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Comments

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ARTICLES

EMPATHY, COMMUNICATION SKILLS, AND GROUP COHESIVENESS: A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

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This article presents an approach to the teaching of interpersonal communication skills to children from 7 - 11 years of age, and should be of great interest to professionals in the fields of psychology, social work, education and people involved in training such persons.

Discussed herein will be research, theory, and technique, but the main focus will be how to do something other than "provide short range solutions to long range problems" (Saxer, 1981). Most of the information, including the objectives discussed in this article, has been drawn from stage one of a two stage programme developed by the author and another American School Psychologist, Barbara Saxer. This article mainly concerns the development of group cohesiveness and basic empathetic communication skills necessary for positive group interaction. Stage one, the focus of this article, is more affectively oriented, as opposed to Stage two of the same programme which focuses on cognitive problem solving skills such as generating alternative solutions and making step by step plans towards a goal.

The first section of this article will briefly summarise the research which supports the assumption that certain interpersonal skills are important to healthy social functioning. Also included is information drawn from developmental theorists such as Piaget, Erikson and Freud which provides support for the theory that, when systematically and precisely taught, "empathetic" skills can be a powerful preventive intervention.

The second section will discuss how, in an attempt to be more precise and more able to communicate to others what was being done, specific goals were developed. These goals provide an important link between the theoretical and the practical applications of applied behavioural techniques.

3.

The last section describes the difficulties encountered in implementing such a programme along with practical considerations, and a discussion of suggestions for improvement.

The Theoretical and Research Background

Spivack and Shure (1976), in reviewing the work of Shantz (1975), came to several conclusions regarding the development of social cognition in children. For the purposes of this article the two most important are :-

(1) That the ability to understand what another person sees, feels, thinks, intends and how he perceives others is a developmental phenomenon.

(2) That middle childhood marks the period of dramatic changes in social understanding....his own feelings, thoughts and intentions can be the object of another person's thinking.... he can appreciate simple social situations from another's perspective....he becomes alert to the inner experience of others.

This leap in social understanding would seem to be supported by both Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson. During what Freud calls "latency age" and Erikson calls "industry vs inferiority". both stress the importance of successful peer relations and the necessity of becoming useful members of a social group. It is during this time that a child's world expands beyond his/her family circle to include a wider group of class-mates and friends.

Piaget appears to come to a similar conclusion from a more cognitive viewpoint. The major task of this age group, which he names "concrete operations", is "decentering" (both cognitively and socially). This implies that the child begins to be able to perceive the world from perspectives other than his own.

Does the evidence bear out these theoretical conclusions? Research is still somewhat inconclusive but the tentative answer appears to be 'Yes'. Again Spivack and Shure (1974, 1976 and 1978) in an extensive review of research in this area highlight several important studies.

Rothenberg (1970) found that children who had better role taking ability interacted more positively with peers. Jennings (1975) in his study with pre-school children concluded that children with good interpersonal awareness and role taking skills were more popular and displayed more leadership ability, initiative and ability to get along with others. Chandler etal (1974), Selman and Jaquette (1977), and Feshbach and Feshbach (1969) all seem to have found an inverse relationship between measures of empathy or cognitive role taking and maladjusted behaviours. Generally maladjusted or disturbed youngsters had more difficulty with tasks involving these skills than their normal age mates. In a programme designed to teach social perspective taking, Chandler (1973) found that delinquent behaviour decreased. In another similar programme Iannotti (1975) found that role playing furthered positive interaction although it did not seem to alter aggressive behaviour.

Spivack and Shure (1974, 1976) state quite clearly that they believe that interpersonal perspective taking or empathy is a separate phenomenon from impersonal perspective taking. Rather than assume that interpersonal skills will be acquired in the natural course of cognitive development or academic learning, they should be taught as a distinct set of skills.

In summary then, it does not seem unwarranted to assume that what has been called role taking, social cognition, empathy or simply getting along with others is an important skill, especially for middle aged children (7-11 years). It also appears that those children who have more "empathy" are generally regarded as more popular, more confident, better leaders and so on.

Goals

The important question for a practising psychologist, teacher or social worker is what specifically needs to be taught to children and the best sequence to teach it. The goals enumerated overleaf are an attempt to specify which skills are important and the order in which they should be taught.

Important "givens" are that instruction will take place in a small group setting of five to eight children of approximately the same year or class within the seven to eleven year old range.

(1) Group members will verbalise all other member's names with 10% accuracy both when prompted by a group leader and during spontaneous group interaction.

(2) Group members will accurately verbalise at least three physical features describing another group member when that member is removed from sight.

These two goals have been placed first for several reasons. Since most children of this age can be successful with these easy tasks, this naturally provides opportunities for the leader to provide positive social reinforcement. This has the effect of starting the group off in a positive, comfortable manner. The intention is also to begin the process of teaching children to focus their attention, if only in a very superficial way, on the other members of the group.

The beginnings of group cohesiveness are also developed as children begin to take note of and remember qualities of other members.

It has been the author's experience that token or point systems individually administered to each member can be cumbersome. What has evolved is a combination of social reinforcement, usually in the form of verbal praise, and a group point system. In other words if Angie were to perform a task successfully she would be given verbal reinforcement and also a point would be put into a group account. When the groups' points have reached a certain level an agreed upon reinforcer such as 15 minutes of free time would be earned. Referring to Freud and Erikson, co-operating is seen as an important developmental task for this age group. Focusing some of the attention on the accomplishments of the group helps to develop a sense of the group as a whole working towards common goals.

