



Perceptions of self, significant others, and teacher–child relationships in indiscriminately friendly children



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 May 2014

Accepted 3 July 2014

Available online

Keywords:

Indiscriminate friendliness

Child perceptions

Perceptions of self

Reliability trust

Teacher–child relationship perceptions

ABSTRACT

Objective: Despite increasing research on indiscriminate friendliness in children, almost no research exists on social-cognitive deficits that are supposed to underlie indiscriminately friendly behavior. In this study, we compared indiscriminately friendly children with controls regarding their perceptions of self, reliability trust in significant others, and perceptions of the teacher–child relationship.

Method: Children's perceptions were compared in two samples: a sample of 33 likely cases for disinhibited reactive attachment disorder (RAD) from special education for children with emotional and behavioral disorders (75.76% boys, $M_{age} = 8.52$, 96.9% Caucasian, 33.3% and 45.5% of their mothers completed primary or secondary education, respectively) was matched on sex, age, and socio-economic status with a sample of 33 controls from general education. Children participated individually in several interviews assessing global and social self-concept, reliability trust in significant others, teacher–child relationship perceptions, and vocabulary. Parents and teachers completed a screening questionnaire for RAD and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

Results: Likely disinhibited RAD-cases showed more indiscriminate friendliness and more problem behavior in general according to their parents and teachers than controls. Furthermore, likely RAD-cases reported a more positive global self-concept, more reliability trust in significant others, and more dependency in the teacher–child relationship than controls.

Conclusions: The results are in line with clinical observations of indiscriminately friendly children and findings in clinical samples of maltreated or attachment disrupted children but contrast hypotheses from developmental attachment research. Further research is needed to explain the more positive perceptions of indiscriminately friendly children.

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1. Introduction

Although research on indiscriminate friendliness has been expanding for more than a decade now (cf. Chisholm, 1998; Kocovska et al., 2012), the research body on the social-cognitive correlates of indiscriminately friendly child behavior is still

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small. Because of their presumed history of extremely insufficient care (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and following attachment theory (Bowlby, 1977; Thompson, 2008), it may be assumed that indiscriminately friendly children have built distorted internal working models of self and others that negatively influence their further behavioral and relational development. Moreover, social-cognitive deficits (e.g., deficits in reading and responding to social cues) have been proposed as an important contributor to the persistence of indiscriminately friendly behaviors (Smyke et al., 2012). However, research on the view of the self and the social world among indiscriminately friendly children is almost completely lacking up to now. The availability of a screening instrument for indiscriminate friendliness (Relationship Problems Questionnaire, see Section 2.2.1) has facilitated the investigation of its social-cognitive correlates. In the current study, children scoring above the cut-off for this screening instrument (i.e., likely disinhibited RAD-cases)¹ were compared with children scoring below this cut-off regarding their perceptions of self (i.e., global and social self-concept) and their trust in the reliability of significant others.

In addition to perceptions of significant others in general, the current study focused specifically on children's perception of the teacher–child relationship. This choice was guided by the following arguments. First, teachers may be considered as ad hoc attachment figures for children (Verschuere & Koomen, 2012; Zajac & Kobak, 2006) and the quality of the teacher–child relationship is assumed to be shaped by children's experiences in their primary attachment relationships (Buyse, Verschuere, & Doumen, 2011). As indiscriminate friendliness is supposed to result from situations with limited opportunities to form stable or selective attachments (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), indiscriminately friendly children are expected to be at risk for developing teacher–child relationship problems. Second, if children at risk for relationship problems do manage to build a high-quality relationship with their teacher, this appears to buffer negative effects on their development (Buyse et al., 2011; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In other words, the relationship with the teacher appears to function as an important developmental context for children with attachment problems (Verschuere & Koomen, 2012; Zajac & Kobak, 2006). Insight into the way indiscriminately friendly children perceive the teacher–child relationship may provide tools for teachers to better understand relational problems and to improve their relationship. In turn, improvement of the relationship may positively affect the children's development. Thus, the focus on child perceptions of relationships with teachers in this study may have both theoretical and practical implications.

1.1. Indiscriminate friendliness

Indiscriminate friendliness is the core symptom of the disinhibited type of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) in the DSM-IV that has been renamed as Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013). In contrast to children with the inhibited type that exhibit a lack of social approach, children with the disinhibited type are oversociable and overly familiar, also in their interactions with unfamiliar persons (Zeanah & Gleason, 2010). Previous studies have confirmed the validity of both types, specifically in children younger than 6 years (Zeanah & Gleason, 2010). Though less research exists in school-aged children, some studies have demonstrated that both types of behaviors are reliably identifiable in children older than 6 years as well (Minnis et al., 2007, 2009; Vervoort, de Schipper, Bosmans, & Verschuere, 2013).

The DSM-IV presumes that both types result from pathogenic care (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Despite the recognition of this shared etiology, the recently published DSM-5 distinguishes the two types as separate disorders (i.e., reactive attachment disorder and disinhibited social engagement disorder) because of their different correlates, course, and response to intervention (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For instance, studies found that, in contrast with inhibited behaviors, indiscriminately friendly behaviors persisted in children of 6 years and older, even when the caregiving environment improved after adoption or foster care (e.g., Smyke et al., 2012). This finding raised the question of what components other than the concurrent caregiving environment are crucial in the persistence of indiscriminately friendly behaviors. To explain this persistence, Smyke and colleagues (2012) suggested that they might be related to maladaptive social cognitions. These may influence children's interpretation and behaviors in new relational contexts, explaining the continuity of disturbances in social relationships in disinhibited children. This assumption is congruent with a central tenet of attachment theory, stating that early caregiving experiences are carried forward to new relationships through children's representations of self and others.

1.2. Attachment theory

In attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1977), it is assumed that children build mental representations of attachment figures based on their interpersonal experiences with them. Children who experience their attachment figures as available and responsive, build secure representations of their attachment figures, while children with unavailable and unresponsive

¹ The terms "indiscriminately friendly children" and "likely disinhibited RAD-cases" are interchangeable as indiscriminate friendliness is the core symptom of disinhibited RAD. We specifically use the latter term, however, to refer to the selection procedure based on the cut-off for the disinhibited subscale of the Relationship Problems Questionnaire.

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