DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 197 565 EC 131 772

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TITLE 10 and 25 Second Impressions of Ingratiation Attempts by Children with Learning Disabilities.
INSTITUTION Northwestern Univ., Evanston, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.; Illinois Univ., Chicago. Inst. for Learning Disabilities.
PUB DATE 80
CONTRACT 300-770-493
NOTE 11p.; Portions of this paper were presented at the Convention of the American Psychological Association (Montreal, Canada, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; Exceptional Child Research; *Interpersonal Competence; *Learning Disabilities

ABSTRACT

Two experiments examined the ability of learning disabled versus nondisabled third to fifth grade children (N=20) to ingratiate an adult interviewer. In each experiment an equal number of disabled and nondisabled youngsters were instructed to act natural, and an equal number were instructed to "try and get the lady to like you." Naive college students rated the children from the ensuing interactions based on observations of either 10 or 25 seconds of the videotaped interviews. In Experiment 1, Ss were presented with videotapes containing both audio and visual stimuli. Experiment 2 was identical to Experiment 1 except only visual content was presented. Both experiments demonstrated that children with learning disabilities are able to ingratiate an interviewer at least as well as nondisabled children when explicit instructions to do so are given. (Author)

10 And 25 Second Impressions of Ingratiation Attempts by Children with Learning Disabilities

by

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Portions of this paper were presented at the Montreal convention of the American Psychological Association, 1980.

Parts of this study were supported by a research contract from the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, Office of Education (US HEW OE 300 770 493), with the University of Illinois Chicago Institute for Learning Disabilities. Thanks are due to the personnel and children of Evanston School District 65 whose cooperation made these studies possible. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Barry Perlmutter, Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill. 60201.

Abstract

Two experiments examining the ability of learning disabled versus nondisabled children to ingratiate an adult interviewer were conducted. In each experiment an equal number of disabled and nondisabled youngsters were instructed to act natural, and an equal number were instructed to "try and get the lady to like you." naive college students rated the children from the ensuing interactions based on observations of either 10 or 25 seconds of the videotaped interviews.

In experiment I subjects were presented with videotapes containing both audio and visual stimuli. Experiment II was identical to experiment I except only visual content was presented. Both experiments demonstrated that children with learning disabilities are able to ingratiate an interviewer at least as well as nondisabled children when explicit instructions to do so are given.

For those of you concerned about the social status of children with learning disabilities, this news may prove both encouraging and disheartening. First the good news. It appears that LD children are not universally devalued across all social situations. There even appear to be some circumstances in which these kids receive higher marks than their nondisabled peers.

Now for the bad news. While most social skills training programs aimed at LD children have tended to focus on the development and practice of specific behaviors, evidence from a series of studies conducted by James Bryan, Barry Perlmutter, and Richard Sherman (Bryan & Perlmutter, 1979; Bryan & Sherman, 1980) suggests that children with learning disabilities may already possess these skills, but either lack the insight as to which situations are proper for displaying them, or are simply unmotivated to perform in a socially advantageous manner. Moreover, both positive and negative impressions are formed of these children by observers totally unfamiliar with them, their backgrounds, and diagnoses, within an initial period of only 10-25 seconds. This despite observers' statements that they were unable to make accurate judgements as to the social competency of LD and normal children after 2-5 minutes of observing them on videotape.

The overwhelming preponderance of evidence concerning the social status of children with learning disabilities has tended to lead researchers to the conclusion that such children are universally disliked. Classroom teachers are likely to describe them as less cooperative, less able to cope with new situations, less socially acceptable to others, less accepting of responsibility, less tactful,

and more aggressive than their nondisabled peers (Boersma & Chapman, 1978; Keogh, Tchir, & Windeguth-Behn, 1974; Myklebust, Boshes, Olson, & Cole, 1969). Parents describe them as obstinate, sassy, bossy, stubborn, more clinging, and less able to receive affection (Wender, 1971; Strag, 1972). And peers consistently rate them toward the bottom of the class sociometrically (Siperstein, Bopp, & Bak, 1977; Bruininks, 1978). Study after study has demonstrated that LD children are disliked by those people with whom they have the most frequent contact.

Although several explanations for this rejection have been proposed, virtually all have involved the assumption that personal knowledge about the child, such as his or her diagnosis, knowledge of portions of the case history, or direct contact is involved. The bulk of the studies in this area have been accomplished using those people who have enjoyed the most contact with the children as subjects. Many studies have employed ratings of LD children by their classmates. Others have used teachers or parents as judges. The important point is that judges have generally been very familiar with the children they rated.

