

Communicative Interaction In Early Childhood: Foundation For Positive And Negative Behavioural Patterns

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of communicative interaction in early childhood on the behavioural patterns of young children. It highlights those social factors that determine the pattern of social interaction between young children and others. It also discusses some of those factors, which constitute children's social context of development. The paper brings to the limelight the negative social attitudes and emotions that children acquire from their different environments and the various strategies for intervention. Finally, the paper emphasizes the need for parents, care-givers, educators and teachers to create a healthy social and emotional climate that will help young children to develop positive social attitudes.

Keywords: Social-Cultural Factors, Parenting styles, Care-giving styles, Peer interaction, Negative attitudes.

Introduction

Communicative interaction in early childhood is very important in the cognitive and socio-emotional development of children. Some early childhood experiences continue to affect children even in adulthood. Many of the psychological, emotional and social problems that manifest in adolescence and adulthood have their roots in early childhood. Communicative interaction in early childhood refers to the verbal and non-verbal situations of language use that occur in the process of children's development. The pattern of communicative interaction between young children and others reflects the type of interpersonal relationship that exists between them. Communication between young children and adult helps the children to establish connection and build relationship with the adults. Also, the manner in which adults talk to children is very important in shaping their behavioural patterns.

Early childhood refers to the period between 2 and 6 years. This is the period, when children become gradually independent and develop skills that portray readiness for school. Apart from the influence of the parents on children's development at this time, many other people in their social context of development contribute either positively or negatively to their overall development. In this category are the children's siblings, relatives, peers, neighbours, teachers etc.

Socio- Cultural Influences

The major socio-cultural factors that determine the pattern of communicative interaction between children and adults are culture, gender, and social class.

Culture: Culture which refers to a people's way of life, beliefs, values, religion, art, etc. has a lot to do with the way children and adults relate. According to Triandis (2000), there are basically two types of culture: individualism and collectivism. He described individualism as a set of values which give priority to personal goals rather than to group goals. Whereas collectivism refers to a set of values that support the group. It encourages group integrity, interdependence of group members and harmonious relationships. Many western cultures are individualistic e.g. Great Britain, Canada, Netherlands, Germany and United States of America. African and Eastern cultures on the other hand, are regarded as being collectivistic. It is generally believed that individualistic cultures are more prone to social ills (e.g. child abuse, divorce, drug abuse, mental problems, and crimes) than collectivistic cultures.

The culture of a people determines to a great extent, their parenting styles, relationships among members of the family, relationship with neighbours, care-giving styles, peer group relationships and so on. A child from the African culture will likely have a wider range of people to communicate with (e.g. immediate family members, uncles, aunts, grand parents, cousins, nieces, nephew etc) than a child from the western culture. His pattern of interaction will certainly be different from that of a child from the American culture who may only have his parents to talk to.

Gender: Gender has been described as the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of being male or female. It is different from sex which refers to the biological dimensions of being male or female. Every culture specifies the social roles that males and females should perform. This, to a great extent, determines the pattern of communicative interaction between children and adults. Gender roles determine the kind of plays that boys and girls engage in. For example, parents encourage boys to engage in aggressive type of plays with other boys but girls are allowed to play with toys or engage in social roles which tend to be romantic and less masculine in nature. Societal expectations about how males and females should act, talk, think, dress, feel etc. are mostly based on the gender roles and culture.

Social Class: This refers to the members of a society that share a similar social rank and certain economic and cultural characteristics in common, (Colman, 2003). Social class is traditionally divided into three groups: upper class, middle class and lower class. The social class of an individual is determined by his level of education and his socio-economic status. These determine to a great extent the pattern of communicative interaction in various families.

Social Context of Development in Early Childhood

The social context or environment where a child grows up provides the communicative contexts in which interactions take place. The way a child interacts with other children, adolescents and adults in his/her environment will depend on a number of factors, which include: the family and parenting style; the care-giver and care-giving style; relationship with peers; early childhood education, and relationship with teachers. All these factors exert some influence on the development of children in some definite ways. Some of these effects are discussed below.

