ED 265 936   PS 015 586

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TITLE   Children's Peer Relationships.
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SPONS AGENCY   Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED),
                Washington, DC.
PUB DATE   86
CONTRACT   400-83-0021
NOTE   3p.
PUB TYPE   Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis
                Products (071) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Childhood Needs; *Children; *Friendship;
                *Interpersonal Relationship; Intervention; *Peer
                Relationship
IDENTIFIERS   ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT
        Children ought to have satisfying friendships because
they otherwise may miss out on opportunities to learn important
social skills, develop little faith in their abilities to achieve
interpersonal goals, suffer painful feelings of isolation, and become
vulnerable to influence by delinquent peers. Factors contributing to
children's peer relationship problems include unacceptable social
behavior, "differentness" from other children, family problems, and a
reputation as a social outcast. Children with relationship problems
can be helped through social skills training, interventions focused
on related problems, provision of nonthreatening social experiences,
and cooperative classroom projects. Adults are urged to give children
evident opportunities to share peer-related concerns, show respect
for children's unique social needs, and create social options for
children without creating pressures. (RH)

ERIC Digest

Children's Peer Relationships

Christine B. Burton

Children's friendships have inevitable ups and downs. Yet the feelings of satisfaction and security that most children derive from interacting with peers outweigh periodic problems. For a number of children, however, peer relations are persistently problematic. Some children are actively rejected by peers. Others are simply ignored, or neglected. It even appears that some popular children have many friends but nevertheless feel alone and unhappy. This Digest examines factors that contribute to children's peer relationship problems and describes ways to help children overcome these problems.

Why Are Peer Relationships Important?

Children who are unable to form close or satisfying relationships with peers should be of concern to parents and teachers alike. For one thing, these children miss out on opportunities to learn social skills that will be important throughout their lives. Especially critical are the skills needed to initiate and maintain social relationships and to resolve social conflicts, including communication, compromise, and tact (Asher, Renshaw, and Hymel 1982). Children who lack ongoing peer involvements also may miss opportunities to build a sense of social self-confidence.

These children may develop little faith in their own abilities to achieve interpersonal goals and, thus, are discouraged by the normal ups and downs of social interaction. Implications for the children's future social and professional adjustment are obvious.

Finally, children without satisfying friendships may suffer from painful feelings of isolation (Asher, Hymel, and Renshaw 1984). School may be an unpleasant place for such children. They may ultimately become truant or drop out altogether (Kupersmidt 1983). Or, in their search for a sense of group belonging, the children may become vulnerable to the influence of delinquent or drug-abusing peers (Isaacs 1985).

What Factors Contribute to Peer Relationship Problems?

As adults become aware of children with significant peer relationship problems, their concern should focus on why such problems are occurring. Fortunately, recent research has expanded insight into the following factors that contribute to children's peer relationship problems.

Social behavior. Some children behave in an aggressive or disruptive manner and, hence, are rejected by peers. Other children withdraw from peer interactions and, in this way, limit their ability to gain acceptance and friendship (Coie and Kupersmidt 1983; Dodge 1983). Each type of ineffective social behavioral pattern can stem from different root causes. One possible cause is a lack of knowledge about effective interaction strategies. Another potential cause relates to the children's emotional states. Children who are anxious or fearful about peer relations are unlikely to behave in an effective manner. Academic problems also can contribute to ineffective social behavior. Children who cannot engage themselves with classroom work assignments often disrupt and irritate their peers (Burton in press).

Differentness. Similarity fosters social acceptance. Conversely, children tend to encounter social rejection when they are perceived to be dissimilar from their peers. This may occur when children are of a different ethnic group or sex, are physically unattractive or handicapped, or are newcomers to their classrooms (Asher and others 1982).

Family problems. Family problems can have damaging effects on children's peer relations. For example, children of divorcing parents may act out feelings of anger at school, eliciting rejection from peers in the process. Children with family problems, such as parental alcoholism, may feel reluctant to bring friends home, avoiding close friendships as a result.

Reputation. Even if children overcome the circumstances that originally led them to experience peer problems, a reputation as a social outcast is extremely difficult to change.

How Can Children Overcome Peer Relationship Problems?

Children require help from adults if they are to overcome serious peer relationship problems. The most successful helping strategies are matched to the specific needs of the children involved.

Social skills training. Children whose behavior leads to social rejection often need to learn new interpersonal skills. In such cases, specific instruction on ways to make peer interactions mutually satisfying and productive can be effective in improving the children's peer relations (Asher and others 1982).

Intervention for related problems. When peer problems co-occur with serious academic problems, children may need intensive academic intervention if they are to become accepted members of their classroom groups (Coie and Krehbiel 1984). Similarly, children should be given school support for dealing with family problems, when possible, to minimize potential adverse effects on the children's peer relations.

Nonthreatening social experiences. Large groups can be threatening to children who lack self-confidence. Shy children may therefore benefit from opportunities to interact with peers in small groups. Parents can encourage shy children to invite classmates over one at a time for special activities. Or shy children can be encouraged to develop outside interests, like music or art, that will provide a natural basis for interacting with other children. Both of these approaches can boost shy children's self-confidence and may help them start friendships in the process

Cooperative classroom projects Cooperative group projects can foster peer acceptance of children who are trying to improve their social reputations, including children who are seen as different by their classmates. Under this scheme, teachers assign interesting tasks to small work groups. The group members must work cooperatively to achieve the tasks. In so doing, they must interact with peers they would typically avoid and often discover new bases for liking them (Bierman and Furman 1984 Isaacs 1985)

General Guidelines for Adults

Beyond intervention for specific peer problems, there are several general strategies that may help all children maintain a healthy outlook on their own social lives (Burton in press).

● Give children explicit opportunities to share any peer-related concerns they might have. Show respect for children's unique social needs. Some children may be contented with few friends. Some popular children may have such high expectations that they never feel socially successful.

● Create social options for children without creating pressures. Take care not to communicate the expectation that children should be liked by "all of the people all of the time."

Conclusion

In sum, the message regarding children's peer relationships is a clear one. Peer relationships are important contributors to the quality of both children's current lives and their future development. Children who have difficulty in relating to peers can be helped. Such intervention is most effective when it is tailored to fit the specific nature of the children's peer problems.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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