Are Unpopular Children More Likely to be Ignored by Teachers? 

Links Between Social Behavior & Peer Ratings in a Preschool Sample

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between peer social status and social interaction behavior in a group of preschoolers. Participants were 32 children in two cohorts ranging from 36 to 57 months of age. It was hypothesized that children rated by their peers as less popular would receive fewer social invitations from others and this was supported (r = .526, p = .002). Children rated by their peers as less popular were also more likely to have their social invitations ignored by teachers (r = .363, p = .041). These results have significant implications. As social dynamics in children of this age are relatively fluid, it is important to be able to identify children in need of social skills help to best set them up for future positive outcomes.

Introduction

To understand social dynamics in young children is important to understand children’s perceptions of each other as well as their patterns of social interactions. Developing and maintaining peer relationships is a new priority for many preschool children (Gleason et al., 2005; Walker, 2009) and achieving competence within the peer group is important for the development of social skills (Rosenblum & Olson, 1997). Children’s individual behaviors largely determine whether they are likely to be accepted or rejected by their peers (Ramsey, 1995). Prosocial cooperative behavior, patterns of social approach, and the ability to interpret and understand others’ emotions are linked to likability and peer social status (Denham et al., 1990; Walker, 2009). Well-liked children also tend to show more positive affect and leadership skills and are more likely to give social reinforcement and nurturance to peers (Masters & Furman, 1981), while unpopular children tend to show more aggression, disruptiveness, and hyperactivity (Walker, 2009). The biggest difference between those who are popular and those who are not is that the unpopular lack positive interpersonal behavior.

Popularity is important to study in young children because lack of peer acceptance is linked to problems later in life, including dropping out of school and delinquency (Asher et al., 1981). Social skills problems tend to develop early and once established, low social status tends to persist (Mussun-Miller, 1990).

Two groups of children at significant risk for negative future outcomes are the rejected group, who tend to be disliked by peers, and the neglected group, who tend to be ignored by peers (Rosenblum & Olson, 1997). Peer rejection is associated with poor school adjustment and internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Walker, 2004). While popular children are more likely to play cooperatively, engage in ongoing conversation, and show positive affect, rejected and neglected children are more likely to engage in parallel play, onlooker behavior, and alone-focused play (Walker, 2009).

Participants

Participants were 32 preschool children (16 boys, 16 girls) in the San Francisco area who ranged from 36 to 57 months old (M = 45.72, SD = 5.85). In the fall of two consecutive years, participants were recruited for this study through an announcement at the child’s preschool, followed by an e-mail home to parents. The first cohort consisted of 16 children (8 boys, 8 girls) who ranged from 38 to 53 months old (M = 45.13, SD = 5.23). The second cohort consisted of 16 children (8 boys, 8 girls) who ranged from 36 to 57 months old (M = 46.31, SD = 6.53). No incentive was offered for participation.

Procedure

Peer sociometric nominations. Children were shown photographs of classmates one at a time and asked to name the child in each picture. The pieces of paper were then laid out with 12 dots, 6 dots, and 1 dot printed on the pages. The child was shown each photograph again, one at a time, and asked to place each photograph onto one of the pieces of paper. If the child identified a classmate as someone he or she played with a lot, the photograph was placed on the page with 12 dots. If the classmate was identified as someone the child rarely played with, the photograph was placed on the page with 1 dot.

Social interaction behavior. Observers watched each child for ten 3-minute periods and recorded all social interactions of the child during this time including who was involved, who initiated each interaction, and any response. A social interaction was defined as an exchange in which all participants demonstrated awareness of the other(s).

Measures

Peer sociometric nominations. If a child identified a classmate as someone he or she played with a lot, the classmate was given a score of 3. If a child identified a classmate as someone he or she rarely played with, the classmate was given a score of 1. Popularity was measured as the number of scores of 3 received by a child divided by the total number of scores received. Unpopularity was measured as the number of scores of 1 received by a child divided by the total number of scores received.

Social interaction behavior. For each interaction, the initiator and respondent were indicated and the initiation was coded as positive, negative, or neutral in tone. Initiations and responses were coded as neutral unless they had a clear positive tone (e.g., a compliment) or clear negative tone (e.g., throwing a toy). Initiators and respondents were categorized as children, teachers, self (e.g., talking to oneself), or no one.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Children with lower peer sociometric ratings will receive fewer social invitations from others.

Hypothesis 2: Children with lower peer sociometric ratings will be more likely to have their social invitations ignored (no response).

Results

Hypothesis 1: A significant correlation was found between children nominated by peers as more unpopular and number of social initiations by others to the child (r = .526, p = .002).

Hypothesis 2: A significant correlation was found between children nominated as more unpopular and number of non-responses by teachers (r = .363, p = .041), but not between unpopularity and non-responses by children (r = .117, p = .523).

See correlation matrix for related correlations not tested by hypotheses.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that less popular children receive fewer social invitations and are more likely to have their social invitations ignored by teachers as compared to more popular children. These findings have significant implications.

Preschool is a time for rapid development in social understanding and social skills (Ramsey, 1995). If unpopular children are less likely to be approached by others, they may be missing important social interaction opportunities. Future research might examine whether this deficit can be overcome by teaching children ways to effectively initiate positive social interaction with their peers. Further, the finding that unpopular children are ignored more by teachers suggests that teachers may be influenced by the social dynamics of the classroom. Future research might examine the extent to which this kind of bias is present, whether teachers are conscious of such tendencies, and how they might be reduced.

As social dynamics in the preschool classroom are in constant flux and children of this age have relatively fluid social structures, teachers and parents have an opportunity to positively influence the social relationships between individual children and their peers such that future negative outcomes are minimized.

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Notes

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01