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AUTHOR Mohr, Laura L.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A role playing technique designed to promote good mental health in exceptional children is described. It is explained that the life coping skills approach emphasizes that exceptional children are first of all children. A sequence for guiding role playing is provided (building comfort, building involvement, introducing interaction among players, adding dialogue, involving the class, and using role play in the classroom). Ten tips on role playing are listed. Appended material describes role playing activities for educable mentally handicapped, trainable mentally handicapped, orthopedically handicapped, learning disabled/emotionally handicapped, gifted and talented, and preschool handicapped children. (CI)

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Life Coping Skills for Exceptional Children

Laura L. Mohr
University of South Carolina

Alice C. D'Antoni
Myrtle Beach Air Force Base

Nidia Moreno-Milne
University of Houston

Dean K. McIntosh
University of South Carolina

Karen Miano
University of South Carolina

Gail Raymond
University of South Carolina

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Abstract

This paper centers around a role playing technique to facilitate good mental health in exceptional children. Life Coping Skills for Exceptional Children emphasizes that exceptional children are first of all children; therefore, they experience the feelings, frustrations, anxieties, problems, and concerns of growing up much as normal children do, as well as varying degrees of other problems related to the child's exceptionality. This paper summarizes steps used in teaching the art of role playing before it can be used as a method for developing affective behaviors in exceptional children. In addition, the paper presents examples of role play activities which can be used with students who are learning disabled, emotionally handicapped, trainable mentally handicapped, educable mentally handicapped, orthopedically handicapped, preschool handicapped, and gifted/talented.

Life Coping Skills for Exceptional Children

Exceptional children are first of all children. They have the same kinds of needs and desires and feelings that all children have. Regardless of the specifics of individual differences, exceptional children have life adjustment and coping problems with life events as do all children. In some cases the characteristics of the child's exceptionality may make the coping problems even more intense. Thus, coping with ordinary life events can be a struggle for some children, normal or exceptional; and when life stresses pile up, some children cannot handle the stress or anxiety.

Generally children who have learned to cope have been aided by supportive significant persons in their environment such as parents, teachers, and counselors. A recent study of stressful life events (Coddington, 1979) reported that those events related to separation of significant persons (i.e. death, divorce, serious illness) were significant causes of stress in children from ages five to eighteen. Among other significant stress events were failure in school and drug abuse. Exceptional children are not immune to the stressful life events. All children need the opportunity to explore situations they currently face or are likely to face and to consider how they want to handle everyday life situations.

Fagen and Long (1976, 1970) emphasize the need to teach pupils positive skills to enable them to cope with intense feeling and demands from the home, the school, and the community through a curriculum blending cognitive and affective skill development. Schools have

expressed a commitment to the total development of children; however, more emphasis may have been placed on basic academic skills in the past. Presently, schools are becoming more aware of the need to include curriculum for the growth and development of social and emotional skills. The Life Skills for Mental Health Program (Georgia Department of Human Resources, 1978) emphasizes three areas where attention is needed in the affective development of children.

Self Awareness and Self-acceptance. Children need the opportunity to learn who they are as individuals and what they are willing to believe in making their own value decisions. Goals and objectives related to the acceptance of self and others are:

TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE BECOME MORE ACCEPTING OF THEMSELVES AND THE SIGNIFICANT PEOPLE WITH WHOM THEY COME IN CONTACT.

To feel better about self as an individual with talents and personal qualities that are valuable.

To be less critical of personal limitations.

To appreciate other's talents and accept their limitations.

To be able to clarify important value issues, especially in the face of conflicting messages.

To accept the decisions that others make and the values that others hold as being legitimate for them.

To be able to generalize learning that occurs in specific situation to other situations (p. 4).

Acceptance of Feelings. Children need to learn that people experience the total range of human feelings. Young people are often hesitant about expressing feelings productively and choose instead to camouflage them until they build up and spill over uncontrollably. Goals and objectives related to the acceptance of

feelings are:

TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE BE MORE ACCEPTING OF ALL FEELINGS.

To identify feelings.

To accept all feelings as legitimate.

To claim feelings rather than camouflage them.

To recognize personal responsibility in choosing how to act on a feeling (p. 5).

Interpersonal Relationships. Children need to learn that the bases of good relationships relate to abilities in expressing oneself openly to others, in listening to others, and in showing genuine respect for the needs and feelings of other people. In conflict situations, people tend to deal with each other through playing games, manipulating, or by having explosive outbursts when the anger builds up and breaks through inappropriately. Goals and objectives related to interpersonal relationships are:

TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE FORM MORE SATISFYING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHERS.

