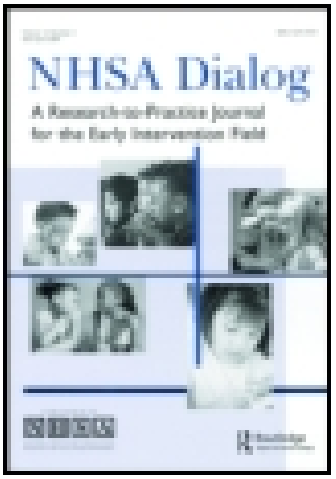

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RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARIES

Encouraging Friendships in Preschool Classrooms

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This article reviews the findings from our research in Head Start classrooms and their potential theoretical importance. Practical suggestions are offered to administrators and teachers as to ways to promote friendships in classroom settings. Some approaches are likely to work better for boys and others for girls. Understanding how children select their friends and helping children develop friendships will make the classroom more enjoyable for everyone.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, temperament, childcare/daycare

Romero, Perez, Pasnak, and Lehman (2009/this issue) investigated what led to friendships in Head Start children. Research prior to our study indicated that a child's behavior, sex, and ethnicity were likely to determine whether or not other children would accept the child as a friend. Our research supported the first two propositions. It identified several aspects of children's behavior that influenced whether or not other children accepted them as friends. Sex was also important—girls preferred girls as friends, and boys preferred boys. This was what one might expect, and it confirms findings by many other researchers. However, our research showed that in one situation at least—when classrooms are multiethnic—a child's ethnicity did not affect who they selected as a friend. This finding was unexpected but is a very positive note. In such classrooms, children are accustomed to being around and interacting with children of different ethnicities. Children who restricted their choices to their own ethnicity would have to overlook other determinants of friendship more often than would be the case in classes where only two or three ethnicities were represented.

The theoretical importance of this research was primarily that it confirmed the importance of a child's "prosocial behavior" and "positive assertiveness" and "negative assertiveness" in determining whether other children accepted the child as a friend. These labels bear some explanation. "Prosocial behavior" is basically acting in a kind, helpful, understanding way. Children who are prosocial are nice to others, sharing, cooperating, and offering some form of

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sympathy and comfort to other children. Prosocial behavior is limited when children are very young, but even toddlers show some of it, and it gradually increases as the children age. Other researchers (Denham & Holt, 1993; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; Ladd & Mars, 1986) have promoted the idea that children who are more prosocial will be more liked even when they are preschoolers, and our research confirms that proposition, which was always logical enough.

"Positive assertiveness" amounts to being outgoing, active, purposeful, and dominant. A child who is positively assertive is a leader who doesn't hesitate to suggest new activities and make friendly approaches to other children. It is not to be confused with being mean and aggressive; rather, the child's self-expression and initiatives are constructive. In theory, such characteristics would be desirable in an individualistic culture like the predominant American culture. Some researchers have found support for this position (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenbert, & Reis, 1988) but others have not (Denham & Holt, 1993). Our research indicates that positive assertiveness *is* an important determinant of whether a child will be chosen as a friend—particularly when boys cross the gender line and choose girls. They tend to choose the girls who are most dominant and independent.

"Negative assertiveness" is not what it sounds like. A child who is negatively assertive is not aggressive or destructive. Rather, the child does not put himself or herself forward. Such a child is typically sad, pouty, and subdued. Boys who display this behavior tend not to be chosen as friends by other boys, although it seems to make little difference to girls.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

The main application for administrators is to modify the demographics of their classrooms when that is practical. A natural tendency is to assign children to the classes closest to their homes. However, if children from many different ethnicities are enrolled in a program, they may live in clusters in certain neighborhoods. This may result in some classrooms having predominately children of one or two ethnicities. An administrator may be able to facilitate cross-ethnic friendships by taking care to maximize the ethnic heterogeneity of the children in as many different classes as possible. There may be little opportunity for "mixing it up" in many programs, but when it is possible and does not increase expenses for busing or cause undo hardships for families transporting their own child, our study, which is admittedly based on a small sample, indicates that it may be worth doing. The other practical application for administrators is to alert their teachers as to what to expect and what to do to enable more children to gain acceptance and friends in their classrooms.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

