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ABSTRACT

Young children exhibit aggression in order to achieve their goals, to respond to their developing understandings of ownership. The NAEYC "Code of Ethical Conduct" for early childhood educators includes the commitment to support children's development, including helping them to learn to work cooperatively. The types of interventions that children experience affect the long-term quality of their responses to others. In this vein, Katz's work on children's social competence can plausibly be merged with Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding. Katz's work offers nine principles of practice for enhancing social competence. Vygotsky introduces the child's private speech as a tool "to transfer problem-solving knowledge and responsibility from the adult to the self." Vygotsky found that scaffolding promotes private speech through which children realize they can answer their own questions and learn how to regulate their own behavior. Research reveals effective strategies that provide a platform on which teachers can build. Learning to put these strategies into practice is an ethical responsibility of every person in the early childhood field. (Author/HTH)

Affecting the Future: The Role of Appropriate Scaffolding in the Development of Social Competence

Catherine M. Kearn

Abstract

Young children exhibit aggression in order to achieve their goals, to respond to their developing understandings of ownership. The *Code of Ethical Conduct* for early childhood educators includes the commitment to support children's development, including helping them to learn to work cooperatively. The types of interventions that children experience affect the long-term quality of their responses to others. This paper proposes the merging of Katz's work on children's social competence with Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding. Katz offers nine principles of practice for enhancing social competence. Vygotsky introduces us to the child's private speech as a tool "to transfer problem-solving knowledge and responsibility from the adult to the self." He found that scaffolding promotes private speech through which children realize they can answer their own questions and learn how to regulate their own behavior. Research tells us about effective strategies that give us a platform on which to build. Learning to put them into practice is an ethical responsibility of every person in the early childhood field.

> *Thirteen-month-old Eileen spotted a ball and with a big smile followed it as it rolled across the floor. Jean joined in pursuit of the ball. Teacher Karen smiled at the children and asked, "Can I play with you?" She encouraged one, then the other, to throw the ball and "go after it." Eileen and Jean giggled as they raced in toddling fashion across the room.*

Karen had seen an opportunity to help the children like each other more. She had turned a potential conflict into a fun cooperative exchange. She modeled assertive words: "Can I play with you?" rather than creating a situation of helplessness and conflict by saying something like: "Eileen has the ball. Jean has to watch and wait."

> *Four-year-olds Sue, Mary, and Arlene are building a block house complete with bedrooms, garage, and driveway. Joe watches intently, then approaches and asks: "Can I build with you?" In chorus, the girls respond, "no." Joe respects their no but continues to stand nearby. When the girls start to move props into the house, Joe picks up a stop sign and places it at the end of the driveway. Arlene sharply reminds him, "We told you no." Joe responds, "But I just wanted to help," and walks away.*

The three girls had staked out their domain. Joe respected their "no" but not without a second assertive try. Teacher Ann was busy with another group and missed the interaction. When told about the incident, she expressed amazement at Joe's respectful response. She had modeled the language for him on numerous occasions and was delighted to know he had used it.

She had succeeded in scaffolding one level of acceptable social behavior. Joe had used words instead of forcing his way in. He had respected the "no" response.

What can we gather about the effects of this transaction? Would Joe be able to sustain this behavior if consistently shut out? He had walked

away—but he had walked away alone. The three girls continued to shut out others who approached them, even hitting another girl several times with a block. How could the teacher scaffold their behavior so others would not resent and react to their exclusivity? What could the girls learn? How could the teacher help these children like each other more instead of less?

Because there were a minimal number of blocks, this situation was an opportunity to help children deal with the less-than-adequate resources. The teacher needed to do more than say, "You need to find something else" or "The girls were here first." By using directive speech, the teacher fails to assist children in developing self-regulation. By not intervening effectively, the teacher teaches them that the biggest person can decide what happens without consulting anyone else. It also supports the making of arbitrary rules. Instead, the teacher might have acknowledged that all five children wanted to build and then helped them figure out why it might not work.

