

Links between empathy, social behavior, and social understanding in early childhood

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Abstract

The purpose of the current investigation was to examine both social behaviors (i.e., aggression, shyness-withdrawal, and prosocial tendencies) and social understanding (i.e., attitudes and responses to such behaviors in hypothetical peers) of empathic and low-empathic children. Participants were 136 children in kindergarten and grade one. Parents completed ratings of child empathy, shyness, aggression, and prosocial tendencies. Children were presented with vignettes depicting prosocial, aggressive, or shy peers, and asked questions concerning their understanding and responses towards these behaviors. Results indicated that as compared to low-empathic peers, more empathic children were reported to exhibit greater prosocial behavior and less aggression and social-withdrawal. In addition, empathic children demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of shyness and aggression as compared to less empathic peers. These results suggest that empathic children are more socially sensitive, both in terms of their social understanding of others as well as their own social behaviors.

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Empathy has been defined as “an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition” (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998, p. 702). This includes both recognizing and experiencing another person’s emotional state. Empathy is frequently accompanied by either sympathy or personal distress (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Liew et al., 2003). Sympathy reflects a desire to improve the other’s emotional state (as opposed to merely taking on such state as in empathy), whereas personal distress is a negative reaction, such as anxiety, to another’s distress.

It has been argued that sympathy and personal distress provide a conceptual link between empathy and peer interaction. In particular, children high in personal distress tend to be relatively compliant and non-assertive, and may attempt to deal with negative emotions (manifested as distress or anxiety) by avoiding certain social situations (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). In contrast, children who are less compliant and more assertive are more likely to experience sympathy, and thus try to assert themselves by responding to the other child’s emotional reaction.

Previous research in the area of children’s empathy has focused primarily on factors that influence the development of empathy in childhood (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, Carlo, & Miller, 1991; Robinson, Zahn-Waxler, & Emde, 1994; van der Mark, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kraneburg, 2002), as well as the link between empathy and children’s emotionality and social competence with peers (e.g., Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987;

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Gill & Calkins, 2003; Liew et al., 2003; Roberts & Strayer, 1987; Shechtman, 2003). Given that social competence encompasses both behavioral and social-cognitive components (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1996), we might expect more empathic children to differ from their less empathic peers in terms of both the display of their *own* social behaviors, as well as their social understanding of *others'* social behaviors.

Although there has been some previous research relating empathy to children's own social behaviors with peers in early childhood (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), much less is known about the link between empathy and social understanding. Social understanding involves making inferences about others' thoughts, emotions, and intentions (Porath, 2003). Moreover, children's understanding and interpretations of peers' social behaviors contribute significantly towards their own behavioral responses to different types of peers (e.g., Graham & Hoehn, 1995). Thus, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the social behaviors and social understanding of empathic young children.

1. Empathy and social behaviors with peers

Results from previous studies have established connections between children's empathy and their social behaviors with peers; however, researchers in this area have focused primarily on prosocial orientation and aggression. In the following sections, we briefly review these studies as well as the more tentative links that have been suggested between empathy and shyness.

1.1. Prosocial behavior

Behavior intended to assist or benefit others is known as prosocial behavior. It has been well established that children high in empathy also show more prosocial tendencies such as comforting, altruistic, and responsive behaviors toward peers (e.g., Miller & Jansen op de Haar, 1997). Moreover, there is empirical support for a positive relation between empathy and prosocial behavior, although this association tends to be somewhat modest (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). For instance, Miller, Eisenberg, Fabes, and Shell (1996) found that vicarious emotional responding (i.e., empathy) and moral reasoning were positively related to prosocial behavior towards peers. In fact, an interaction effect was observed such that children high in both moral reasoning and emotional responding were most likely to assist a peer in distress.

Conceptually, empathy is linked to prosocial behavior in that prosocial responding is dependent upon other-understanding, emotion regulation, and social initiative (Miller et al., 1996). Prosocial children tend to have well developed perspective-taking abilities and moral reasoning (Miller et al., 1996), do well academically (Welsh, Parke, Wideman, & O'Neil, 2001), and have high self-esteem (Bosacki, 2003). As such, prosocial behavior is seen in a positive light, and is associated with healthy emotional and social functioning including positive peer relations (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

1.2. Aggression

Children lower in empathy tend to exhibit more overt aggressive behavior (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, Usher, & Bridges, 2000; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Strayer & Roberts, 2004). It can be argued that when children understand the emotional and social consequences of their actions, they will be less apt to respond in a physically aggressive manner. For example, preschool aged children who showed more concern for others were reported to have fewer disruptive behavior problems 2 years later (Hastings et al., 2000). However, other literature has shown that empathy and behavior problems are not necessarily associated in preschool-aged children (MacQuiddy, Maise, & Hamilton, 1987; Zahn-Waxler, Cole, Welsh, & Fox, 1995). Miller and Eisenberg (1988) suggested that perhaps aggressive children are capable of responding empathically, but that they misinterpret peers' behavior in social situations. Low levels of empathy may be manifested as increased externalizing behavior, including aggressive acts toward peers.

As with prosocial children, aggression might be linked conceptually to empathy in terms of social cognitions. It is now widely accepted that aggressive children display biases and deficits in social information processing, including problems with encoding and interpreting social cues, and a hostile attribution bias (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge, 1985; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Katsurada & Sugawara, 1998). Moreover, the negative outcomes associated with aggressive behavior may in part be related to aggressive children's inability to perceive or accurately interpret social feedback (e.g., rejection). For instance, Hymel, Bowkerm, and Woody (1993) reported that aggressive children significantly overestimated their own competencies in academic, athletic, appearance, and social domains. As rated by peers, aggressive children were

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