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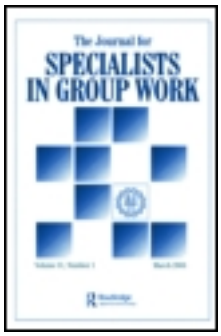

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Working with Groups

Social Skills Training in Middle Childhood: A Structured Group Approach

Steven R. Rose

The author describes a time-limited small-group treatment program, based on social learning theory, that promotes the social competence of youngsters in middle childhood.

Children vary in their acquisition and performance of social skills. Some youngsters are highly competent in interpersonal abilities, but others show a minimal degree of appropriate social interaction. The remediation of social inadequacy is dealt with in time-limited treatment groups for children (Rose, 1985). The purpose of this article is to describe the theoretical assumptions, model characteristics, interventions, and sessions of a time-limited group program for developing the social skills of young people in middle childhood.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND MODEL CHARACTERISTICS

Social inadequacy represents a deficiency in carrying out activities in interpersonal interactions (Hersen & Eisler, 1976). The author created a model of response acquisition to promote the learning of socially competent actions. In this model it is assumed that maladaptive functioning will be replaced by adaptive social behavior that is rewarding to the young person (Eisler, 1976).

The social skills training program was based on the assumption that children with low levels of social competence do not demonstrate social skills to the same extent as do girls and boys with higher ability levels. The aim of the program is to help children learn to perform social actions that enhance their likelihood of evoking desired words and deeds from other young people.

Research has shown the importance of social skills for boys and girls in the middle childhood years (Foster, 1983). The skills of empathy (Michelson & Wood, 1980; Shantz, 1975), assertiveness and leadership (Bornstein, Bellack, & Hersen, 1977), friendship and cooperation (Oden & Asher, 1977), and communication (Ladd, 1981; LaGreca & Santogrossi, 1980) are linked to the social competence of youngsters in the developmental period of middle childhood.

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Small groups are used in the program for teaching youngsters social skills. The advantages of using the group are (a) it is usually more appealing to children than individual counseling and (b) it increases the productivity of the practitioner (Lazarus, 1968). The peer group is a natural place for social skills training to occur, and it provides the opportunity for girls and boys to demonstrate and teach as well as observe and learn social skills (Combs & Slaby, 1977; Patterson & Anderson, 1964; Strain, Kerr, & Ragland, 1981). One study showed that elementary school pupils who participated in the social skills training program for 10 group meetings improved in (a) overall assertiveness, (b) ability to converse with adults, and (c) empathy, popularity, and acceptance among peers (Rose, 1986).

INTERVENTION PROCEDURES

Social skills training with children in groups builds competence in performance through the use of multiple procedures. *Rehearsal* provides for learning new actions and practicing them in a supportive environment (McFall & Twentyman, 1973). *Instructions* are explicit statements that are used in rehearsals to either prompt or remind the youngster to engage in specific social behaviors (Gambrill, 1977). *Modeling* is the learning of social interaction through observation, imitation, and reward (McFall & Lillesand, 1971). *Feedback* consists of giving clear information to boys and girls about their interpersonal actions (McFall & Marston, 1970). *Social rewards*, such as praise, attention, and approval, are events involving others that increase the probability of occurrence of interpersonal actions (Gambrill, 1977). *Coaching* involves giving youngsters ideas and advice about interpersonal situations (McFall & Twentyman, 1973; Oden & Asher, 1977). *Assignments* are contracts for work to be done between group meetings (Rose, 1972). *Group contingencies* are ordered arrangements of rewards in which either individual or joint activity results in consequences for the entire group (Wodarski, Feldman, & Flax, 1973). The contingencies are combined with *point systems* that involve the systematic use of generalized, conditioned rewards (Kazdin & Bootzin, 1972).

GROUP MEETINGS

The social skills training program consists of two phases, basic and advanced, with five 45-minute meetings held in each phase. At the end of each meeting, the children complete ratings of satisfaction with the session. The social skills taught, the sequence of program activities implemented, and the materials used in each session are shown in Appendix A.