Family Interaction

Children grow up in diverse kinds of families e.g. nuclear family, single parent family, foster family, polygamous family, etc. In some families, parents devote time to nurturing and supporting their children. In some other families, the children are treated harshly or neglected. Some children live with both parents, others live with single parent. Some children are taken to day-care centres because they have mothers who are in full-time employment. Some other children stay with their mothers at home all the time. Some children live in large families with siblings and the extended family members; some others live in nuclear families. Some children live in poverty; some others live in luxury. All these varying circumstances affect children's development and continue to affect them even in adulthood.

Parenting Styles

Parenting styles have great impact on the development of children. Baumrind (1971) has identified four types of parenting styles: authoritarian parenting, authoritative parenting, neglectful parenting and indulgent parenting.

Authoritarian Parenting: In this kind of parenting style, the child is required to obey the parents without questions. The parents exercise absolute control over the child and punish him if he disobeys. Children of such parents grow up in fear and anxiety. They lack initiative and cannot communicate freely with others. They are always afraid of making mistakes because that would attract some punishment.

Authoritative Parenting: This type of parenting style allows children some degree of independence. The parents are more understanding and supportive even though they still place some level of restriction over the children. It is the best form of parenting. Children of such parents show better social orientation. They tend to have high self-esteem, relate well with peers, and are self-reliant.

Neglectful Parenting: In this style of parenting, children are allowed to do whatever they like e.g. staying in a neighbour's house till late in the night. The Parents tend to be busy pursuing other interests to the detriment of their children's welfare. Such children are poorly motivated, insecure and lack self-discipline.

Indulgent Parenting: In this style of parenting, the parents are involved with their children's upbringing but are not strict about placing restrictions and control over the children's behaviour. Such children do have a lot of freedom and they grow up socially incompetent in many ways. They lack self-control and respect for others. They are rude, abusive, egocentric and domineering.

Care-giver–Child Interaction

Children have strong attachment to their care-givers especially in infancy and early childhood periods. The care-giver may be the mother, father, grandmother or any other person entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the child. The presence of a nurturant and supportive care-giver gives a child the feeling of security and confidence.

The role of responsive and sensitive care-givers is very important in the development of children in early childhood. The care-giving styles that children receive will go a long way in determining whether the children will develop positive or negative behavioural patterns. Ainsworth, (1979) carried out a research on infant's motivation to be near the care-giver and the extent to which the care-giver's presence provides the child with security and confidence. She identified four categories of infants: securely attached

babies, insecure avoidant babies, insecure resistant babies and insecure disorganized babies. She also found out that the children in each of these categories behave differently due to the type of care-givers they have. The details of her findings are discussed below.

Securely Attached Babies: They feel secure in the presence and absence of the care-giver. They are more relaxed and eager to play with toys.

Insecure Avoidant Babies: They are indifferent about the presence and absence of the care-giver. They turn their back on the care-giver.

Insecure Resistant Babies: They try to resist and fight the care-giver by kicking and pushing away. They are not interested in playing with toys.

Insecure Disorganized Babies: They appear to be confused and fearful even in the presence of the care-giver.

A good care-giver should be responsive and sensitive to the child's needs and signals. Carbornell, Aizte, Bustamante, and Quiceno (2002) assert that the care-givers of securely attached babies are usually sensitive to babies' signals and are available to respond to them. On the other hand, care-givers of avoidant babies tend to be unavailable. They often do not respond to their babies' signals and have little physical contact with the babies. Care-givers of disorganized babies often neglect the babies and sometimes physically abuse them. (Berlin and Cassidy, in Santrock 2005).

It is important that care-givers become consciously aware of their roles and responsibilities towards the up-bringing of the child. They should realize that every little bit of love and care shown to a child contributes to the overall development of the child. Little things like mutual eye gazing, eye contact, physical contact and touching play important roles in early social interaction.