Activities directed towards meeting these goals can be as simple as asking each member to share his or her name and afterwards seeing who can remember all the names without mistake. This second goal can also be accomplished via a simple game. Direct the group to look closely at one member. After a few seconds send that member out of sight and ask who can recall physical features of that member (i.e. brown eyes, blonde hair, wearing a green sweater, etc). As a way of recording who has accomplished a goal, a type of checklist with each member's name along with each goal is useful. (See Figure 1)

	goal	1	2	3	4	5
John		X	X			
Sam		X				
Tina		X				X

Figure 1:
Example of a record sheet.

(3) Group members will verbalise at least one piece of personal information.
(i.e. favourite subject, game, food, pet, where they live, where born, etc)

(4) Group members will attend non-verbally to a speaker as demonstrated by sitting quietly, without distracting movements, while looking at the speaker throughout the time the speaker is talking.

These goals are aimed at setting up a situation where the non-verbal aspects of attentive listening can be taught and practiced. Often this begins with a short demonstration of attentive and inattentive listening and its effects. Attentive listening is again explained and modeled to the children. Afterwards each member is asked to share something about himself while the others practice attentive listening. With younger children it can be helpful to have them draw or paint something about themselves and verbalise what they have drawn.

(5) Group members will remember and accurately repeat a piece of personal information shared by another member.

This goal takes listening one step beyond attending non-verbally. Each member is asked not only to listen but to recall what has been shared by another member. Depending on the level of the group, remembering can take place after each member has shared or after the entire group has finished.

(6) Group members will verbally describe their present feeling state.

Sharing how one feels is considered to be an important communication skill which adds a more effective dimension to group interaction. This can very easily be incorporated as a beginning ritual in the group by asking each member how they feel today and what important incidents may have taken place since the last meeting. Many times children, especially younger ones, find it difficult to label their feeling states spontaneously. If this is the case it is often helpful to give them a choice such as sad, mad, happy or scared. As a preliminary practice it can also be useful to have the group role play these various feeling states and practice identifying these states by non-verbal cues. Pictures or drawings which illustrates feeling states can also be used to introduce children to the identification of feelings. A continuation of goal 5 should also be incorporated, as listening attentively is an important and difficult skill to learn.

(7) Group members will verbally describe a personal incident including who was involved, what happened first what happened next, how it ended and how they feel about it.

(8) Group members will accurately paraphrase another's statement including how the member felt and for what reason.

Being able to describe an incident in a temporal sequence as described above is not strictly speaking an empathetic skill but is included because it is thought to be helpful preparation for the learning of more cognitive interpersonal problem solving skills. Clearly stating the temporal sequence and the important people involved in an incident makes the setting up of role playing situations required for the next two goals much smoother.

8.

Goal 8 takes the skill of listening one step further to taking into account both what someone said and how they feel about it. It puts more emphasis on para-phrasing or "putting it into your own words". This of course is a more advanced skill which many children find very difficult. Despite this, experience seems to indicate that with practice many are quite capable of learning this skill.

(9) Group members will each role play a character in a personal incident shared by another member. The actions will be performed in the same sequence in which they are shared.

(10) Group members will, upon completion of a role playing sequence, identify and verbalise a feeling word matching each character's probable feeling state.

Traditionally role taking has been regarded as an important element in moral development and the learning of empathetic skills. Its importance is upheld here and it is thought that practice in role taking is best done after the preparation required in meeting the previous goals. Role playing provides very concrete and active practice for identifying how someone thinks and feels. Psychodramatic techniques such as role reversal and process checking which involves freezing the action to ask questions such as "How do you feel right now?" or "What do you think is happening right now?", provide other ways in which a skilful leader can improve childrens' skills in understanding others.

Discussion

The goals discussed have generally been affectively oriented. In one sense they can be regarded as preparation, or perhaps pre-requisites for, the learning of more cognitive interpersonal problem solving skills which involve generating alternative solutions and making step by step plans. This idea has been suggested by Spivack and Shure (1976) and has been incorporated into steps to interpersonal problem solving (Saxer & Hass, 1980) a programme which is essentially an elaboration and continuation of what has been discussed here.

9.

With children at the lower end of the 7-11 year old age range it is helpful to incorporate the use of puppets or art materials such as paints and clay. Art activities can be useful in making somewhat abstract verbal skills more concrete and play like. A general rule of thumb is to keep all activities as concrete as possible.

One area of concern and further investigation is how to increase generalisation of these skills to the classroom and home. One method used by the author was to write the specific skill worked on that day and suggested follow-up activities on a card. Each child was given one of these cards and was told to give it to the teacher. Minimally this establishes open lines of communication between the group leader and the teacher. At best, if the teacher is willing to do the follow-up activities, this provides opportunities to generalise skills to the classroom setting. Other suggestions include training teachers to teach these skills directly to their students or as Spivack and Shure (1978) have done, teaching parents to teach interpersonal skills to their children at home. An ideal setting would be to involve children, teachers and parents together in a comprehensive programme covering both home and classroom. It is also difficult to say what length of training is best or how many repetitions is necessary to master each skill.

What has been presented here is a programme which has been successfully used in teaching children the interpersonal skills necessary for co-operative group interaction and communicating understanding to others. It has been found that children between the ages of seven and eleven are developmentally ready for learning such skills and are in a stage of development where the skills are especially necessary. Although more evaluation and research is needed it appears that teaching children interpersonal skills in a systematic way can be a successful preventive intervention.

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