Basic Phase

The basic phase of the program is devoted to learning the following social skills: the recognition and expression of emotions; requests and refusals; initiating, maintaining, and concluding conversations; and providing and accepting empathy (Bornstein, Bellack, & Hersen, 1977; Konner, 1979; Ladd, 1981; LaGreca & Santogrossi, 1980; Michelson & Wood, 1980; Shantz, 1975).

The objectives of the first session include developing unity, belonging, and attraction to the group so that cohesiveness, one of the dimensions of group solidarity, is strengthened (Feldman, 1968). The girls and boys learn to ask and answer social questions, introduce one another through a structured, paired warm-up activity, discuss the program's purpose, name the group, and play a game similar to charades (Oden & Asher, 1977). As their homework assignment, the children are asked to write down the names of three feelings and to indicate one time recently in which they sensed one of these emotions when they were with a peer.

The purpose of the second meeting is to develop the recognition and expression of feelings, an important skill area that is often neglected by theorists in social skills training (Argyle, 1978; Furnham, 1983). The chil-

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dren perform a rehearsal, using one of the completed assignments, in the following sequence: selection of a problem situation, setting a goal, suggestions from members and leader, modeling, review of modeled response, rehearsal by target child, feedback from members and leader, and summary by target child. Later, the leader assigns homework in which the children are asked to describe an incident in which they wanted to say something to a peer yet did not. Then, using the number of points earned for the meeting as a guide, the members fill in the appropriate level of a thermometer figure that is an indicator of shared progress toward the goal of a field trip (Kazdin & Bootzin, 1977). The practice of tallying points continues in subsequent sessions until the goal is reached.

The objective of the third meeting is to learn the skills of making appropriate requests and refusals, which are aspects of assertiveness with peers (Bornstein, Bellack, & Hersen, 1977). At the beginning of the meeting, the children discuss how they completed their assignment. The children undertake a brief review of the group contingencies and the point system, and then perform two rehersals. Later, the leader distributes cards for a new assignment. In this one, the children are asked to describe a situation in which they ask a peer for something they want.

The fourth meeting is devoted to the topic of initiating, maintaining, and ending conversations—social skills that seem to be associated with peer acceptance (Oden & Asher, 1977). The session begins with a review of the completed assignments distributed in the previous meeting. The leader conducts two rehearsals, interspersed with a social skills game (Oden & Asher, 1977). For homework, the children are asked to describe a situation in which they wish to become friends with another child.

The fifth meeting centers on the skill of empathy with peers, a content area of assertiveness (Michelson & Wood, 1980). During the session, the leader implements a review of the assignments. The children perform two rehearsals using their assignment cards.

Advanced Phase

The author has conceptualized the second phase of group social skills training (Sessions 6–10) as a period when children build on the abilities they acquired in the initial phase (Sessions 1–5). Four social skills—making friends, displaying assertiveness, coping with peer aggression, and demonstrating interpersonal leadership—are the focus of this phase (Bornstein, Bellack, & Hersen, 1977; Foster, 1983; Oden & Asher, 1977).

The purposes of the sixth meeting include fostering cooperative intragroup relations (Vogler, 1968, 1969). The meeting begins with mutual introductions, a conversational skill related to making friends (LaGreca & Santogrossi, 1980; Michelson & Wood, 1980). Then, to provide a cognitive map, the leader reviews the methods by which youngsters earn points for the field trip (Hilgard & Bower, 1966; Kazdin & Bootzin, 1972; Wodarski, Feldman, & Flax, 1973). The trip serves as a shared reward in the social environment. After the review, the members reconsider the rehearsal sequence by enacting the situation of a child greeting a peer on the playground to make friends (McFall & Twentyman, 1973; Oden & Asher, 1977). Later, the leader distributes assignment cards that include the following statement: "Write down what happened the last time you tried to talk to another boy or girl to make friends with him or her."

Entering or joining peer groups requires social skills that withdrawn and unaccepted children, in particular, need to learn (LaGreca & Santogrossi, 1980; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). In the seventh session, youngsters learn the skills involved in approaching peers to make friends (Oden & Asher, 1977). During the meeting, the members review the completed assignments that serve as the basis for two rehearsals focused on making friends (McFall & Twentyman, 1973). Then, the children are given an as-

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signment dealing with peer conflict in which they are asked to write down what happened the last time they disagreed or argued with a friend (Selman, 1980).

