term positive effects that may not be clear until children reach adolescence.[11] Finally, promoting social competence is a prime mission of early childhood education.[12] This mission is endorsed by kindergarten teachers, who more often identify social competencies, rather than academic skills, as central to school readiness.[13] Thus, social skills intervention is consistent with the culture and goals of early childhood education settings.[12]

Research and Conclusions

Bierman and Erath, Manz and McWayne, and Odom describe three empirically validated approaches to social skills enhancement that can be integrated into preschool classrooms. The approach described by Bierman and Erath is grounded in assumptions that children with poor peer relationships lack one or more "competence correlates," social-cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills necessary for successful social interaction, and that these skills can be taught through direct instruction and practice. The competence correlates (or, in evaluation research terminology, intermediate objectives[14]) are crucial in planning social skill curricula. These authors also outline critical instructional components of interventions, including repeated practice of new skills and explicit support to generalize the new skills to the peer context. Preschool children do not spontaneously transfer even simple skills learned in one context to another nearly identical context;[15] most young children need explicit instruction to try new social

skills in a different context (e.g. the classroom). This may require an adult coach or a socially competent peer partner who stays near the child in the classroom and prompts skill use.[16] It may also require the cooperation of classroom peers who agree to accept the target child's early play bids.

Bierman and Erath suggest that programs for children who are already exhibiting delays or problems in peer relationships (i.e. indicated programs), be nested within programs aimed at all children (i.e. universal programs). The advantage to a nested approach is not only, as Bierman and Erath suggest, that it would provide all children and families with services commensurate with their needs, but also that implementing a universal program could change the culture of the classroom, making all children more receptive to and supportive of nascent social skills and friendship bids from targets of the indicated program.

Manz and McWayne also stress the importance of the play context and play skills, but highlight challenges to making the targeted social skills culturally relevant in programs serving low-income or ethnic-minority families. The Play Buddy approach (also referred to as Resilient Peer Treatment or RPT) has been used with socially withdrawn, maltreated preschoolers.[17,18] Socially competent preschoolers are taught to initiate play with the withdrawn targets of the intervention; adult volunteers prompt the child, acting as coach when needed. Community notions of socially competent behaviour would naturally be incorporated in such embedded interventions. Moreover, learning skills in the classroom obviates the need for explicit encouragement to generalize new behaviour to a different setting. Fantuzzo and colleagues[17,18] report increases in observed peer interactive play and decreases in solitary play for treatment children in a randomized control trial, with improvements maintained at a two-month follow-up. There is a wide variation in the sorts of skill or behavioural deficits preschoolers with peer relationship problems experience, and it isn't clear which groups would benefit from a peer partner approach. Some preschoolers with significant social-cognitive, emotional or behavioural deficits may need direct instruction and practice, in combination with peer partner play.

Odom argues that children with special needs usually require help and support to develop social skills for peer interaction. Children with disabilities are often segregated from typically developing peers by placement in special classrooms, through peer rejection, or both. Both types of segregation deprive disabled children of opportunities to learn interaction skills and peer group norms — learning that is essential for peer acceptance. Interventions for children with disabilities are more powerful, according to Odom, when they take place in groups of typically developing peers. In a childhood culture in which any difference is grounds for teasing and exclusion, children with disabilities can face brutal treatment even if they have age-appropriate

social skills. Thus, it would make sense, in addition to offering social skills intervention to children who need it, to also engineer changes in the classroom and school culture that would make hurtful acts less acceptable and acts of kindness more valued. Such an approach has been used in the PeaceBuilders universal violence prevention program[19] and the "You Can't Say You Can't Play" curriculum, a classroom-focused intervention designed to reduce peer exclusion in kindergarten.[20]

The research reviewed in these three papers provides a good overview of the rationale for and approaches to enhancing the social skills of preschool children. A number of significant questions were not addressed in these papers, however; many of these don't yet have clear answers but deserve the attention of researchers. Among the most important, both theoretically and practically, is what changes when, as a result of social skills intervention, children develop better peer relationships. Bierman and Erath, in their list of competence correlates, offer a set of likely candidates that can serve as both a guide for program development and a map for assessing intermediate objectives. By documenting changes in behavioural, emotional and cognitive processes that occur during intervention and are correlated with improvements in peer relationships, more effective and efficient interventions can be developed. In an assessment of the effects of a social skills intervention for preschoolers, Mize and Ladd found that treatment-group children showed increases in knowledge of appropriate social strategies after training, and that improvements in social knowledge were correlated with increases in social skill use in classroom interactions with peers.[16] These data suggest that social strategy instruction in this intervention was effective and responsible, at least in part, for positive behaviour change. Research that documents the mechanisms of change during interventions will allow program developers to focus on the most critical components for future work.

Implications for Services

Most preschool teachers feel ill-prepared to handle the challenging behaviour of many young children.[21] For teachers, administrators and others who provide direct services to young children, the most critical and unanswered questions are practical: How is a social skills intervention carried out, and who will do it? Manz and McWayne offer one set of answers for these questions in their description of the Play-Buddy intervention: socially competent peers and family volunteers work with target children in an area of the regular classroom. However, other models of social skills intervention require more materials, planning and special training. Fortunately, there are now social skills programs developed or adapted for preschoolers, programs that are

grounded in empirical research, have demonstrated efficacy, and are available commercially[22,23,24] or described in accessible publications.[25,26] These programs capitalize on the fact that young children respond to active learning experiences, using play, video, puppets and role play to engage children.

Unfortunately, even with the availability of commercial products, there are obstacles to providing social skills programs to the large numbers of preschool-aged children who may benefit. In both the United States and Canada, preschool education consists of a fragmented patchwork of programs with no national regulatory agency, organizational framework or support system.[27] Most preschool programs are under-funded and staffed by teachers who are poorly trained and poorly paid.[27,28] This situation can be contrasted with that in public schools. Public schools are linked through state or provisional government organizations so that information, curricula and policies can be quickly disseminated to programs serving large proportions of children in a given area. Reaching large numbers of preschool care-providers with information and training about young children's social competence would be difficult, yet it should be a priority. The importance of training is illustrated by findings from Greenberg and colleagues showing that positive changes in children's behaviour as a result of implementing the PATHS social skills intervention were correlated in the .3 to .4 range with ratings of the quality with which teachers implemented the curriculum.[29] Thus, an important challenge for policy-makers is how to disseminate information, training and social skills curricula in the vast, loosely connected patchwork of programs serving preschool-aged children.

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