One thing that teachers should be aware of is that boys have a fairly strong tendency not to make friends with other boys who are negatively assertive—that is, who respond to difficulties by whining or crying and are sad or mopey. Because the day is more pleasant for everyone, children and adults, when children form friendships and enjoy their friends, it is likely to be worth time and effort to discourage behavior that discourages friendships. A teacher should probably refuse

to respond to the attention-getting "negative assertiveness" of pouting and crying in hopes of extinguishing or at least reducing it. At times when such a boy is not being negative, the teacher may be able to encourage him to display positive social behavior by giving him a leadership role in some classroom activity or encouraging him to initiate some fun activity with another child. Finally, if a boy is often sad and gloomy, a teacher may try to find out why and do what she can to improve his situation and his enjoyment of his Head Start classroom, always taking care not to focus her attention on him when he is actively complaining or crying. It is worth noting in this context that negative assertiveness on the part of girls had little or no effect on their being chosen as friends, at least in this small study. Hence, a teacher's first concern should be for boys who show this trait.

On the plus side of the ledger, boys liked girls who were assertive in certain ways—leaders who were direct, self-starting and self-reliant, persistent—ones who often raised their hands to volunteer or participate. These qualities were important, whereas other traits one might expect to determine friendships—friendliness, cooperativeness, and tractability—made little difference. Knowing this, teachers may be well advised to encourage the positive (i.e., good) aspects of assertiveness, particularly for girls. Boys tend to like them more and share more activities with them when they have these traits. This was the strongest finding in our whole study.

For girls, there was no strong evidence that positive assertiveness was particularly important in who they chose as friends. Neither was there any evidence that any other quality we measured had any role in their selection of friends. Either girls were less discerning of these personal characteristics, or were more accepting of differences in interpersonal behavior, or we failed to measure the traits by which they chose their friends. What a teacher can do to encourage friendships between girls is still up in the air.

It is worth noting that neither positive nor negative prosocial behavior made any difference in the selection of friends by either boys or girls. That is, being helpful, obedient, cooperative, and sensitive to disapproval did not produce more friendships. Likewise, being hostile; grabbing toys and refusing to share; tattling; or being inattentive, restless, and constantly trying to change activities did not reduce a child's number of friendships. This does not mean that such behavior should be ignored. There are other good reasons for a teacher to try to increase positive and decrease negative prosocial behavior. Positive and negative prosocial behaviors may also become more important later in a child's life, and Denham and Holt (1993) found that they were important in middle-class preschools.

A final point is that this research project showed that Head Start children readily form friendships with children of different ethnicities. Knowing this, a teacher can encourage cross-ethnic friendships with an expectation of success. Like good programs and good teachers, good friendships are important to keep all children happy about coming to their Head Start class, even when they are in a small minority.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

A major problem for researchers is obtaining access to children for research purposes. A few moments of thought will lead to some of the reasons. Why should an administrator allow time to be taken from a carefully devised school day for the sake of your research? A staff member will have to be assigned to collect TB and child protective services forms, as well as other forms for

internal purposes, and deal with any problems that arise in connection with the research. What is the incentive for the teacher to change the lesson plans or approach she uses after she has learned it, practiced it, seen it work well, and become comfortable with it, just to test your ideas? Even if she has only to be the host, there is no benefit to her in letting a stranger disrupt her classroom routine, and she will probably have to send home and collect permission letters and help you in some other ways. Why should parents or parent councils agree to let their children be "guinea pigs," as some would label it, for some professor's research? If the answer is something that doesn't benefit their child, such as advancing science or education for future children, it may not be surprising that the answer is often no. And most research, like that of Romero et al. (2009/this issue), does not provide a direct benefit the children who participate.

