

Children's cooperative and competitive interactions in limited resource situations: A literature review

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Abstract

The ability to balance cooperative and competitive behaviors has important implications for a child's overall development. While socially competent children appear to learn highly successful strategies for entering peer groups and negotiating access to limited resources, the development of this level of social competence can be challenging for preschool-aged children. Early childhood educators may therefore have to intervene to develop the child's social competence and promote the use of negotiation and effective conflict management strategies. Using theories of social exchange and human sociobiology, this paper reviews literature on cooperation and competition involving limited resources and highlights the implications of this research for early childhood education. Results suggest that a variety of individual and social-contextual factors might influence a child's development of socially competent behavior. The review highlights the importance of teaching children to negotiate effectively with peers.

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1. Overview

1.1. Social competence and conflict

A defining feature of socially competent behavior is the ability to meet one's own needs while maintaining positive social relationships with others (Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992). Early peer interactions provide an important socialization function with respect to the development of social competence. It is through these early interactions that children learn how to take-turns, share resources, display feelings, take another's perspective, and perhaps most importantly, how to manage conflicts (Howes, 1988; Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). The ability to regulate emotions and respond appropriately in conflict situations can have a significant impact on a child's social and emotional development (Laursen, Hartup & Koplas, 1996; Shantz, 1987; Shantz & Hartup, 1992). Furthermore the attainment of effective conflict management skills is considered to be a central component of the socialization process as these skills can lay the foundation for the development of all future relationships (Weinstein, 1969).

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For young children, relevant conflict situations may arise as they attempt to enter a peer group (Putallaz & Sheppard, 1992; Shantz, 1987). Studies of group entry behavior in young children have found that a considerable amount of skill is required in order to enter a group successfully. In particular, the child must be flexible, somewhat indirect, and able to take the perspective of others. Although this task is a challenge to master for even the most socially competent child, it is not surprising that children who are less competent have considerable difficulty with peer group entry (Black & Hazen, 1990; Borja-Alvarez, Zabatany, & Pepper, 1991; Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983; Dodge, McClaskey, & Feldman, 1985; Guralnick, 1990, 1993; Phillips, Shenker, & Revitz, 1951; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981; Putallaz, Grimes, Efron, & Moliter, 1997).

Attempting to access limited resources is another situation that may also evoke conflict. For example, getting one's fair share of snacks, gaining access to preferred toys or activities, negotiating a turn in a game, or competing for the attention of adults and peers are important aspects of children's social behavior that may result in social conflict (Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Minuchin & Shapiro, 1983). Thus, while limited resource situations will occur throughout an individual's life, some of the basic skills for managing such conflicts may develop during the preschool years, as children interact with peers to gain and maintain access to limited resources (Putallaz & Sheppard, 1992; Shantz, 1987). It is important to consider how children learn to negotiate with others in order to meet their own needs, as this may assist early childhood educators in supporting children's social competence.

Helping children to become socially competent by developing appropriate conflict management skills is a critical aspect of early childhood practice (Bredenkamp, 1997). However, studies that have investigated children's behavior in limited resource encounters suggest there are a number of factors that can influence both the children's interactions and the subsequent outcomes. Furthermore, these findings may have significant implications for defining social competence. The present review of literature related to children's behavior in limited resource situations is intended to highlight these implications and offer some recommendations for how early childhood teachers might support the development of children's conflict management skills in limited resource situations.

1.2. Development of social competence

Social competence encompasses a variety of social behaviors and capacities that enable individuals to interact more effectively with others (Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Rubin et al., 1998; Bukowski, Rubin & Parker, 2001). These behaviors and capacities have been conceptualized in a number of ways, including specific social skills (Cillessen & Bellmore, 2002; Waters & Sroufe, 1983), friendship formation and maintenance (Hartup, 1989, 1992), peer status (Coie & Dodge, 1983) and social information processing skills (Dodge, 1986; Goldfried & D'Zurilla, 1969; Spivack & Shure, 1974). Despite the variety of conceptualizations, most definitions of social competence emphasize the importance of effectiveness in interaction as well as knowledge or awareness of the environmental demands of any given situation (Putallaz & Sheppard, 1992; Rubin, et al., 1998).

Waters and Sroufe (1983) note that this effectiveness in interaction is dependent on an individual's ability to mobilize and coordinate their own capacities in the face of environmental demands. They suggest that skills acquired in one developmental period may have significant consequences for all subsequent development, because success at one stage may prepare the child for the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead.

In her authoritative review on the development of social competence in young children, Howes (1987) suggested that the capacity to balance one's own needs with the needs of others has its foundations in the first year of life. This capacity develops as infants begin to identify their peers as budding social partners. Skills related to this capacity develop as toddlers begin to engage in mutual social exchanges in the contexts of play that require corresponding roles, such as peek-a-boo and hide and go seek. In turn, these skills lay the foundation for a more complex set of capacities that are required to be effective during the preschool years. Through increased social interaction in the form of cooperative play and social exchanges, preschool children gain experience in social problem solving. They become more capable of anticipating the actions of others, understanding thoughts and feelings, and evaluating social outcomes.

In addition, as children develop their perspective-taking skills and capacity for empathy, they develop the capacity to initiate and maintain friendships with their peers (Eisenberg & Harris, 1984; Howes, 1988; Ladd, 1999). Through this increased social interaction they are able to practice their skills with a wide range of children who have differing play styles, thus enhancing their social knowledge of the peer group. As children become more aware of their peers' styles of interaction, their judgments also seem to become more stable (Howes, 1987, 1988). Children who are

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