Aggression vs. Assertiveness

How does this situation relate to teaching children social competence and assertiveness rather than promoting aggression? Aggression involves actions meant to harm others. The actions must by definition be intentional, and they must be meant to harm. Assertiveness, on the other hand, means expressing one's own needs and feelings, defending one's rights while respecting the rights and feelings of others.

During the first year of life, infants are incapable of aggression because they have no causal understanding. Between the age of 1 and 2, as toddlers begin to develop a sense of ownership, they also begin to develop aggression. The child wants to protect her territory. Protecting toys—territory—is intentional. Those who oppose or threaten that ownership will be the targets of aggressive behavior.

A child's need to protect her territory is developmentally normal. Whether it develops into lifelong aggression, assertiveness, or helplessness depends on the interventions of the adults in the child's life. Aggression as a way of life is learned through direct teaching of antisocial behaviors or the failure to teach alternatives to aggression. Children model their behavior on significant adults as well as peer behavior and television images. Research supports the perception that aggressive children have consistently been subjected to harsh and inconsistent discipline or viewing of violent TV programming—direct teaching of aggressive behavior. As early childhood educators working with children who are in the formative years, we have the opportunity and responsibility to teach those alternative modes of behavior. We need to be proactive, not just reactive. If we fail to teach alternatives to aggression, we are tacitly approving antisocial behavior and aggression.

Social Competence

Section I of the *Code of Ethical Conduct*—Ethical Responsibilities to Children—states: "We are committed to support children's development, respect individual differences, help children learn to live and work cooperatively...." (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997, p. 2). Teachers of toddlers and preschoolers have a unique opportunity to scaffold children's social competence and reduce the risk of lifelong aggressive behaviors.

In *Fostering Children's Social Competence: The Teacher's Role,* Katz and McClellan (1997) discuss nine principles of practice. One of these principles is "optimum teacher intervention promotes social competence." According to this principle, the teacher needs to be aware of what is happening. The teacher needs to be available when a child needs assistance. The teacher also needs to allow children to attempt to solve their own potential conflicts. In the vignette above, the teacher was not aware of the subtle aggressiveness of the girls. Joe needed support to maintain his assertiveness. The teacher could have acknowledged his attempts, allowed him to express his feelings about being excluded, and offered him some alternative strategies. The teacher could also have given the girls an opportunity to develop strategies for relating to Joe other than completely shutting him out. Perhaps they could have told him that when their house was finished, he would be invited to a party. She could have modeled other words, such as: "Joe, right now there are three of us, and because the block area is so small and we have so few blocks, we think it would be hard for more of us to work to-

gether here." She could have suggested they tell Joe: "We are building the house. Would you like to plant some trees in the yard? You could be the landscape man." Either of those comments would have helped Joe and the girls like each other more and would have taught them negotiation skills.

Because no intervention was forthcoming, the girls became aggressive when a fourth girl, Brenda, attempted to join them. Brenda did not ask, as Joe had done. She walked into the block area. Sue used a block to hit her three times in the abdomen. Brenda became a helpless victim, standing speechless until Mary pushed her and she fell on the block structure. At that time, the teacher became aware of the incident. When asked what was happening, Sue and Mary immediately blamed Brenda for knocking down the blocks. Brenda was never given the opportunity to explain. Here was an opportunity to scaffold the social competence of everyone by asking some key questions, by making sure all parties had an opportunity to speak. Questions might have included:

- Brenda, what could you have said to Sue and Mary to let them know what you wanted?
- Sue and Mary, how could you have included Brenda or if you did not want to include her right now, what could you have said?
- Brenda, when Sue hit you with the block, what could you have said to her?
- What do you think would make you happy?

The teacher might have suggested that each party draw a picture of the incident. They could have dictated a sentence about how they would have liked the encounter to end. She might have suggested that the girls start over and think about other things they could do or say so no one felt excluded or was hurt. It is equally important that Brenda learn to assert her rights. This assertiveness is the first stage in standing up for oneself and others as an advocate. It also is the beginning of work for social justice.

