

Prosocial behaviour in preschool: The state of play

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Abstract

Research has found that childhood antisocial behaviour, otherwise termed as conduct disorder, is currently the most widespread psychiatric disorder in childhood (Scott et al., 2001) indicating that although prior research addressing early antisocial behaviour has contributed greatly to the understanding of a wide range of issues, more research remains to be done (Berger, 2007).

This study proposes to address the need for further knowledge concerning anti-social and prosocial behaviour through approaching these social phenomena from a different perspective by applying a positive rather than negative psychological focus. A discussion of prosocial group organization, children's social competencies, and varying levels of emotional regulation and coping strategies will be presented.

This review is important as problems can arise when children are stigmatized as antisocial within an educational context at an early age, as these negative stereotypes become widely known and reinforced amongst peer groups which then encourage further social negativity towards the stigmatized child (Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to review and re-position the problematic issue of anti-social behaviour observed in children's conduct in the early years (OFSTED, 2005). Conduct disorders are the most prolific psychiatric disorder diagnosed in childhood (Scott et al., 2001) with 10 per cent of boys and six per cent of girls in Britain said to have some form of psychiatric disorder (Office for National Statistics, 2004). The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2002) state that it is imperative to promote good mental and social wellbeing in order to prevent the development of further illness for individuals and the wider society. This research also emphasised that the pro-active promotion of children's mental health and wellbeing are important due to the strong connections they have with children's holistic development (WHO, 2002). These findings offer support for the present argument to proactively investigate the manifestation of early antisocial behaviour to promote children's psychological wellbeing for their current and future quality of life.

Further research into antisocial behaviour by Farrington et al. (2001) suggests that early identification is needed in order to prevent the increasing and extreme financial cost to society. This sentiment is echoed by Scott et al. (2001, p.1) who argue that a proactive approach is needed:

'Antisocial behaviour in childhood is a major predictor of how much an individual will cost society. The cost is large and falls on many agencies, yet few agencies contribute to prevention, which could be cost effective'.

Although future financial benefits are one incentive for investigating the development of early antisocial behaviour, we would argue that due consideration and weight be given to focusing on children's experiences in the early years. Prout (2000) supports this position by commenting that the image of childhood is distorted by a government agenda that seeks to secure future societal needs through the shaping of children into prospective adults. Preferencing a view of children as the future workforce overlaps but does not prioritise the immediate needs of children and the enrichment of their lives. Whether to benefit future society or to pro-

mote children's current psychological well-being, the need for continued research in early antisocial behaviour is paramount.

A specific research focus on antisocial behaviour, however, can be restrictive in that it only enables researchers to analyse the problems associated with negative behaviour (Nelson & Crick, 1999). It is acknowledged that perceptions of children's prosocial behaviour have been limited and that there is a greater emphasis on research addressing children's negative behaviours (Warden et al., 2003). Hay et al. (1999) offer an alternative hypothesis that antisocial behaviour can be further understood through an investigation into prosocial behaviour, as it is the very lack of the latter which underlies the former. Mooij (1999) also believes that research into prosocial interactions proactively enforces positive behaviour. Similarly, this paper makes an argument for investigating the properties of prosocial interaction, as multiple perspectives afford a more detailed understanding of social behaviour; a continuum which incorporates both prosocial and antisocial characteristics.

By considering both inclusive and exclusive prosocial interactions displayed by children, further understanding of children's experiences and perceptions of positive interactions can be gained. Inclusive prosocial behaviour is defined here as indiscriminate and inclusive admittance of others in social interaction, whereas exclusive prosocial behaviour is defined as selective interaction with a limited number of people; language and physical gesture are used in both instances to either encourage or discourage the social participation of others. It is proposed here that some children use inclusive prosocial interactions within a wide social context where they initiate and maintain positive behaviour with many people, whereas other children display exclusive prosocial behaviour within small restricted groups or limited numbers of people.

The paper moves from macro to micro influences on young children's social behaviour relevant to positive (or negative) inter-

actions with peers. The discussion considers children's management of group identity or alignment, including the role of humor in constructing these alignments. Social cognition and individual social competencies are then considered, leading to discussion of the link between emotions and cognitive reasoning. Emotional regulation, and coping strategies are then briefly reviewed, as essential features in helping children to be resilient, especially when with negative experiences. The final section of this paper discusses the impact of negative stigmatization, underscoring implications for future research in young children's early social interactions. The paper does not aspire to be an exhaustive review of each of these domains, but rather identifies key concerns relevant to further explication of young children's prosocial behaviours.

