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ABSTRACT

Social relationships should not be considered merely as the way individuals get along with others. Interaction with others plays a crucial part in the social development of children in terms of how they interpret words, gestures and attitudes of others toward themselves. Every social interaction holds messages that children interpret as enforcing their worthiness as individuals. A child's reactions to the challenges of the classroom setting and the teacher's responses to those reactions can influence the child's social development and subsequent level of accomplishment. Teachers can, therefore, encourage positive social development through their interactions with children. There are a variety of techniques to enhance these interactions, such as intervening in conflicts between children to clarify each child's feelings, and bibliotherapy, or the use of books to help children learn how to define meaning for themselves in various situations. Teachers and parents should encourage children to try harder to accomplish tasks. They should also try to separate the behavior of a child from the child's view of him- or herself as a person. Thoughtful interaction with children both at home and in the classroom can greatly improve their social development and increase their chances of success in life. (JA)

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April 12, 1996

"Are Social Relationships Really Only Social?"

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the ways that various and subtle gestures act on a child's social relationships affecting his or her mental health, cognitive development, self-concept, and intellectual gains. Social relationships are not to be considered as merely behavior that fits into the way "we get along" with others. Interaction with others is far more serious than an added part of the fun in our lives. It plays a vital and crucial part in formulating or changing our own self-development and the direction in the way we think, interpret the behavior of others toward ourselves and the way we reach out to the environment as a "safe risk" or not. Teachers can help a great deal in this regard if they will thoughtfully interact with children.

II. DEEPENING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT A SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP IS

Social development as used in this paper refers to all of children's interactions with other people. It affects a child whenever he or she is with others, and later when the child is alone. It focuses on how a child

interprets words, gestures, attitudes of others toward himself or herself.

Every relationship with others is a social one because it comes from outside ourselves and affects a developing self as we look inward. The interaction itself holds messages for a child that the child will interpret to mean he or she is a worthy individual.

George Herbert Mead, (1967, p. 138) a social philosopher in the early 1900s, said that when we are very young, we learn to regard ourselves as object of the environment. "The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved." In today's language, we would say we interpret someone's

impressions of us by the way someone acts toward us. We begin to see ourselves through the eyes and words of other people. If someone stares at us without smiling, we feel uncomfortable. We wonder what that person is thinking. We think, "It doesn't look good for us."

Charles Horton Cooley, in 1902 (p. 126), said that "...there is no view of the self, that will bear examination, which makes it altogether distinct, in our minds, from other persons." He also refers to "the looking-glass self" as affecting our own impressions of ourselves. "....In imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it" (p. 184).

> A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to that other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. (p. 184)

He goes on to say that it is not only our own mechanical or physical mirror image we think of in relation to that person's mind, but it is whether we are ashamed of what we see or the imagined effect we have on another person's mind (p. 184).

It is easy to see, then, how much we depend on our interpretation of our bbehavior in the minds of others and how the interpretation of the impression contributes to who we are, who we think we can become, or whether others think of us as worthy or their attention. For young children, who are learning about life, other people, and themselves, any relationships is going to have an effect on them. The strength or depth of his effect will depend on how significant that other person is for the child. A parent, sibling, a teacher, a school mate whom a child may see frequently will have a more intense and long-lasting effect than another person with whom the child may not interact often. In extreme cases, when a child has been affected by something an individual said and the child may not have known the person well, the experience may have a strong or traumatizing effect. Child abuse from a stranger, sexual abuse by a person not seen often can have a strong effect on the child in regard to how the child will think of himself or herself.

This suggests that as adults we can be responsible for the way children interact. If we want to protect sensitivities and self-formulations that will help children in becoming strong in self-development, we can be aware of the effects their conservations have on one another. Everyone is

interpreting everyone else. Everyone's personal interpretation is affecting a self-image. Self-images do not develop in a vacuum. It develops in the presence of other people. It is an accumulation of what various people of various ages, in various places, and various degrees of closeness to a child say and do to a child.

Contemporary writers, such as Howard Gardner in his book, *Frames of Mind* (1993), Martin E. P. Seligman, in *The Optimistic Child* (1995), and Daniel Goleman, in *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), all give compelling reasons why social relationships whether at school, home, or outside of either one, can generate crucial aspects of self-development. Gardner indicates that all of us have intelligences in varying degrees. One of the intelligences hs discusses is "Interpersonal Intelligence" (p. 239). Within that category, is "**intrapersonal** intelligence," which is our awareness of **our own** feelings, ways in which we identify them or name them as a result of an experience. He also discusses " **interpersonal** intelligence," which allows us to define what we think are the moods and temperaments of **other people's feelings.** He would like teachers and parents to be aware of these sensitivities and intelligences and encourage them to be used, not ignored. Many schools, today, are using his ideas in their

classrooms as part of instruction.

Seligman emphasizes the importance of helping children (and ourselves as well) to interpret our experiences thoughtfully. We should not think as a result of an unpleasant experience, that we will always be unsuccessful in relationships or tasks that mean a great deal to us. If something does not work at one time, it does not mean that we are always doomed to be failures in future experiences.