The teacher's optimum intervention at this point would have been a bridge to negotiation for the children to use in future encounters. In addition, the teacher could have used other strategies suggested by Katz: (1) Be respectful of children's feelings and (2) Help children cope with adversity. Both Joe and Brenda were disappointed about not being included. They needed to have an adult not only affirm their feelings but also make the distinction between tragedy and disappointment. It is normal and ok to be disappointed; not having the opportunity to build with the blocks today is not a tragedy. It is an opportunity to experience and understand delayed gratification.

The concern raised by the lack of intervention is that Brenda will continue to become increasingly helpless and that the other girls will achieve their goals by excluding others and using aggressive behaviors when they feel those goals are threatened. It is at this age, when the skills of negotiation and assertiveness are developing, that intervention would be most successful.

In his paper, Riley (1999) traces aggression as part of normal development. As with all areas of development, there are individual differences. Some preschoolers are more aggressive than others. He tells us that before age 4 the children who are most aggressive are also the most positively sociable. "They are well liked by other children, cooperate well, know how to get along in pairs and in groups" (p. 2). By age 4 or 5, competent children are learning alternatives to aggression. Those who have learned nothing better than hitting are in danger of developing a lifetime habit of socially unacceptable aggression.

Riley (1999) quotes a study by Leonard Eron. Children were studied at age 8 and periodically thereafter until age 30. He divided the 8-year-olds into groups of low, medium, and high aggression using the peer nomination method. Notable is the finding of a strong correlation between peer-nominated aggressive behavior at age 8 and adult criminality. He goes on to report on the work of Dan Olweus who studied schoolyard bullies and their victims. He found that about 7% of children consistently bully others and about 9% are consistently bullied. He found that bullies had a higher likelihood of later criminal convictions and the victims had an increased likelihood of later social-emotional and mental health problems. He also found that teachers did little to prevent bullying until he taught them how to intervene. He helped them engage the children in discussions about their responses to bullying. Teachers and children faced the question: Is it ok to do nothing?

Scaffolding

Vygotsky talks about the importance of private speech in the self-regulation of behavior. Children learn private speech only after hearing an adult talk through a problem. "...children's learning cannot be separated from the task in which it is taking place...an essential element of scaffolding is that the participants in social interaction negotiate, or compromise by constantly striving for a shared view of the situation" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, pp. 27-28). First, the adult remains engaged in the activity to provide support. As the adult adjusts the amount of help or instruction, she allows the child to ask and answer the questions. Working with an adult who talks a child through a task without assuming control leads to the competence of the child. The child learns to transfer problem-solving knowledge and responsibility from the adult to the self (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 45):

> When adults use questions and strategies to guide children and to help them discover solutions, they elevate language to the status of a primary problem-solving tool. This use of language by adults leads children to use speech to solve problems.... Research reveals that the relation of private speech to children's behavior is consistent with the assumption that self-guiding utterances help bring action under the control of thought. (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 46)

Supplying children with appropriate words to use is an important tool. In *Starting Small,* the teachers related how "calling it as they see it" was very effective. When the boys were poking at the girls' bodies and making fun of them, the teacher suggested, "If someone is harassing you, say 'Don't harass me.'" Calling "If you don't give it to me, you can't play" a threat instead of teasing helps the children see what it really is. Teasing is often acceptable. Threats never are. Using terms like these was effective. The teacher conveyed the message that the behavior was unacceptable, not something that would be tolerated or given tacit approval. At Cabrillo College's Child Development Center in Aptos, California, the word "exclude" carries a special stigma. There is a basic rule: You can't exclude anybody because of who they are. Yet there are legitimate reasons for excluding: undesirable behavior is the main one (Teaching Tolerance, 1997).

Helping children verbalize what it is they want to do is the beginning of negotiation. Teacher Lourdes tells how she uses the Peace Table: "The Peace Table is somewhere you feel comfortable, where you can talk to your friends if they do something that makes you sad or mad.... It's a friendly place." To help the children learn to use the Peace Table, Lourdes invents role-plays, first with puppets, then with the children. When this scaffold is in place, she invites children in conflict to join her at the Peace Table. They start with identification of the problem and then move to the solution: "What do you think you could do to be happy?" Soon the children invite one another to the table without the teacher and even act as mediators of conflicts between others.