One answer is to *bring something to the program*! Our research was done in classrooms where college students regularly functioned as general assistants to the teachers three mornings per week. The benefit of having an additional helpful adult serving in Head Start classes is obvious to everyone—administrators, teachers, and parents. This more than compensates for any time lost to research. It also is advantageous to the young adults who assist with the children. Many college students, and certainly graduate students in education and developmental psychology, like and enjoy children, consider it a privilege to work with them, and often have had part-time jobs in some form of childcare or child supervision. The practical experience of working with children in a classroom, the resumes that are enhanced, and the references that are developed are much to their benefit. Many universities have some form of community service, practicum, or field credit that students can earn, and if the college students can also function as research assistants for some of the time they are at Head Start they may be able to receive research credit. Researchers who are affiliated with universities should consider these possibilities and decide what might be feasible.

An important caveat is that Head Start classrooms may be small. That was the case for the classrooms where our research was conducted. Too many adults, even helpful adults, can clog the space available to children and teachers. The solution for us was to make observations on days when the student volunteers were not present. Researchers should be good diplomats and sensitive to issues teachers face, even when a teacher is too polite to mention any problems. Keep your eyes open for any inconveniences your research project may create for the people who are helping you.

Another possibility emerges in research that involves control groups. It is generally conceded by methodologists that control groups should have as much contact with researchers as experimental groups, receiving an equal investment of time and resources in constructive activities. Such control groups equalize Hawthorne effects, halos, expectations, and other confounds—the classic control groups that receive nothing at all are considered inadequate by today's researchers. Pasnak and Howe (1993, p. 232) make the point that if an innovation is designed to actually benefit children, it should be compared with another manipulation already known to benefit them. So, for example, if one has designed a method of improving early literacy scores, and half of the children are to be randomly assigned to receive this method, why not have your control group receive something else that is beneficial—equal time spent improving numeracy, health, or any other subject that does not involve literacy? Most Head Start programs and parents are sympathetic to investments of time and effort from researchers that will benefit every child. Of course the acid test would be for the control group to receive an alternative that has already been shown to improve literacy. That will tell you if your method really has practical application.

There are special problems with research in Head Start classes that may not be encountered elsewhere. Teachers may be intimidated by the thought of college-educated assistants. That problem can be solved by asking the teachers to "mother" the collegians, reminding them that the students are young adults not much different from their own teenagers. Remind them that the students will be anxious to please but won't know exactly how and that a teacher should take them under her wing and guide them toward whatever she wants. That approach almost always works well, and great rapport is the rule. Another problem is that parents may not be literate in English, Spanish, or any other widely shared language and may be unable to read permission letters. It is helpful if researchers, knowing they intend to do research, attend parent orientation meetings scheduled by Head Start if the local program is willing. A supportive administrator, who knows the benefits to the program of what you are bringing along with your research, may be the best person to explain to parents that you are not proposing brain surgery, and permission letters can be gathered as parents leave. This approach helps parents feel as if they have more insight and control of what they are agreeing to than they can get from a letter from a person of whom they have never previously heard. It works very well for both researchers and parents. It also spares teachers the burden of explaining and collecting permission letters.

Head Start children are charmers. Students and researchers like to interact with them, and it is helpful to the children to interact with folks from many walks of life. In the beginning children tend to be a little shy and study any newcomer. It helps if you get down to their level, asking them their names and complimenting them on their hair ornaments, what they are wearing, or their activities. They will be more comfortable when they first meet you if you wear T-shirts or ties or pins that have cartoon characters or other child-friendly logos on them. It indicates to them that you are a safe and child-friendly person. Avoid using the title Doctor if you have it. Some of these children just received a series on immunization injections and are a little scared of doctors. Never hesitate to play with them, eat lunch with them, and have your students interact with them for extended periods of time doing things other than research. It is rewarding—in more ways than one!

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