The Social Behavior of Depressed Children: An Observational Study

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Few investigations have examined directly the psychosocial functioning of depressed children. In the present study, 20 depressed and 20 nondepressed fourth- and fifth-grade children were observed in free play during their recess period at school, and their self-perceptions were assessed in subsequent individual sessions. The 10 boys and 10 girls in each group were selected according to their scores on both the Child Depression Inventory and the Peer Nomination Inventory of Depression. Analyses conducted on the eight categories of behavioral observations revealed significant differences between the social behavior of the depressed and the nondepressed children. Although the depressed children made more overtures for social contact than did the nondepressed children and were approached by other children more frequently, they spent more time alone and engaged in a higher frequency of negative interactions with their peers. Consistent with these results, the depressed children's responses to the Self-Perception Profile for Children indicated that they experienced themselves as less socially competent in general, as well as less competent across several specific domains of functioning. These findings are discussed as they relate to developmental processes, theories of adult depression, and recent studies on socially isolated children, and directions for future research in this area are offered.
In contrast to the wealth of knowledge about depression in adults, relatively little is known about depressive symptoms in childhood. Nevertheless, clinicians and researchers are becoming increasingly aware that children do in fact exhibit depressive symptomatology. Current assessments of depressive symptoms in normal populations of children have revealed rates ranging from 5.2% (Lefkowitz & Tesiny, 1982a) to 17.4% (Kashani & Simonds, 1979), while rates of depressive symptoms in clinical child populations have been reported to be as high as 59% (Kashani et al., 1981).

Investigations examining the phenomenon of childhood depression have demonstrated a relationship between depressive symptoms and reported dysfunctional social behavior. Lefkowitz and Tesiny (1980), for example, assessed children in grades 3 through 5 on a set of 41 environmental, demographic, and child-rearing variables, and found that the variables that emerged as most strongly associated with depression were those related to social behavior—two of the best predictors of depressive symptomatology, in fact, were unpopularity and poor social functioning. Similar results were reported by Jacobsen, Lahey, and Strauss (1983), who found depressed mood to correlate highly with unpopularity with peers. Finally, the relationship between social dysfunction and childhood depression has also been noted in anecdotal observations that depressed children seem to be socially isolated (Kasahni et al., 1981; Poznanski & Zrull, 1970).

Although the general social withdrawal and social isolation of children who demonstrate depressive symptoms has been noted, the specific manifestations of this behavior and its implications for the etiology and maintenance of childhood depression have yet to be investigated. The importance of examining the interpersonal behavior of these children in greater detail is underscored both by the current developmental literature concerning children’s social relations (e.g., Putallaz & Gottman, 1981) and by recent studies of the social interactions of depressed adults (e.g., Gotlib, 1982; Kowalik & Gotlib, 1987; Kahn, Coyne, & Margolin, 1985).

Interest in socially isolated children stems from the growing knowledge of the influence of peer relations on development. Rubin (1983), for example, contends that “unpopular” children, who do not interact with their peers, are at risk for developing subsequent social, educational, and mental health problems. Supporting this position, a number of investigators have reported differences between popular and unpopular children with respect to their social functioning (e.g., Dodge, 1983; Kurdek & Krile, 1982; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). The available data indicate that low-status children are less adept at employing the skills necessary for successful social interaction with their peers, and that individuals in their social environment appear to be sensitive to their maladaptive interpersonal behavior. Moreover, initial reports implicate these skills deficits as a cause rather than a consequence of peer rejection.