Goleman indicates that, "There are hundreds of studies showing that how parents treat their children--whether with harsh discipline or empathic understanding, with indifference or warmth, and so on--has deep and lasting consequences for the child's emotional life (1995, p. 190)."

These researchers and scientists provide evidence to support their views regarding human interacton and successes in our lives. Their evidence is very compelling in promoting desires and energies of teachers, parents, and siblings to be watchful of the qualities of interactions children have.

In Elkind's third edition of his book, *The Sympathetic Understanding of the Child* (1994), he illustrates his view of children's development by focusing not only the child himself or herself, but also the context or situation in which a child may be at a given time. He refers to the

focusing not only on the child himself or herself, but also the context or situation in which a child may be at a given time. He refers to the sociologist, Erving Goffman, who discussed repetitive social situations (or interactions with others) experienced by people, and how those situations seemed to have their own rules, expectations, and understandings (1994, p. viii). Goffman referred to those situations as *frames.* Elkind suggests that these socialization frames are learned early in life. He, too, reflects the importance of looking at the child's contexts of experiences, not only the child as an individual.

Sometimes children come to school with one set of learned frames (or ways to act in various situations) and the teacher has other expectations of the child's behavior in certain activities (such as not allowing children to hit one another). Elkind says that frames are easy to identify because they are situational rather than psychological (1994, p. xvi). How we respond to someone or a set of circumstances is influenced by those circumstances. We do not necessarily respond in the same way, for example, at all birthday parties. Our feelings or impressions depend on who is at the party, the age of the children, and the receptivity of the host, hostess or the celebrated person.

A sociological theory that is often mentioned in relation to the way people respond to one another and interpret the world around them, is the one by W. I. Thomas in the 1920s (Farley, 1990, p. 71). Thomas recognized that people adjusted to new situations in terms of the way they defined the *meaning* of them in relation to themselves. The way we interpret the meaning of situation is related to the way we respond to it. If an individual is upset by something he or she sees, and runs away from it, that situation held a real threat for him or her. Another way of saying this, is that even though others may not see a given situation as something from which they should run, the feeling of fright is very real to anyone who imagines that it is wise to get away from it.

Each of us has our own definition of what happens around us or to us. These definitions occur without specific instruction. When one considers the many things and actions of people that we see every day and may not talk about it to someone else, it is understandable that often no definition of a small event is made. However, when we do see something that seems odd or unusual to us, it does make an impression of some kind whether we verbalize it or not.

Because values and goals motivate our behavior, we are always seeking opportunities in our environment to obtain what we want. We also know from instructions and comments given to us by our parents and teachers that we are expected to act in certain ways. We are taught to be courteous, thoughtful, honest, nonviolent, for example. The extent to which our parents may get angry at us if we don't listen to them, varies with the importance of those characteristics to them. We know how important they are when we are punished in some way if we do not act as they have told us we should.

When parents or teachers ignore children's feelings and don't try to help children understand them in some way, it not only shows a lack of respect for children's emotions, but it also does not take the opportunity to help children sort out, name, and deal with their feelings. Again, we see how interaction with others affects our self-concept and development. We can learn with constructive help whether we are considered important or not. Goleman notes: 'The difference between the two outlooks--children who are confident and optimistic versus those who expect to fail--starts to take shape in the first few years of life. (p. 193)."

We know from what we have learned from Mead, Cooley, Elkind, Seligman, Goleman, Thomas that the way we interpret people's behavior toward us is crucial to the way we develop, how competent we are taught to think we are, how we feel about being valued by other people, how capable we are about knowing ourselves emotionally. All forms of interaction are presented to us by other people. How we understand or determine what those behaviors mean in relation to who we are depends on how we were taught to define them to ourselves. This takes a lifetime, it is true.

Definitions of behavior can even change with different eras of our society. The 1960s were a very different time than the 1990s. The pre-technological age was very different from today's society. Our parents and teachers were different when they were 20, 30, 40 years old, therefore the characteristics of their interactions with us were different during those ages. However, in the first few years of a child's life all these explanations, frames of reference, attitudes, and views of the adults or siblings who are with children, are making a difference in how the children develop and cope with society. The children are learning about themselves and the directions their behavior is supposed to take (if they are to please the adults who are responsible for them).

III.HOW CAN WE BE MORE AWARE IN KNOWING HOW TO HELP CHILDREN?

Our awareness starts by realizing that the way a child starts out knowing who he or she is depends on, as George Herbert Mead said, "The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises out of social experience. After a self has arisen, it in a certain sense provides for itself its social experiences...(p. 140)." He also said, "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience...(p. 135)."

Social experiences are those interactions with the world that occur every day. They are sometimes subtle, in that we pay little attention to them. We are not referring here to a popular meaning of the word, "social," which is often used to describe a party or gathering of people who are there solely for the purpose of enjoyment. This is why any social interaction is more serious beyond a "party" event because the consequences contribute to the very foundational levels of an individual's understanding and development from the moment of birth.