Group organisation

Nelson and Crick (1999) suggest that children's categorizations of positive and negative social interactions emerge through social cognitive processing. Behaviourist perspectives have been applied to investigate the cognitive processes involved in social construction and suggest that children learn socially through observational learning processes where their behaviour is reinforced by peers (Barry & Wentzel, 2006). This observational form of social cognition was also observed by Martin et al. (2005) who refer to the term homophily which is defined as, 'behavioural and sex similarity' (p.299) and is regarded as an influential variable on social organisation. Martin et al. (2005) believed that when children recognise peers displaying similar play behaviours as themselves they become play partners as they have experienced homophily. Alternatively, children may become play partners due to expected similarity where a child internalises that a peer has the same beliefs and behavioural characteristics, such as the same gender or social class because they display similar attributes (Martin et al., 2005). These cognitive processes involved in social organi-

zation indicate that children categorize their peers into groups with members who are or are not similar to themselves.

When approaching the desired group, the prospective new member displays pro-social behaviour to the existing members within the new social context in order to speed their acceptance into the group (Gruman et al., 2006). These prosocial behaviours include being empathic and sympathetic to peers (Fabes et al., 1999a) and 'sharing, helping, volunteering or altruistic behaviour' (Greener, 2000, p.47). Once the child is an established member of the group they believe that their group is superior to others and this enhances their self-esteem and social identity (Gini, 2006; Baumeister et al., 2003). Warden et al., (2003) found that within a group children will expect their peers to interact in the same way as themselves, therefore reaffirming in-group solidarity (Rutland et al., 2006). This finding can be related to the use of membership categorization in social organization (Schegloff, 2007) as children may use experienced and expected homophily (Martin et al., 2005) to link themselves and others to groups with members who have specifically identifiable characteristics.

One mechanism for sustaining established in-group solidarity is the use of humour where children create and maintain groups – as well as protect themselves – by instilling degradation in other individuals or groups perceived as threatening (Giles et al., 1976). Humour is viewed as an essential tool in the creation and maintenance of group solidarity as the participants are displaying how close they are to each other (Coates, 2007). This is recognized as a way of reinforcing the psychological boundaries within subgroup culture where values and beliefs are reaffirmed (Holmes & Marra, 2002). Everyday conversational humour which emanates from in-group knowledge provides examples of this behaviour where members display, 'a manifestation of intimacy, with the voice of the group taking precedence over the voice of the individual speaker.' (Coates, 2007, p.31). Coates (2007) suggests

that groups use humour to form solidarity as they maintain a topic of conversation in a humorous way and sustain their friendships through similar cognitive processes between peers; therefore enforcing inclusive and exclusive social networks.

In order for children to become a part of the in-group they initially need to learn the appropriate interpretative skills which afford access to their desired socio-cultural community (Davies, 2003). Giles et al. (1976) believe that in order to establish this social construction through humour there are certain cognitive processes which occur involving encoding and decoding humour. The encoder is thought to do so in order to achieve a social goal, e.g. to include or exclude peers, whereas the decoder decides whether the encoder is including or excluding them through their interpretation of how the humour was used. This is related to Holmes and Marra (2002) who suggest that humour can be used to either support or contest peers. With this in mind it is suggested that humour which has been used to challenge peers may have been previously identified under the label 'verbal aggression' which has been associated with children behaving antisocially (for example, Tapper & Boulton, 2005). However, we would argue that supportive and contested humour may be used by children as a prosocial feature of interaction.

Social competencies

The importance of constructing and sustaining social groups has implications for children's social, emotional and educational outcomes. Research by Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) found that children who played with peers in the school playground had better academic outcomes than children who interacted mostly with adults in the same context. This was thought to be because interaction with peers may be more socially complex than interaction with adults and therefore requires sophisticated social cognitive skills. It was found within the study that when children disagreed with each other they had

to find a way of mediating peaceful conflict resolution in order to repair any damage the disagreement may have caused; the children who interacted mostly with adults did not tend to disagree as readily as they would with other children. However, Willoughby et al. (2001) make the important observation that when the children who interacted with adults in the playground did disagree they were regarded as having some form of conduct disorder rather than being perceived as developing their social cognition.