To express feelings and needs verbally to others and to feel less scared and anxious in doing so.

To accept the feelings and needs of others as important to them.

To negotiate productively where a conflict of needs exist (p.5).

Role Playing

The literature presenting strategies for affective education development indicates that role playing is a tool which can be used effectively with all ages and in most situations. Psychodrama, a technique employed with severely disturbed persons, requires a trained

therapist, but role play as a technique for learning new behaviors and skills can be appropriately adapted to the classroom (Hammill & Bartel, 1978). Role playing can help children understand feelings, attitudes, and the acceptance of others. Role playing can help children look at a situation from a different point of view or help children identify with a problem. Role playing provides opportunity for interaction in developing interpersonal relationships. Role playing provides practice or behavior rehearsal for a behavior they want to learn. Role play is used to reinforce both cognitive and affective behaviors. Role playing techniques can be used to teach problem solving (Young, 1967).

The process of valuing--arriving at intelligent choices--can be done through role play (Raths, Harmin, Simon, 1978). Curwin and Curwin (1974) indicate that values clarification is a flexible method of incorporating goals and procedures of affective education in the existing classroom framework. Children's everyday choices, such as How do I act?, With whom will I be friendly?, and Who am I?, can be explored through role playing (Hawley, 1975).

Integrating values clarification in the curriculum subject area makes the content come alive by giving personal meanings to the subject (Harmin, Kirschenbaum, & Simon, 1973). Such examples of role play in subject areas include role playing alternative endings to stories, role playing characterizations of significant persons, giving multicultural responses to situations from history or current events, role playing practical consumer education concerns such as banking or purchasing. Additionally, role play helps build decision-making skills through the social studies curriculum (Shaftel, 1967). Bruner (1966) states that factual knowledge provides a base for learning, but

comprehension and understanding are gained through experiences. In teaching about early man, Bruener had children immerse themselves in different roles to gain understanding of the divergent roles of man. Role playing simulations require students to learn about things beyond their own personal experiences; thus, role playing teaches skills in research, speech, writing, and organization (Pomerantz, 1974). Pomerantz suggests that students role play a project such as a "mini-school" where students assume the roles of the significant persons and develop profiles of these persons through research.

Children can learn how to cope with experiences related to interpersonal problems by explaining various responses and reactions through role play (Hammill & Bartel, 1978). To teach children to build coping resources for frustration, Fagen and Long (1979) suggest role playing situations where a child wants a particular end result but is unsuccessful in getting that result.

Role playing is specifically presented as an effective strategy for teaching exceptional children (Gearheart & Weishahn, 1976; Simon & O'Rourke, 1977; Swanson & Reinhart, 1979; Walker & Shea, 1980). Frostig and Maslow (1973) list role playing among activities to promote language development in children with learning problems. Role play activities have been recommended for use with hearing impaired children (Schwartzberg, 1972) and with orthopedically handicapped children (Fusco, 1977). The Gifted Child Society suggests role play as a method for encouraging creativity and application of ideas for students who are gifted and talented (Ginsberg & Harrison, 1977). Smith (1968) addresses role playing as a method for teaching

social, personal, and emotional skills to the retarded. Role playing allows the retarded student to practice responses in situations similar to those which he/she will possibly find in the community. Also, role playing helps the retarded student practice interacting skills appropriate for mainstream classroom settings.

Guiding Role Play

Guiding role play does not require special talent; however, there are some clear simple steps a teacher can follow to help students obtain success and comfort in role playing. First, the teacher needs to set a classroom climate conducive to role playing. Role playing needs to be taken seriously by the students. Secondly, the teacher needs to learn the role play sequence of building blocks to teach role playing skills to students. Each step builds increasing involvement and comfort and helps generate awareness of how movements, senses, and expressions convey a message. Developing this role play sequence with a class will help insure successful role playing experiences in the classroom.

A sequence of building blocks for role playing is a comfort development and instructional process in the role play technique. The building blocks themselves are a form of creative drama using pantomime, but are not role play. They are a means of achieving successful role play. A guideline to follow is to emphasize beginning with simple exercises, build slowly to activities which involve more risk-taking, such as a speaking role, and then into full role play.

The Life Skills for Mental Health Program (Georgia Department of Human Resources, 1978) presents the following sequence as guidelines.

A SEQUENCE OF BUILDING BLOCKS FOR ROLE PLAYING

Teacher and Students are seated in a circle.