Peer – Child Interaction

Peers play crucial roles in children's development. When a child associates with children of about the same age or maturity level, it gives him the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective. Every normal child needs good peer interaction. Research has shown that children, who are socially isolated, develop certain disorders which include: school drop out, drunkenness, juvenile delinquency, depression, to mention but a few. Rubin, Brikowski, and Parker (1998), identified four different types of peer statuses among children: popular children, neglected children, rejected children and controversial children. They observed that whereas popular children are happy, enthusiastic, and self confident, rejected children are aggressive and delinquent.

When friendship develops among peers it becomes very advantageous. Research has shown that friendship among peers provides companionship, physical support, ego support, intimacy and affection for children. It is important that children make friends that have good social skills; children that are considerate, kind, empathetic, and supportive not those who are disrespectful, inconsiderate, jealous, and dishonest (Berndt, 2002; Hartup, & Abecassis, 2002; and Gottman,. & Parker, 1987).

Teacher-Child Interaction

Early childhood education creates opportunities for children to interact with other people apart from members of their families. The nursery and kindergarten programmes provided for children should be such that provide the basic ingredients of early childhood education. Such programmes should have the competence and resources

to provide young children with a variety of learning experiences and exposure to other children and adults along with opportunities for extensive play. The schools should be committed to the task of ensuring that the school environment approximates a good early childhood programme (National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1997).

Early childhood educational programmes should be totally different from primary school programmes in their curriculum. The methods of teaching, evaluation and classroom management should be suitable for the age of the children. The Teacher Training Programmes for pre-school children should also be different from those of the primary schools.

Research has shown that early childhood education can be a source of stress for young children even though it has some advantages. Clarke- Steward and Fein cited by Santrock (2005) found out that children who attend early childhood education have some peculiar characteristics (both positive and negative).

Positive Characteristics

- They interact freely with peers than home-reared children.
- They have a better social orientation in the sense that they are more confident, assertive, self-sufficient, verbally expressive, independent, and comfortable in social and stressful circumstances.
- They are goal-directed.
- They exhibit more task persistence and leadership skills.

Negative Characteristics

- They are less cooperative with adults.
- They are less polite and less compliant to teacher's demands.
- They are more aggressive and bossy.

The interaction between the teacher and the child in early childhood is very important in the cognitive, social and emotional development of the child. The nature and behaviour of the teacher will help the child develop interest in schooling or dislike for schooling: Children like teachers that are enthusiastic, kind, considerate, playful and creative. They do not like those that are harsh, frightening and boring.

The Influence of Communicative Contexts on Children's Emotions

Lewis, 2002 carried out a research on emotional development and identified two categories of emotion: primary emotions and self-conscious emotions. Primary emotions refer to emotions like joy, sadness, fear, anger and surprise. They appear in the first six months of life. On the other hand, self-conscious emotions refer to emotions that require some level of consciousness such as: shame, guilt, pride, jealousy, envy, empathy. They appear from one and half years to two and half years.

Parents and care-givers can help infants and young children to modulate their emotions. For example, by carrying and soothing them when they cry, these adults help them to reduce their level of stress. Cummings (1987) asserts that emotions are relational.

This means that they are induced by social interaction. In many instances, emotions are elicited in interpersonal conflict.

It is important that members of the family create a lively and humorous atmosphere in the home, as this will diffuse the child's tension. When a positive mood is created and induced in a child, he will be willing to comply with instructions and directions from parents. When parents and care-givers respond promptly to a child's cry, it helps to create a bond between them and the child, thereby removing fear and anxiety. Within the first six months from birth, infants display different emotional styles. One baby may appear to be cheerful, another baby may be crying most of the time. Their various ways of showing their emotional responses, relate to their temperament.

