...information for program practitioners on assessing positive peer relations.

ASSESSING PEER RELATIONS: A GUIDE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PRACTITIONERS

Mary A. Terzian, Ph.D., M.S.W.   October 2012

BACKGROUND

Getting along well with peers and having supportive friendships are critical goals for positive youth development. Although most children and youth enjoy healthy relationships with their peers, some young people are disliked, excluded, and/or bullied by others. These children and youth are more likely than their better liked and accepted peers to experience problems with academic, social, and behavioral adjustment. Promoting positive relationships with same-age peers can deter and prevent these problems.[i] This brief describes factors that promote positive peer relations; provides information about easy-to-use measures for assessing peer relations (both positive and problematic); and lists several resources for promoting positive peer relations in childhood and adolescence.

HOW ARE POSITIVE PEER RELATIONS FORMED?

Varied social and emotional skills have been associated with positive peer relations, including:[ii,iii,iv]

- Cooperative play skills—such as taking turns, sharing, and responding positively to peers (particularly for younger children);

- Communication and interaction skills—such as being able to express an interest in joining a group and being able to invite others to do so and knowing how to communicate one's feelings;

- Emotional understanding and self-regulation skills—such as understanding one's own feelings and the feelings of others (empathy); being able to manage strong emotions; and being attuned to social cues;

- Social problem-solving skills—such as knowing how to identify problems with peers and being able to generate different solutions for addressing those problems; and

- Conflict resolution skills—combining a variety of social skills, such as communication, problem solving, self regulation, and negotiation, in order to manage one's own conflicts or to mediate the conflicts of others.

Children and youth who are well-liked tend to be more adept at managing negative emotions—such as anger, nervousness, or sadness—and at expressing emotions in appropriate ways. They also tend to exhibit friendly and positive social behaviors, such as being cooperative and helpful.[v,vi] By contrast, children who are disliked by their peers more often have difficulties with emotional regulation and are more likely to act in aggressive, antisocial, impulsive, withdrawn, or submissive ways. [vii,viii] Additional factors influencing the evaluations of peers include confidence, humor, athletic ability, doing well in school, and attractive physical appearance (tending to result in positive evaluations) and having a disability, being overweight or obese, or not conforming to gender norms (tending to result in negative evaluations).

ASSESSING PEER RELATIONS

Various aspects of peer relations can be assessed by asking peers, teachers, or fellow out-of-school time program practitioners how much a child or adolescent is liked or disliked by peers (*peer acceptance/rejection*); overtly excluded by peers (*social exclusion*); or bullied by peers (*peer victimization*). Program practitioners may also ask children to reflect on their own personal experiences and rate their own relationships with peers and friends. Below we offer several methods and measures for assessing peer relations.

Child Behavior Scale, *Excluded by Peers Subscale.*[ix] To identify children who are experiencing exclusion by peers, practitioners may ask teachers to rate students on the following seven-item subscale. This scale has been found to be valid and reliable for children ages 5 to 13.[x]

> Instructions: Please rate how these statements apply to your student. (0 =*doesn't apply*, 1=*applies sometimes*, 2=*certainly applies*).
> 1. Peers refuse to let this child play with them
> 2. Not chosen as a playmate by peers
> 3. Peers avoid this child
> 4. Is excluded from peers' activities
> 5. Is ignored by peers
> 6. Not much liked by other children
> 7. Ridiculed by peers

Lower scores on this scale indicate more positive peer relations. To score this scale, sum the items and divide by the number of responses. Because most children are generally accepted by peers, receiving a rating of 1 or 2 on just one or two of these items may raise concern.[xi]

Self-Perception Profile for Children and Adolescents, Social Acceptance Subscale.[xii] This self-report measure includes five items (items 19 to 24, shown below) to assess acceptance by peers and also whether children have friends and view themselves as popular.