Adolescent years become even more difficult in self-development and self-concept. Between thirteen and nineteen, extremely important decisions and thoughts are being defined and re-defined as we interact with more people who can affect our lives very seriously. People such as companions, mates, future employers, and so on affect the way we view ourselves. Pessimistic or optimistic perspectives, begin early, however.

Goleman cites a study conducted with Head Start children which listed characteristics of readiness for school (pp. 193, 194).

"1. *Confidence*, related to a sense of control over one's self and the environment;

2. *Curiosity*, knowing that finding out about things leads to positive pleasures;

3. *Intentionality*, wishing to have an impact and being effective;

4. *Self-control*, able to control one's own actions;

5. *Relatedness*, able to interact with others and knowing one is understood;

6. *Capacity to communicate*, knowing one is able to exchange ideas and feelings with others;

7. *Cooperativeness*, able to balance our own needs with others' (p. 194)."

We can help children by noticing their reactions and responding to situations such as the following:

1. Watch for a child's reactions when another speaks angrily to him or her. Note the way a child responds either in words or actions. The teacher can step in and help the child be aware of his own feelings. The child needs in help in knowing the meaning of what happened in relation to his or her own needs.
2. Watch for a child's reactions when a teacher gives directions to a child and those directions are difficult for the child to follow. The teacher will know that the child needs clarity. In that sense the child's emotional needs are respected.
3. Note the child's behavior when another child rebuffs him or her or walks away from the child who has sought contact. The teacher can either approach both children who help the child who has been rejected understand what the child is feeling and help the child know what to do next.
4. Note a child's responses when another child has teased a child by calling a derogatory name (even "Baby" at the kindergarten level).

The teacher can talk to both children indicating that it is not fair to hurt one another's feelings. Help children realize that words do hurt us. Often teachers bring in stories that deal with ways of being considerate of other people's feelings and how important it is not to do that intentionally. Bibliotherapy, or using books to inculcate certain values and deal with emotional issues in children, can be very useful in helping children learn how to define meaning for themselves in various situations.

Teachers and parents can encourage children to try harder rather than criticize them for not being able to do something. When we emphasize that effort is what is needed to succeed, rather than saying the person "will never learn," we are then helping the individual know what to do next. Children very easily begin to think that **they, as individuals** are really incompetent if they are hear that repeatedly. Negative thinking about one's self can become habit. We have to help children avoid labeling themselves as clumsy, awkward, foolish and other negative characteristics. Try to separate the actions or behavior of a child from the child's introspective view of himself or herself as a person.

The causes we attribute to the results of our experiences of success or failure in our lives will influence an optimistic or pessimistic view. Seligman refers to those explanations to ourselves as our "explanatory style" (p. 52). This is crucial to the habits of thought our children will notice and they will hear and do the same.

Central to the way we explain causes of success or failure will affect or energize us in what we choose to do about those experiences and others in the future. It can affect whether we give up or continue trying to succeed. Our habits of persistence and not giving up after a few setbacks toward what we want, are greatly affected by our explanatory style and what we think are our chances for current and future successes. Our enjoyment of life will be shaped by our explanatory style.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONLUDING THOUGHTS

When we realize that each of us create our own reality of what the world is in terms of our sociological as well as psychological experiences with and from people in a society, we can understand that all relationships are social in origin. The infant's first relationship with its mother in the

feeding and caring process is a social relationship. As the father, siglings, and grandparents interact with the infant, broader and more varied dimensions of the infant's world and personality develop. The nature of the sociological setting of various relationships is now recognized as extremely significant in regard to the way personalities will develop.

The above view differs from the popular usage of the term, "social," which brought to mind human interaction at a party or celebration and did not necessarily involve broad and deeper serious implications for our personality development. The frequent reflection we had of the way we thought other people viewed us was not necessarily emphasized.

Educators used to remind us that one of the major purposes of preschool and kindergarten for young children was to learn how to get along with others. With the benefit of the work of sociologists and psychologists, however, we have learned that *any* human relationship carries with it serious implications for the quality of an individual's internal and external life. Evidently the way we learn, whether we have self-confidence, whether we will persist in pursuing our goals, whether we think we are worthwhile human beings, greatly depends on how we tend to

interpret people's behavior *toward* us. The chances we have toward success depends on what we have learned from our parents regarding their view of life's chances for them, too. The internal conversation we carry on with ourselves is part of a learned response to the interpretation and definition of a situation we have experienced. What teachers have said to us when we were in elementary school influenced what we thought we were capable of accomplishing.

We know now that it is better to concentrate on encouraging children to try, not to give up when they are having difficulty with a certain task. We want them to think of their effort as being more important than being "born with" a certain skill. Knowing that one can try whether one knows or not if a skill has been "inherited," is far more encouraging and a more flexible and enduring view than thinking if one was not born with a skill, that it does not help to try to develop it.

Most writers have told us that the various little rules and directives we learn at home influence us greatly in our personality development and self-concept, it is true. Many writers and scholars, however, have also told us that when we become aware of certain automatic thoughts we have which may be getting in the way of what we want, we can change.

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