Temperament

Thomas and Chess cited by Santrock (2005) identified three basic types of temperament: easy child, difficult child, and slow- to-warm-up child.

Easy Child: The child in the category is usually in a positive mood. He quickly learns regular routines in infancy and adapts easily to new experiences.

Difficult child: The difficult child cries frequently and reacts negatively. He engages in irregular daily routines and is slow to accept change.

Slow-to-warm-up child: A child in this class has a low activity level and reacts negatively. He shows low adaptability and low intensity of mood.

Apart from hereditary and physiological factors, the social context of a child's development can influence temperament. In some cultures, parents react differently to the temperament of children, depending on their gender. For example, mothers may respond quickly to the crying of girls than boys. Temperamental differences in children have some important implications for parent-child interaction. Temperament experts suggest that mothers should not label a child as 'a difficult child', as this may affect him negatively. There is also the need for mothers to be sensitive to the individual needs and signals of their children.

Negative Social Attitudes in Early Childhood and the Patterns of Intervention

Some negative behavioural patterns emanate in early childhood and continue to manifest later in life, if the child did not receive any significant help. These negative behavioural patterns include: low self-esteem and aggression.

Low Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is an evaluation of the self. It is a perception that one has about oneself. Some children develop high self-esteem while some develop low self-esteem. There are diverse causes of low self-esteem, such as: family conflict, child abuse, insecurity, lack of social skills, lack of social approval, and lack of emotional support. Low self- esteem makes a child feel inadequate. Such a child lacks drive and initiative. He becomes prone to antisocial behaviours.

Strategies for Increasing Children's Self-Esteem

To help children increase their self-esteem the following strategies will be useful:

1. **Identify the cause of low self-esteem:** Pre-school teachers and parents should help the children to identify the causes of their low self esteem by helping the children to identify and appreciate their areas of competence, such as: athletic

skills, artistic skills, physical strength, academic skills, etc. If the children are able to value their areas of competence, it will improve their self-esteem.

2. **Provide emotional support and social approval:** Parents, teachers or any other supportive adult can increase children's self-esteem by becoming a source of emotional support and social approval for the children.
3. **Encourage them to enhance their academic performance:** Parents and teachers should encourage the children to achieve their academic goals. It will help them to have a better self-image.

Aggression

Aggression in children could manifest in the form of fighting, bullying, domineering attitude, and desire to control others etc. Aggressive personalities are driven by insecurity, anxiety and hostility. Most children learn to be aggressive by watching and imitating aggressive parents, siblings peers or others who are aggressive. Aggressive, children may become depressed, lose interest in school work or even avoid going to school. It has been observed that bullies are more likely to have low grade, smoke and drink alcohol. In a research study, Olweus (1980) found out that parents who are bullies are usually authoritarian and permissive about their son's aggressive tendencies.

Strategies for Helping Children Deal with Aggression

Parents, teachers, and other adults can help children deal with aggression by getting them to talk about their feelings of sadness; bitterness and anger. By talking about their feelings, the children become self-conscious about their aggression and begin to make efforts to overcome it. The teacher can adopt the following strategies to help the children deal with aggression:

1. Create conducive emotional climate in the classroom that can encourage emotional expression.
2. Involve children in dramatic plays in which emotions are involved.
3. The teacher can ask them stimulating questions about causes and consequences of certain emotions.
4. The teacher can lead the children to create pictures about different expressions of emotions.

Conclusion

It is very important that parents and caregivers realize the role they have to play in the upbringing of their children, especially in the early childhood period. They should recognize that the key factor in any child's development is the quality of parenting (care-giving). They should make choices that will ensure good quality care for their children. No matter how busy parents may be, it is their duty to monitor their pre-school children and observe for themselves, if their children are having behavioural problems. In choosing a day-care centre or pre-primary school for the children, parents should look out for a place, where they children can get high quality care. It should be a physical environment that is conducive for the cognitive, psychological, and social development of the children.

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