The notion of varying competencies or capacity in social cognition is supported by Gardner (1999) who identifies social or interpersonal intelligence as one of his eight intelligences. Research by Ladd (1999) acknowledges the link between social intelligence and antisocial behaviour in childhood where it was believed that children's inability to positively interact socially was due to some children being deficient in key social information processing skills. Bjorkqvist and Osterman (2000) also believe that social intelligence correlates with prosocial behaviour as socially intelligent children choose to act in a way that exposes them to the least danger. Conversely, Nelson and Crick (1999) suggest that children who are perceived as using extensive prosocial behaviour often misinterpret the intention of their peer's social interactions as more positive than intended through a benign attribution bias. It is also important to note that children who are perceived as antisocial are also capable of forming sub-cultures and social networks with peers; therefore indicating that close social relationships remain achievable for all children (Dasgupta, 2004). Further support for the argument that children perceived as antisocial demonstrate some characteristics of social intelligence is provided by Garandeau and Cillessen (2006) who suggested that the social manipulation present in indirect and relational aggression requires high levels of social cognitive skills. Therefore it is argued here that all children are capable of demonstrating some capabilities in social intelligence and that either

prosocial or antisocial behaviour is used in order for children to achieve their own social goals.

Personal goals are defined as, 'underlying motivational processes' (Barry & Wentzel, 2006, p.154) which cognitively affect the amount of prosocial behaviour a person is willing to display when engaging in social interactions with another person. The incentive to initiate and maintain a prosocial relationship is often for the purpose of an individual to achieve a goal. This definition indicates that prosocial behaviour is initiated through a deliberate and conscious cognitive decision. Bjorkqvist and Osterman (2000) suggest that social intelligence enables a person to display the required behaviour to achieve their own social goals and to recognise these motives and goals in others. Further research into the motivation and cognitive process of children's prosocial behaviour by Barry and Wentzel (2006) found that all children displayed prosocial behaviour as a goal for their own social advantage. The final decision stage in the social interaction process is connected to moral reasoning where children calculate how a positive or negative response may be perceived by their peers (Nelson & Crick, 1999). Fabes et al. (1999b) suggest that the cognitive processes involved in moral reasoning are positively related to prosocial behaviour as these displays of socially competent behaviour are positively perceived. Therefore, it could be argued that children's social interactions emanate from cognitive processes where conscious moral reasoning is applied in order to fulfill personal goals.

Alternatively, Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) suggest that children act prosocially when prompted by feeling a sense of gratitude through emotion rather than through cognitive awareness of social rules, therefore indicating that prosocial behaviour emanates from a positive emotional response rather than cognitive functioning. McPhail (2004) refers to the concept of cognitive reasoning and emotion being separate entities and argues that the academic context should

not disregard the extent to which emotions influence cognitive functioning. Fabes et al. (1999b) also believe that emotions affect behaviour as displays of antisocial behaviour are initiated by extreme negative emotions. The effect of emotions on social cognitive processing has been investigated by Nelson and Crick (1999) who suggest that children who are perceived of as prosocial are less likely to feel upset about conflicts with peers due to their positive perception of peers' interactions towards them. It is further argued that because of this positive interpretation of peers' intentions, these children may be less likely to experience negative emotions which can stimulate aggressive responses, resulting in a vicious circle (Nelson & Crick, 1999).

However, research by Hecke et al. (2007) informs that children are able to repress undesirable emotions through their motivation to be prosocial as this behaviour helps them to achieve their personal goals. This emotional regulation is also referred to by Eisenberg et al. (1995) where it was hypothesised that prosocial cognitive reasoning could override negative emotions in school children in order to gain approval from teachers and peers. It is hypothesised that sympathy and empathy are a basis for the development of moral reasoning (Eisenberg et al., 1995) and that empathy is recognized as the link between emotion and moral reasoning and associated with the development of social cognitive skills (Fabes et al., 1999b). However, Hay et al. (1999) found that children who display excessive amounts of concern for their peers may have emotional dysregulation, possibly leading to psychopathology, as these children have not learnt to control their emotions. This suggests that characteristics of prosocial behaviour can also be perceived as damaging to children's social development; too much and too little empathy are both linked to further social behaviour problems and emotional regulation is essential for the development of positive interpersonal relationships.

