Managing Conflict: Interactional Strategies of Learning Handicapped and Nonhandicapped Adolescent Girls

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Naturalistic observations of learning handicapped and nonhandicapped high school girls were conducted to explore differences in the types and effectiveness of interaction strategies used during troubled peer contacts. Findings indicated that learning handicapped girls engaged in more conflict than nonhandicapped females and that this conflict generally involved dominance/submission themes and was managed in ways which increased the probability of future conflict. Conflict involving nonhandicapped girls mostly focused on selfishness or low tolerance for peer's habits and was handled in ways which lowered the likelihood of future disagreements. Implications of these findings with regard to the social standing of the learning handicapped girls in the school setting is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of interpersonal relationships during the adolescent life stage has been shown to be a valid predictor of adult functioning (Cowen et al., 1973). Adolescent friendships serve as a foundation for egalitarian relationships with spouses, neighbors, or co-workers in later adult life. They are also important resources for adolescent individuation and identity development.

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Through the young person's association with peers, opportunities are provided to relate intimately with someone outside the family and to experience relationships in which both members can express opinions and be listened to (Berndt, 1982; Hill, 1980; Hunter, 1984).

Studies examining friendship patterns among mildly learning handicapped adolescents (i.e., learning disabled and mildly mentally retarded) have consistently found less developed and more troubled relations between peers. Although authors note variability within the population—with at least some learning handicapped youngsters achieving stable and mutually responsive peer associations—the majority are found to be at risk for poor interpersonal relations (Dubley-Marling and Edmiaston, 1985; Perlmutter et al., 1983; Zetlin, 1987). Among the reasons presumed responsible are deficits in social perception leading to inappropriate behavior (Kronick, 1978) and being more aggressive than nondisabled peers in exerting influence over others (Perlmutter et al., 1983).

A recent study by Zetlin and Murtaugh (1987) compared the friendship patterns of learning handicapped and nonhandicapped adolescents in terms of intimacy, empathy, and stability. They found fewer friendships and more discordant associations within the handicapped sample. Their data also revealed less evidence of intimacy and empathy between the handicapped teens and their peers, although relatively low levels of empathy were observed in both groups. Examination of why friendships ended and why so much bickering existed turned up no behaviors specific to the handicapped or nonhandicapped samples. Rather, both groups displayed similar behaviors leading to peer disturbances. These included undesirable personality characteristics such as being bossy or moody, having a stuck-up attitude, being a rumor monger, and being a liar or "two-faced."

Research with children indicates that youngsters with friendship difficulties display problematic strategies that destabilize interactions with peers (Selman and Demorest, 1984). These difficulties appear due to social-cognitive competence deficits that limit their behavioral effectiveness. Younger vs. older and unpopular vs. popular children tend to select strategies that are less normative, less prosocial, less effective at solving the problem, and in conflict situations, more aggressive than their counterparts (Carlson, 1987; Renshaw and Asher, 1983). Stainback and Stainback (1987) contend that the ability to resolve conflict effectively is one of the most difficult skills needed to master in forming and maintaining friendships. Those less competent socially tend to deal with conflict in either an "overtly aggressive or submissive manner rather than by constructive attempts to meet their own needs without infringing on the needs or rights of others" (p. 21). The question remains as to the types and effectiveness of interaction strategies used by adolescents during troubled peer contacts, and whether there are group