I. BUILDING COMFORT

Tell students you will create an object in space with your hands. (Examples of objects you might create are: a threaded needle, an ice cream cone, a razor, a pencil/ pen.) Be sure to create an object that is familiar to the people in your class--something they have used themselves. As they watch you use the object, they will see what it is. Tell them that after you use the object, you will pass it to the person next to you. When each person has used the object, he or she will pass it on to the person next in the circle. Each person should see the object, manipulate space so that it becomes absolutely real, and then think of a new way to use the object. By the time it is passed completely around the circle, everyone will have used the object in a different way.

II. BUILDING INVOLVEMENT

Students come individually into the circle to perform, and the remaining members of the group are the "audience."

Give students a situation to pantomime in front of the group while the other class members guess from the performance what the situation is. A number of suggested "situations" are listed here:

1. Obstacles to Cross--Give each student a different obstacle to pantomime crossing in front of the group. Suggested obstacles are:

iced over lake	river	locked door	mud	ladder
railroad tracks	fire	mountain	tall grass	stone wall
expressway	fence	snow	rope	line of guards

2. Places in Space--Pantomime activities or behaviors appropriate to the place.

any of the rooms in a house	school bus
playground	hospital
classroom	jail
church	any place students create

3. Pantomime household chores, and guess what they are.

4. "Open the Box"--Have children pantomime receiving a gift and opening it. You can vary the situation by suggesting that the gift is the thing they most want, or suggest that it is an inappropriate gift from a relative who lives 1,000 miles away and hasn't seen the child in years.

(Or pretend the relative has come for a visit and is watching as the gift is opened!) Choose a setting for receiving gifts that is appropriate to the group. (Don't choose Christmas if there are children in the group who do not celebrate Christmas. Make it a birthday instead.) Let the children create the setting. For example, decide with the children where the Christmas tree should stand and how tall it is. Together, put on the lights and ornaments. Then plug in the cord and watch the lights go on! Each child in turn takes her gift from under the tree and acts out what gift she has received. This will be communicated by pantomime of opening the box, taking out the gift and then "using" it. The teacher can also ask the children to become adults on Christmas morning.

5. Focus on Senses--Start this activity by talking about how we use our senses and how we explore with senses. Let the students guess the situation and sense involved.

Sight: climb up and look down from a high area
spot someone in a crowd
watch a football game

Hearing: listen to a dull lecture
listen to good music

Touch: pulling taffy
walking with something in your shoe
walking in the grass
playing in the sand/mud

Smell: perfume
an offensive odor
a bon fire
a rose garden

Note: This activity could be used in conjunction with the Life Skills activity that deals with senses and with the fact that some people have special differences in their "sense abilities." See Life Skills Guide for ages 9-11, "Special Differences," p. 21.

6. Focus on Space--Pantomime a confined space, such as being stuck in an elevator or crawling through a cave.

III. INTRODUCING INTERACTION AMONG PLAYERS AND USE OF "CHAIR"

1. The chair is the only prop which will be used in role play. Discuss with the class how a chair is described; the purpose of a chair. The students may arrive at an agreement on what purpose chairs serve: to support the human body in a seated position.
2. Go around the circle and ask everyone to name a type of chair or some object that supports the human body in a seated position.

3. Make the chair into something amusing to the students, such as a chair at the dentist's office. You can then become the patient, fearful and evasive.
4. Then each child can make the chair into something else to sit on.
5. With the students, create a scene involving a chair. Let the class create the specifics. You might start by saying, "Let's pretend that these chairs are the seats in the doctor's waiting room. How many people are waiting to see the doctor?" By asking questions of the whole class, lead it into describing the makeup of the individual characters: "Is this woman young or old?" "What is she like, is she irritable or pleasant?" etc. Afterwards, ask for volunteers to take roles. Give the students a short time to step out of their shoes and into their new roles. Tell them that they are becoming that person. At the end of the role play, be sure to tell them to leave that role and become themselves again. Always praise the performances at the end of any type of creative drama.
6. Divide the class into pairs or trios and have them to build the story. You can add or change elements in the story, such as the dentist or overprotective mother.

IV. ADDING DIALOGUE

Add the dialogue to the dramas the students have created. If they have created the roles, they will know what to say.

V. INVOLVING THE CLASS

Have the students count off according to the number of actors in the role play situation. Then give each actor a number. The students are to "understudy" the actor with their corresponding number. You may even want to call on them to substitute at points in the role play or to be the actors in a replay after a period of discussion.