Emotional regulation and coping strategies

Emotional regulation has been regarded important in the initiation and maintenance of positive peer relationships as children who have emotional regulation are better equipped to deal with negative social encounters as they learn to deal with their own feelings and the negative feelings of others (Blair et al., 2004). Children can learn to regulate their emotions through increased time spent with peers (Hay et al., 1999), although a significant number of preschool children experience social and emotional problems which consequently affect their ability to form close relationships with peers (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). Nelson and Crick (1999) found that when perceived prosocial children acknowledge a conflict situation they are more capable of regulating their emotions and report lower levels of distress in addressing hypothetical provocation than children who are perceived of as antisocial. This indicates that children who use a majority of prosocial behaviour have the emotional regulation which affords them the power to be less aggressively reactive when provoked (Nelson & Crick, 1999).

However, Hay et al. (1999) argued that children have to possess the ability to regulate their emotions before prosocial behaviour can develop. This is supported by Fantuzzo et al. (2005) who found that children who had lower levels of emotional regulation and self-control displayed early socially negative behaviour, and lower levels of emotional interaction and awareness. It can be argued that prosocial behaviour increases over time due to the internal development of emotional regulation (for example, Blair et al., 2004; Fantuzzo et al., 2005). This hypothesis is supported by Stevenson and Goodman (2001) who found that early behaviour problems such as deficits in early emotional self-regulation predicted later adult criminality more than the impact of negative family or social circumstances.

Yet labelling children as socially disruptive or emotionally disengaged at an early age negatively affects their emotional resilience, and damages the child's perspective of external social support (Grotberg, 2001). Alternatively, by perceiving all children as demonstrating a range of prosocial behaviours, their positive actions can be reinforced, thereby limiting the emotional damage placed on children. This is initiated through the acknowledgement that children who display general socially negative behaviour and withdrawal may also display exclusive prosocial behaviour in other social areas. Further research into inclusive and exclusive social behaviours can offer an insight into why children display certain behaviours and whether these behaviours are used as emotional coping strategies.

The function of emotional coping strategies in the development of preschool children's social and behavioural competencies was investigated by Blair et al. (2004). The research found that children's ability to cope with their emotions was essential and more important than an individual's temperament in the development of prosocial behaviour. Blair et al. (2004) hypothesized that children with emotionally negative temperaments were more likely to display prosocial behaviour and accept peers' interactions if they could regulate their negative emotions; and conversely problem behaviour would increase if there were lower levels of emotional regulation. Children who are able to regulate their emotions are more likely to engage in prosocial interactions and are better able to cope emotionally with negative social experiences. However, the ability for children to regulate their emotions may be confused with the repression of natural feelings of anger and aggression as a way of coping with the bureaucratic rules within their school environment (Abdennur, 2000). Through the repression of emotions, internal regulation processes become difficult and passive coping strategies are used which reflect high behavioural inhibition (Blair et al., 2004). Children who do not have the appropriate regulation skills repress their emotions, leading to behavioural inhibition

where the child does not manage or cope with negative social incidents. Consequently young children who are inhibited and experience negative emotions are susceptible to internalizing behavioural problems which can lead to further psychological damage such as anxiety and depression (Shamir-Essakow et al., 2005).

All children will experience negative emotions at some time and being forced to repress these feelings may actually cause further psychological damage. Abdennur (2000) states that by physically demonstrating their anger, children enforce their identity to be strong, competent and capable of defending themselves. Therefore, children who are perceived as displaying antisocial behaviour may cope better psychologically as they do not repress negative emotions and so paradoxically may be more competent to interact prosocially. Blair et al. (2004) agrees with this hypothesis and recommends that constructive coping strategies are more beneficial in emotional development. Children who are perceived as prosocial may use non-confrontational aggression as a way of coping with negative emotional situations (Abdennur, 2000). As non-confrontational aggression is hidden the child who is targeted may experience prolonged incidents of non-confrontational aggression without it being noticed by an adult, therefore elevating the risk of advanced psychological damage for the targeted child. It can therefore be argued that although ostentatious displays of physical and verbal aggression are socially reprimanded they are visible to caregivers and can be addressed immediately, whereas incidents of social non-confrontational aggression can cause more complex problems due to the prolonged effect.