Two questions remained unanswered by these studies. The first involved observers immediate impressions of children with learning disabilities. While the available evidence indicates that familiarity breeds contempt, it has remained unclear whether such familiarity is necessary for judges to form their negative opinions.

The second unanswered question involved the universality of rejection. Granting that children with learning disabilities often perform in a socially abberant manner, it seems likely that negative

ratings of them by teachers, peers, and parents have stemmed from some objectionable behavior. Therefore, the question of whether or not these children possessed the skills necessary for acceptance within specific social situations remained unaddressed. It is likely that judges rated the children based on overall impressions. Even where these impressions were negative, there was a lack of evidence to indicate that LD children are deprecated within all possible contexts.

Bryan & Perlmutter (1979) examined both these questions. Results indicated that college undergraduates without any knowledge of who the children were, their diagnosis, or sociometric standing, consistently rated LD lower than NLD children when shown 3-5 minute videotapes of them teaching a peer how to play a table-top bowling game. Yet when ratings of these children interacting with younger kids were analyzed, indications were that LD females were rated as more, rather than less socially adaptive than normals.

While difficult to document, when one reads the literature addressed to social remediation, there appears to be a greater emphasis placed on developing and practicing particular responses than on discriminating exactly when such responses are called for. The implicit assumption is that children with social deficits are able to recognize when such behaviors as smiling, listening, talking, or acting silly are desirable, but lack the ability to perform them in an acceptable manner.

Bryan and Perlmutter indicated one situation in which some LD children were apparantly able to perform at an acceptable level. Perhaps the social rejection of LD children involves not social skill deficits, but differences between LD and NLD youngsters in their

motivation to ingratiate or in their knowledge of to whom, when, and where ingratiation attempts should be employed.

Bryan and Perlmutter also demonstrated that observers need not be familiar with children with learning disabilities in order to form negative impressions of them. The current set of experiments sought to entend these findings by: 1) Shortening the amount of time subjects were allowed to view videotaped interactions, and 2) Further establishing whether LD youngsters have the ability to act in a socially acceptable manner when cues to do so are made obvious.

Videotaped segments lasting 10 and 25 seconds were taken from 3 minute interactions between a female adult and 3rd-5th grade youngsters, half of whom had previously been diagnosed as learning disabled. Children in this study were given one of two sets of instructions. Essentially, each was either told to act natural during his interview or to attempt to make the interviewer like him. They were given no clues as to how to go about making the interviewer like them, however. Thus, there were four conditions in these studies, formed by the two sets of instructions, ingratiate or act natural, and the two classifications of children, LD or NLD.

Two studies were run. In the first the sound and picture were both presented. In the second the picture was still presented but the sound was turned off. Raters for both studies were college undergraduates fulfilling a requirement from an introductory psychology course. Study number one employed 22 males and 24 females. Study number two used 21 males and 21 females. While half of the raters in each study were assigned to observe the children for 10 and half for 25 seconds, each

rater saw the same 20 children, presented in identical order.

The results of these studies consistently showed that LD were rated worse than NLD children when the instructions were to act natural, but were rated at least as high as normal youngsters in the ingratiate condition. Moreover, these ratings held true even when subjects were presented with only 10-25 seconds of videotaped interactions with the sound turned off!

Three important conclusions emerge: 1) Children with learning disabilities do not appear to lack the ability to make a favorable impression upon naive observers when they are told in advance that the situation is proper for displaying positive social behaviors. 2) They are judged largely on the basis of their nonverbal behaviors. And 3) These judgements are formed within an initial observation period of only 10-25 seconds.

It seems that negative impressions of children with learning disabilities are not limited to persons with a history of contact with them. These impressions are formed very rapidly and, judging by comments made by raters used in the current set of studies, before those evaluating the children are even aware that a judgement has been made. This raises a methodological problem in that it seems observers quickly lose their objectivity when it comes to LD and NLD children. Where such objectivity is deemed necessary, as in the case of blind observations within classrooms, this issue must be addressed.

However, the primary findings of these studies are two-fold. 1) Children with learning disabilities are apparently able to perform the social task of ingratiating, at least over the short run, and 2)

Impressions of these children, whether positive or negative, are initially formed within the first of 10-25 seconds of contact.

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