VI. USING ROLE PLAY

You can use the role play strategy in a number of ways in your class:

1. Exploring situations children face or are likely to face--for example, going to high school; asking someone for a date for the first time; moving to a new neighborhood; spending the night away from home for the first time; interviewing for a job. High school classes might divide into "families" and consider how their families would deal with the everyday issues (and perhaps a few hardships) of family life.
2. Exploring situations that others face to gain understanding--What would it be like to be blind or to be crippled in some way? Suppose you had to make your way around school in a wheel chair? What would it be like to be a member of the opposite sex? Of another race?

3. Exploring fantasies--What would it be like to go to the moon? To travel through the bloodstream? What would it be like to meet someone from another planet?
4. Exploring real interaction problems--When problems arise in class (e.g., two students get into a fight) the teacher can ask the students to role play different ways to resolve the problem, and explore the consequences of the different solutions.
5. In subject matter--Teachers can use role play to help students get a more vivid feel for the issues in the subject. For example, in government class, set up a mock Supreme Court and consider a controversial decision being faced by the Court (or that has been faced in the past). The debate is presented to the Court and the Supreme Court Justices hand down their decision. In history, have students take the parts of a family at the beginning of the American Revolution, when the father announces that he has decided to fight with the colonies. Or perhaps the 17 year-old son announces that he has decided to fight with the colonies and the father is loyal to England. (Note: in history classes, it is better if the teacher avoids having children act out the pageantry of war, and rather focuses on the feelings and day to day lives of the people during that time.)

TIPS ON ROLE PLAYING

1. Before beginning role play, orient the students. Give enough directions so participants know the situation they are in. Try to arrive at the situation by asking questions and getting the group members to decide: the mood of characters, physical characteristic and ages, the setting.
2. Select role players, volunteers if possible. Make sure they know they have a right to pass if they choose.
3. Set an approximate time limitation for the actual role play--about 5 minutes and state that you will stop the role play at some point.
4. Give the participants a brief time to get into their roles after they agree to assume them, and then say "begin".
5. At the end of the role play, tell the participants to leave their roles and become themselves again.
6. Discuss actions of characters, not the role players. Refer to the role by the name of the character rather than by the name of the player.
7. Avoid the use of role playing for therapeutic purpose in the classroom.
8. Always praise performers at the end of any type creative drama. Lead the applause even if it was not an academy award performance!
9. When role play is use to explore how students would respond to a problem or situation, generally the situation should be replayed to consider alternate responses.
10. Establish closure with discussion at the end to help student to clarify responses.

Adapted from Life Skills for Mental Health: A Guide for Trainers, Division of Mental Health/Mental Retardation, Georgia Department of Human Resources, Atlanta, Georgia, Revised May 1978.

APPENDICES

- Appendix A Role Playing Activity for Educable Mentally Handicapped
- Appendix B Role Playing Activity for Trainable Mentally Handicapped
- Appendix C. Role Playing Activity for Orthopedically Handicapped
- Appendix D. Role Playing Activity for Learning Disabled/Emotionally Handicapped
- Appendix E. Role Playing Activity for Gifted and Talented
- Appendix F. Role Playing Activity for Preschool Handicapped

Appendix A

ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY

STUDENTS: Educable Mentally Handicapped

GRADE LEVEL OR AGE: 9-12 years

SUBJECT: General Body Care

OBJECTIVE: To introduce the concept of health and cleanliness to the students and acquaint them with basic care procedures.

DESCRIPTION:

Materials- Pictures of a bathtub, hair, nails, teeth, and a person doing exercises.

Characters--Teacher and students.

Setting- Students sitting on the floor in a circle.

Situation--Introduction is made to the students on the importance of general body care. Teacher covers basic care on keeping the body clean and how important it is. Next, the teacher covers different rules to follow for their body's care. Important rules include: taking a bath everyday, wash face, wash ears, wash and clean nails, brush teeth, wash hair, trim fingernails and toenails weekly, sleep eight hours nightly, and get plenty of exercise. Students can pantomime the different rules.

A game of pantomime is suggested. Each student, taking turns, will act out the following topics: take a bath, wash hair, brush hair, eat properly, clean nails, wash hands, brush teeth, exercise, and sleep. Students try to guess what pantomime is being done.

Appendix A

ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY

STUDENTS: Educable Mentally Handicapped

GRADE LEVEL OR AGE: 9-12 years

SUBJECT: Health Services

OBJECTIVE: To make students aware of the people and organizations who help when one is hurt or for general health checkups.