> Instructions: Please use this list of sentences to describe yourself as accurately as possible. Describe yourself as you see yourself at the present time, not as you wish to be in the future. Describe yourself as you are generally or typically, as compared with other persons you know of the same sex and of roughly your same age. There are no right or wrong answers. Please choose the number that best describes you. (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3= neither agree nor disagree; 4= agree; 5=strongly agree)
> 1. I would like to have a lot more friends.

2. I am popular with others my age.
3. I am always doing things with a lot of kids.
4. I wish that more people my age liked me.
5. I have lots of friends.
6. I find it hard to make friends.

Higher scores on this scale indicate higher levels of perceived social acceptance. To score this subscale, make sure to first reverse code items 1, 4, and 6 above (for example, a response of 5 should be recoded to 1; a response of 4 should be recoded to 2, etc.). Second, compute the average of all six items. Higher average scores should indicate higher levels of social acceptance. You may want to examine whether scores differ by age and gender. If you find large differences, you may want to compare girls' scores to the average score for girls, and boy's scores to the average score for boys, rather than to the average for the overall sample. Scores lower than the mean could be considered low, and scores higher than the subgroup mean could be considered high.

Flourishing Families Survey of Family Life, Peer Connection Subscale.[xiii] This self-report measure has seven items (items 1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 11, and 12, shown as 1-7 below) to assess whether children have a supportive friend. Children rate each item using the following response options: 0=Never; 1=Once a month; 2=Once a week; 3=A few times a week; and 4=Every day. Item 5 should be recoded such that higher scores indicate stronger connections with peers.

1. How often do you call or text this friend?
2. If you needed help with something, how often could you count on this friend to help you?
3. How often do you and this friend go over to each other's houses?
4. How often do you tell this friend things about yourself that you wouldn't tell most kids?
5. How often do you feel like it's hard to get along with this friend?
6. How often do you and this friend go places together, like a movie, shopping or a sports event?
7. How often does this friend praise or congratulate you when you do a good job on something?

Based on an examination of data obtained from the Flourishing Family Project,[xiv] we recommend applying a mean score cut-off of 2.2 and below, to identify children who lack supportive friends (these children lie in the bottom quarter of the sample).

Templeton Positive Indicators Project, Peer Friendships.[xv] This self-report subscale has seven items to assess whether teens are a supportive friend. Psychometric analyses indicate this subscale has a high degree of reliability (Cronbach's alpha=.86) and that better scores on this subscale predict a lower likelihood of smoking and higher grades.[xvi] (The full scale also includes a subscale relating to *having* a supportive friend, which, although it has good reliability and validity, was not found to predict outcomes such as smoking and grades.)

Instructions: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements (strongly disagree; somewhat disagree; neither agree nor disagree; somewhat agree; or strongly agree).

1. I am there when my friends need me.
2. I would stand up for my friends if another kid was causing them trouble.
3. I help close friends feel good about themselves.
4. I have broken promises I made to my friends
5. I support my friends when they do the right thing.
6. I encourage my friends to be the best they can be.
7. I find it hard to be kind and caring with my friends.

Response values for these items (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) can averaged to create a summary score. Higher scores indicate being a more supportive friend.

USEFUL RESOURCES ON PROMOTING POSITIVE PEER RELATIONS AND SOCIAL SKILLS

- Bandy, T., & Moore, K. A. (2010). *What works for promoting and reinforcing positive social skills: Lessons from experimental evaluations of programs and interventions.* Research-to-Results Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: Child Trends. This fact sheet synthesizes effective strategies that work for promoting and reinforcing social skills.

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (n.d.). *A Family Guide to Keeping Youth Mentally Healthy and Drug Free.* Washington, DC: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: http://family.samhsa.gov/teach. This guide seeks to help parents promote their children's health and well-being. It includes information on how to help teens in middle school make friends and deal with being left out of a group or event.

