The Effects of a Preschool Problem Solving Program on Interpersonal Behavior

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an interpersonal problem solving skills program for preschool children. Twenty-three children were given the interpersonal problem solving program over a ten week period, while 23 children were involved in a contact control group. A behavioral assessment of interpersonal problem solving ability and a subjective assessment of perception of self were obtained prior to training and immediately following training. Results indicated that from pretest to posttest the problem solving trained children, relative to the contact control group children, demonstrated a significant increase in interpersonal problem solving ability and positive perceptions of self. Discussion focused on the implications of the durability of the skills learned, generalizability of skill acquisition, and needed future research.

A major focus of early childhood education programs is the development of positive social interaction. Recently, structured educational programs for young children have begun to be developed with a focus on communication and problem solving skills as a means to facilitate positive social interaction (Ridley, Vaughn, & Wittman, in press; Shure & Spivack, 1974, 1978, 1979; Weissberg, Gesten, Rapkin, Cowen, Davidson, Flores de Apodaca, & McKim, 1981). The pioneering work by Shure and Spivack (1979, 1980) and an extension of this work by Ridley and Vaughn (in press), have helped identify the essential components needed in an interpersonal problem solving program with preschool age children. Research evaluating preschool interpersonal problem solving programs has demonstrated that: (1) both lower SES black, inner-city preschool children and a middle SES population can learn to generate alternative solutions to interpersonal problems; (2) classroom teachers involved in the training program rate program children as better adjusted when compared to nonprogram children; and (3) the trained interpersonal problem solving skills appear to mediate adjustment one or two years later (Ridley...
& Vaughn, in press; Shure & Spivack, 1979, 1980). Although these results are encouraging, several problems prevent a definitive assessment of program efficacy. Some of the design and measurement problems include: (1) the use of a no contact control group rather than the use of a viable contact control group, (2) potentially confounding of results by uncontrolled or unknown variables such as teacher involvement, and (3) the use of teachers involved in the implementation of the training program as evaluators of outcome measures such as adjustment. It is difficult to evaluate the results of these interpersonal problem solving programs with preschoolers without controlling for the above problems.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate an interpersonal problem solving program with preschool children which addresses the limitations of previous studies. The specific features of this study were: (1) the interpersonal problem solving training program was compared with a viable contact control group, (2) teacher involvement, as a potentially confounding factor was eliminated, and (3) program outcomes were evaluated by persons not involved in the training program or aware of which children were in the experimental or contact control groups.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were obtained from children enrolled in a preschool located in a southwestern community. Forty-six subjects (23 males and 23 females) between the ages 4 years, 2 months to 5 years, 6 months were selected to participate in the study. Subjects were matched by age and sex and then randomly assigned to an experimental or contact control group (23 experimental subjects, 23 contact control subjects).

Procedure

Experimental and contact control group subjects were trained for 50 sessions. Each session was conducted for 20 minutes for a total of 16 2/3 hours. Sessions were administered each weekday for a ten week period. Both experimental and contact control group subjects were removed from the regular classroom and brought to nearby rooms for their respective training programs. To assure that program effects were a result of the training and uninfluenced by classroom teacher or parent involvement, classroom teachers and parents were not informed as to which subjects were in the contact control group or the experimental group. Classroom teachers and parents were unaware of the content of the training program and were not allowed to participate in or observe training sessions.