DESCRIPTION:

Materials- Picture of dentist, nurse, physician, Band-Aid, bandages.

Characters- Scene I- school nurse with bandage, cotton, water
boy with a cut

Scene II-doctor and little girl.

Setting- Scene I--nurse's office

Scene II--doctor's office

Situation- Introduce activity with a review of general health care which include parts of the body we take care of, food, and people who help keep our bodies health. These include nurse, dentist, and doctor.

Scene I- Let a boy cut his knee or hurt himself and send him to the play nurse.

Scene II- Pretend a little girl breaks her arm. Send her to the doctor. Show students how to put arm in sling.

Discussion of the different roles and how they were carried out should follow the activity.

Appendix B

ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY

STUDENTS: Trainable Mentally Handicapped

GRADE LEVEL: Middle (ages 12-15)

SUBJECT: Safety skills

OBJECTIVE: The student will demonstrate safety precautions in the home.

DESCRIPTION:

Characters - a mother, a stranger -a utility repairman, the TMH student

Setting - The inside of a home: a room with windows, door, and a telephone.

Situation - The student role plays a scene where the student locks the doors when left home alone when his/her mother leaves to go next door to the neighbor's house. While the mother is gone the doorbell rings. The student asks who it is and/or looks out of the window. It is a stranger so he/she does not open the door but calls the mother at the neighbor's house for instructions.

Appendix C

ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY

STUDENTS: Orthopedically Handicapped (Moderately handicapped)

GRADE LEVEL: Secondary

SUBJECT: Functional skills

OBJECTIVE: The student will be able to use appropriate skills for dining in a restaurant.

DESCRIPTION:

Characters - 4 students: 2 boys, 2 girls with physical disabilities
waiter
other persons in restaurant

Setting - a restaurant with table and chairs

Situation - Four physically handicapped students go on a dinner date to a restaurant. Students through role play will practice ordering, paying, and using appropriate utensils for courses, tipping, conversation, as well as management of wheelchairs, braces, and/or crutches.

Appendix D

ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY

STUDENTS Learning Disabled/Emotionally Handicapped

GRADE LEVEL: Primary-Junior High

SUBJECT: Affective Area/Behavioral Adjustment

OBJECTIVE: To develop feelings of positive persona' power.

DESCRIPTION:

Characters: Victim whose position is "I am helpless and can't help myself; try to help me."

Rescuer whose position matches the Victim's--"You are helpless and can't help yourself; but I'll try to help you."

Persecuter(Villian) whose position is "You are helpless and it's your own fault."

Setting: Classroom/Playground/Bathroom/School Environment

Situation: Teacher is out of room. L /EH child is being hasseled and bullied by another child (and/or children). After reaching brink of frustration LD/EH child lashes out (verbally and/or physically) at child (children). At this instant the teacher reenters and automatically blames LD/EH child for disruption. Another child chimes in that it really wasn't the LD/EH child's fault and proceeds to come to that child's rescue.

Appendix E

ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY

STUDENTS: Gifted/Talented

GRADE LEVEL: 4th-6th grade

SUBJECT: Language Arts

OBJECTIVE: To understand how it feels to "go against" the group

DESCRIPTION:

Characters - Baseball Team. Up to 9 persons. Danny and additional team members. Each team member chooses his/her own name.

Setting - A baseball team meeting two days before the final game of the year.

Situation - The team has voted to give the volunteer coach a present. All agree to put in \$10.00 each into a "kitty". Danny badly needs glasses and his parents cannot afford them. He needs only \$15.00 more to purchase them. He has to tell the team he may not put \$10.00 into the "kitty", and he awaits their reaction.

Appendix F

ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY

STUDENTS: Preschool handicapped and non-handicapped

GRADE LEVEL: Kindergarten

SUBJECT: What happens at school/ What happens away from school

OBJECTIVE: To determine the difference between activities performed at school and those which are not.

DESCRIPTION:

Characters - Teacher and students.

Setting - Students in a kindergarten classroom.

Situation: The children are asked about the things they do when they are in kindergarten. They are encouraged to tell what activities are performed each day, and are provided cues as needed. After a number of different activities have been discussed, the children are asked to tell some things that they do when they are not at kindergarten. A wide variety of responses should be elicited. Next, the children are instructed to act out some of the activities that have been described. The children are divided into pairs. Each pair is instructed to act out a different classroom activity of their own choice. After the activity is completed, the remainder of the classmates guess what activity has been performed. Handicapped and non-handicapped children can be paired for this exercise. The procedures are repeated for activities away from school.

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