This teacher's use of the Peace Table is an example of scaffolding. It also involves using personal speech for self-regulation. The children are learning impulse control as they learn to use words before and possibly instead of action. At the Peace Table, they speak aloud to one another. Vygotsky said, "What the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore, the only good kind of instruction...must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening functions.... we must consider the upper threshold as well; instruction must be oriented toward the future, not the past" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 104).

Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo, and Hendrix (1995) tell us that recursive cycles of behavior develop because they work. The behavior is effective: the child succeeds in getting what he wants. If a child succeeds in getting what he wants by being aggressive, he will use that strategy again. If he attains it by being assertive, he will use his negotiation skills again. Slaby et al. list several ways young children respond to an initial failure to get what they want: compromise, agreeing under a condition, offering a counterproposal, providing a justification for refusal, requesting an explanation, using a threat or physical force. The choice they make not only affects the outcome, it affects the way the children regard one another later and the method they will use in the next conflict (pp. 100-102).

Katz and McClellan (1997) discuss the need to intervene to break this cycle:

> Young children cannot break a negative recursive cycle by themselves.... Evidence suggests that, once established, differences in preschoolers' social competence and peer acceptance remains well into the elementary years and beyond.... Without intervention, children entering new social situations readily assume the status and behavior they held in previous groups.... Based on research, it is reasonable to assume that the younger the child, the more easily parents and teachers can help him shift from a negative to a positive cycle. (p. 56)

Learning to solve social problems in an effective and acceptable way involves many skills. Children need competent teachers who take the time to scaffold their learning of these skills:

- Listen carefully: give all parties an opportunity to describe their perceptions.
- Gather information.
- Define the problem.
- Set a goal: how can we respect the rights of each person involved?
- Generate alternative solutions: what else can we do?
- Anticipate consequences: what will happen now?
- Choose the best solution.

These steps can be followed at the Peace Table or in a less structured discussion, first with teacher assistance, then between children. A negative recursive cycle can be transformed into a positive cycle of negotiation, assertiveness, and peaceful solutions.

Closely related to the principle of breaking recursive cycles is the idea that any meaningful relationships require content. Adult and child or child and child must have something to relate about. If the main content of contact with a child is undesirable behavior, no nurturing relationship can survive. If the adult can address the behavior and then move on to topics of interest and value to the child, that adult is assisting in the breaking of the recursive cycle. If the only attention a child receives is related to undesirable behavior, then that behavior is strengthened. If the teacher starts to talk about Tom's cap collection or brings in various types of caps she has collected to share with him, they can talk about caps instead of his aggressiveness in the dress-up area. If the teacher asks Jenny to share her interest in books, Jenny may learn to talk instead of withdrawing to a book when conflict arises. If Tom is frequently involved in pushing others in line because he wants to be first, the teacher could use the Peace Table to discuss the behavior and then find opportunities to talk to Tom about his interest in race cars.

Looking at the principles of practice that Katz and McClellan describe in *Fostering Children's Social Competence* (1997, pp. 49-61), we see a common thread. The teacher's competence and interaction with the child is of paramount importance:

- Children's feelings deserve respect.
- Social competence is culturally defined.
- Social difficulties provide opportunities to teach.
- Social behavior develops in recursive cycles.
- Direct communication enhances adult effectiveness.
- Meaningful relationships require content.
- Optimum teacher intervention promotes social competence.
- Adult expectations shape children's characters.
- Teachers' interactions with children model social competence.

Katz suggests other strategies not specifically addressed above. Among those are

- Communicate openly with parents.
- Establish authority and credibility; avoid offering choices when you don't really offer a choice; avoid threats.
- Accommodate individual differences: avoid comparisons that imply disapproval.
- Establish and invoke ground rules.
- Word questions carefully so they are not confusing.

Conclusion

Scaffolding children's growth in any area means knowing the child's developmental status. Scaffolding children's growth requires understanding when and how to "provide tasks at the upper end of the child's current abilities (in the zone of proximal development), as well as patient, encouraging assistance and

feedback coordinated with the child's self-regulatory efforts (that is, scaffolding)" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 48). To affect the future is to apply scaffolding to children's learning of social competence.

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