- Gurian, A., & Goodman, R.F. (n.d.). *Friends and Friendships.* NYU Child Study Center. New York University. Retrieved on June 1, 2012 from http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/friends_friendships. This article offers tips to parents about how to support positive behaviors and respond to difficulties at school to support positive peer relations with classmates. Tips for young children, school-age children, and preadolescents are provided, along with a list of do's and don'ts for addressing shy and withdrawn or aggressive behaviors.

- Schwebel, R. (2000). *Helping your children navigate their teenage years: A guide for parents.* Washington, DC: White House Council on Youth Violence. Retrieved on July 1, 2010 from http://download.ncadi.samhsa.gov/ken/pdf/SVP-0013/SVP-0013.pdf. This guide includes a section to assist parents with helping their teenager cope with bullying.

- Hair, E.C., Jager, J., & Garret, S.B. (2002). *Helping teens develop healthy social skills and relationships: What the research shows about navigating adolescence.* Child Trends research brief. Washington, DC: Child Trends. This fact sheet discusses factors that lead to high quality social relationships among young people and identifies interventions that have been found to be effective in promoting these relationships. Retrieved on June 1, 2012 from http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2002_07_01_RB_TeenSocialSkills.pdf.

REFERENCES

[i] Relationships exclusively with younger peers may hinder the development of age-appropriate skills; and relationships exclusively with older peers may promote problem behavior.

[ii] Bandy, T., & Moore, K. A. (2010). *What works for promoting and reinforcing positive social skills: Lessons from experimental evaluations of programs and interventions.* Research-to-Results Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[iii] Bierman, K. L., & Erath, S. A. (2004). *Prevention and intervention programs promoting positive peer relations in early childhood.* Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development.

[iv] Rubin, K. H., Bukowski, W. M., & Parker, J.G. (1998). Peer interactions, relationships, and groups. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional, and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 619–700). New York: Wiley.

[v] Hubbard, J. A., & Coie, J. D. (1994). Emotional correlates of social competence in children's peer relationships. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 40,* 1-20

[vi] Bierman, K. L., Smoot, D. L. & Aumiller, K. (1993). Characteristics of aggressive-rejected, aggressive (nonrejected), and rejected (nonaggressive) boys. *Child Development, 64*, 139-151.

[vii] *Bierman*, K. L. (2003). *Peer rejection*: *Developmental processes and intervention strategies*. New York: Guilford Press.

[viii] Rubin, K. H., Bukowski, W.M., & Laursen, B. (Eds.) (2009). *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups.* New York: Guilford Press.

[ix] Ladd, G. W., & Profilet, S. M. (1996). The Child Behavior Scale: A teacher-report measure of young children's aggressive, withdrawn, and prosocial behaviors. *Developmental Psychology, 32,* 1008 –1024.

[x] Ladd, G. W., Herald-Brown, S. L., & Andrews, R. K. (2009). The Child Behavior Scale (CBS) Revisited: A longitudinal evaluation of CBS subscales with children, preadolescents, and adolescents. *Psychological Assessment, 21,* 325–339.

[xi] Buhs, E., Herald, S., & Ladd, G. (2006). Peer exclusion and victimization: Processes that mediate the relation between peer group rejection and children's classroom engagement and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 98*, 1-13.

[xii] Harter, S. (1985). *Manual for the Self-Perception Profile for Children* (Revision of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children). Denver: University of Denver.

[xiii] Barber, B. K. & Olsen, J. (1997). Socialization in context: Connection, regulation, and autonomy in the family, school, and neighborhood and with peers. *Journal of Adolescent Research. 12*, 287-315.

[xiv] For more about the Flourishing Families Project, go to http://flourishingfamilies.byu.edu.

[xv] This measure was developed by Child Trends for the Templeton Foundation, for the Flourishing Children Project. For more information on positive indicators, see: http://www.childtrends.org/_docdisp_page.cfm?LID=E211A0AA-8237-462C-B4B9F18062B5B2B0.

[xvi] These findings may be found on the Child Trends web site at http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2012_07_19_SP_FlourishingPDF.pdf.