The major purpose of the eighth session is to give children the opportunity to practice in social situations with peers those assertive responses that provoke angry reactions (Bornstein, Bellack, & Hersen, 1977). Completed assignments from children who have not recently presented situations to be role played serve as the basis for two rehearsals (McFall & Twentyman, 1973). The rehearsals are interspersed with a game in which the children enact feeling adverbs (e.g., *happily*, *sadly*) as a way of associating emotions with actions (Kazdin & Bootzin, 1972; Oden & Asher, 1977). Afterward, the children are given assignments to describe a recent conflict situation in which they wanted to do one thing and a friend wanted to do something else (Selman, 1980).

The objectives of the ninth meeting are to develop leadership in children and promote generalization of learning (Gambrill, 1977; Kazdin & Bootzin, 1972). The children participate in a discussion about how they use their social skills outside of the group. To develop the leadership skills of the girls and boys, the leader coaches members, who, in turn, lead two rehearsals (McFall & Twentyman, 1973). Then, a new assignment is given to develop the members' skills for dealing with peer aggressiveness (Bornstein, Bellack, & Hersen, 1977). For this assignment, the children are expected to describe what happened when a peer picked a fight with them.

The purpose of the 10th group session is to encourage the generalization of the social skills learned earlier. The group members discuss interpersonal interactions involving the application of social skills outside the group. The group then reviews completed assignments, and the leader praises the members for work done well. Two rehearsals, led by members who are coached by the leader, are interspersed with a game that requires skill in observing eye contact (Oden & Asher, 1977). Afterward, final plans are made for the field trip, which is held after the 10th session, and the group ends.

CONCLUSION

A group program of social skills training is a useful approach for youngsters in middle childhood who need to develop the abilities required for peer association. The directive, time-limited intervention is appropriate for socially isolated, withdrawn, and unassertive children; aggressive youngsters; and girls and boys in ordinary schools without specific problems (Spence, 1983).

Some counselors work with groups of children whose skill deficiency patterns require a special focus on the development of particular skills. Those practitioners will need to design their own programs (Wilkinson & Canter, 1982).

The group approach to social skills training lends itself to research that will help to increase its effectiveness. Counselors have an important role to play in evaluating the program (Morran & Stockton, 1985).

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APPENDIX A

Summary of Features of Program Sessions

Skills for Session 1 are acquaintance and participation. Activities include introduction, discussion, group naming, game, assignment, and evaluation. Materials needed are writing tablet, marker, evaluation forms, interview cards, pencils, game cards, pin, and assignment cards.

Skills for Session 2 are recognition and expression of affect. Activities include assignment review, rehearsal, contingency review, assignment, point tally, and evaluation. Materials used are writing tablet, marker, evaluation forms, assignment cards, thermometer figure, sign board, and point counter.

Skills for Session 3 are request and refusal. Activities include assignment review, contingency review, two rehearsals, assignment, point tally, and evaluation. Materials for sessions 3–8 are the same as those for Session 2, except that no assignment cards are needed for Session 5.

The skill for Session 4 is conversation. Activities include assignment review, first rehearsal, game, second rehearsal, assignment, point tally, and evaluation.

The skill for Session 5 is empathy. Activities include assignment review, first rehearsal, second rehearsal, point tally, and evaluation.

The skill for Session 6 is cooperation. Activities include introduction, contingency review, rehearsal review, assignment, point tally, and evaluation.

The skill for Session 7 is joining. Activities include assignment review, two rehearsals, assignment, point tally, and evaluation.

The skill for Session 8 is assertiveness. Activities are assignment review, first rehearsal, game, second rehearsal, assignment, point tally, and evaluation.

The skills for Session 9 are leadership and skill generalization. Activities are discussion, assignment review, two rehearsals, assignment, point tally, and evaluation. Materials needed are writing tablet, marker, evaluation forms, assignment cards, thermometer figure, sign board, point counter, and permission slips.

The skill for Session 10 is skill generalization. Activities are discussion, assignment review, first rehearsal, game, second rehearsal, point tally, trip planning, and evaluation. Materials used are writing tablet, marker, evaluation forms, thermometer figure, sign board, and game slips.

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