Further protection from psychological damage initiated by negative social experiences can be found in children's emotional resilience which prevents the development of future anxiety, depression and behavioural problems (Conway & McDonough, 2006). The development of emotional resilience is thought to be initiated by an early close maternal bond which transfers to

consequent childhood relationships through close personal contact (Conway & McDonough, 2006; Greener & Crick, 1999). Characteristics of the maternal bond may be replicated in close exclusive interactions within dyadic or intimate groups which develop as children become older where this emotional support encourages fewer negative emotional experiences. However, for children who generate inclusive relationships, emotional resilience is supported because these children have more than one friend to rely on; if a child is challenged with a social peer problem they have a large number of other friends who offer emotional support.

These aspects of external social supports within exclusive and inclusive interactions can be linked to emotional resilience through research by Grotberg (2001) who refers to how children perceive these supports as 'I have' (p.76). The ability to recognise personal inner strengths 'I am' and abilities 'I can' are also perceived as essential in the development of emotional resilience. However, Bonanno (2005) suggests that resilience can be established through different ways and that the overall resilience needed to cope with ongoing life situations, such as poverty, is unlike the resilience required when dealing with an individual incident of trauma. This is extended by findings which indicate that the emotional resilience needed to cope with long-term trauma requires an adaptive attitude with the ability to be flexible to change, whereas isolated incidents of trauma provoke behavioural strategies involving the maintenance of important social relationships that provide emotional support. It is therefore suggested that resilience can help children to cope with an isolated traumatic event, such as an incidence of aggressive behaviour, through the varying external emotional supports available in exclusive small tight groups or inclusive social networks. These prosocial peer supports play an essential part in the development of resilience (Grotberg, 2001). This is significant in the early years where

children who are emotionally resilient in preschool are less likely to experience depression and anxiety in later childhood (Conway & McDonough, 2006).

Necessity of early intervention

The social implications of negatively labeling a person have been investigated by Hebl and Dovidio (2005) who suggest that such labeling involves exclusion of the stigmatized individual from the wider social network; partly achieved through the avoidance of the stigmatized person. In addition to this, further stigmatization is enforced as children self-evaluate their social identity through how they perceive others to value them; if they believe that they are negatively stigmatized they will engage in behaviour which will reinforce this perceived identity (Sinclair et al., 2005).

Negative stereotyping is particularly problematic in early childhood as it affects the development of a positive social identity, which in turn influences how children will perceive themselves throughout their life (Nelson & Crick, 1999; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Negative stigma damages children's psychological wellbeing as it devalues a person through excluding them on one aspect of their whole identity and in doing so also excludes all positive attributes of a child's personality (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Focusing on and anticipating antisocial behaviour draws attention to this behaviour and reinforces its position and validity; if children are expected to behave in a certain way, then they are more likely to live by this expectation (Markowitz, 1998; Dijksterhuis et al., 2000).

Perceiving children as belonging to dichotomous categories of antisocial or prosocial does not allow for the range of behaviours and heterogeneous social abilities demonstrated in interactions in the early years. Emotional resilience is developed through close social supports (Conway & McDonough, 2006) which are often protected by members openly excluding unwanted peers. Although it may appear that members of a close dyadic

relationship are displaying overt antisocial behaviour it is important not to stigmatize these children as the foundations of emotional resilience may be being built within and protected by the exclusion of some peers. This recognition of the use of exclusive and inclusive prosocial interactions between perceived antisocial children and perceived prosocial children can inform practitioners of the similarities and differences between children often represented as belonging to opposite ends of the social spectrum (for example: Warden et al., 2003).

Concluding remarks

From a theoretical position this paper introduces the importance of adopting a positive perspective for any future research that is concerned with children's social behaviour. This paper provides an analytical review of research on children's social intelligence in early childhood to demonstrate that all children display a range of both positive and negative social behaviours. Therefore researchers and practitioners are encouraged to identify the

positive attributes that all children possess rather than categorising them as either belonging to a prosocial or antisocial dichotomy. Through providing an optimistic view of the ability for all children to act positively, future research can inform policy and practice to help alleviate the problems of early negative stigmatization.

Accordingly, the implementation of such research can inform practitioners, parents and all involved in the early childhood community to embrace an awareness and an understanding of the competencies which lie in all children to initiate and maintain prosocial relationships. Through the avoidance of antisocial stereotyping, practitioners can recognise and reaffirm the positive elements of all children's social behaviour (Searight et al., 2001; Mooij, 1999).

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