

Peer Influences and Positive Cognitive Restructuring

Thomas F. Tate

Although it is widely accepted that peer influence is a powerful factor in adolescent development, profession use of this resource has been generally confined to exceptional or problematic populations. The research literature suggests that peer group programs have produced orderly, productive, and positive academic and rehabilitative environments. Peer group paradigms have also generated positive results in creating productive social group living environments and have helped reduce aggressive behaviors in group living settings. This article suggests elements to facilitate a peer group approach to cognitive problem-solving development school and group living settings while highlighting the adult-imposed roadblocks to that process.

The impact of peer influence on adolescent development is generally associated with negative connotations. I believe that the use of the peer group as a vehicle for problem-solving development has not been fully utilized, even though it presents significant opportunities for childcare practitioners and educators.

It is widely accepted that membership in peer groups is a powerful force during adolescence. These groups provide an important developmental point of reference through which adolescents gain an understanding of the world outside of their families. Failure to develop close relationships with age-mates, however, often results in a variety of problems for adolescents – from delinquency and substance abuse to psychological disorders (Hops, Davis, Alpert, & Longoria, 1997). Furthermore, higher peer stress and less companionship support from peers has been associated with a lower social self-concept in adolescents (Wenz-Gross, Siperstein, Untoh, & Widaman, 1997).

As children progress through adolescence, they build knowledge bases that help them navigate social situations. An abundance of literature has suggested that there is considerable individual variation regarding cognitive skill development during adolescence as it relates to peer influence. Dodge's (1993) research indicated that poor peer relationships were closely associated with social cognitive skill deficits. He found that adolescents who had developed positive peer relationships generated more alternative solutions to problems, proposed more mature solutions, and were less aggressive than youth who had developed negative peer relationships. Along those same lines, Bansal (1996) found that adolescents who compared themselves negatively in reference to their peers experienced a reduction in attention to problem-solving tasks.

Peer Influence as a Behavior Management Tool

Most public and private childcare systems continue to overlook peer influence despite the growing body of literature indicating that it represents a powerful force in maintaining orderly, productive, and positive academic and rehabilitative environments (e.g., Bellafiore & Salend, 1983; Brendtro & Lindgren, 1988; Emery, 1990; Gadow & McKibbin, 1984; Gibbs, Potter, Goldstein, & Brendtro, 1996; Salend, Jantzen, & Geik, 1992; Wasmund, 1988). Schools all but ignore the incorporation of peer group strategies as a vehicle for developing problem-solving skills in the classroom, focusing instead on individual memorization of facts and concepts (while removing "problem" children from the

classroom). One only needs to review the contents of school proficiency tests to realize that education administrators have become more interested in teaching children “what” to think than “how” to think.

Similarly, rehabilitation programs generally focus on rules and conformity, practices that are often designed to control youth and maintain staff-imposed order. Mental health systems commonly focus on individual pathology and seek to improve client functioning through adult-child counseling approaches. In those instances where peer group approaches have been used with adolescents, it has usually been to arrest or change maladaptive social behaviors. Pettit (1997) found the peer group to be a useful resource in decreasing violence and aggression in children; Brannon, Larson, and Doggett (1991) reported that the peer group process facilitated the disclosure of victimization by adolescent sexual offenders.

Over the past two decades, child- and family-service programs have popularized the term empowerment and, to some extent, have incorporated peer-referenced paradigms into their approaches with adolescents. Many programs have failed to truly value children as partners in this process; instead, they have used peer influence to police the environment and maintain order once children have broken adult-imposed rules.

Adult Views of Troubled Adolescents

Unfortunately, many childcare professionals have a pessimistic view of children and behavior that is detrimental to the rehabilitative process, and the basis of most therapeutic approaches for children with behavior disorders is a negative attitude (Brendtro, 1988). According to Brendtro, a pervasive clinical orientation that explains problematic behaviors as pathological or deliberate has prevented child-care professionals from viewing behaviors as symptoms of personal distress. Furthermore, the managed care movement has been overly obsessed with the quick elimination of isolated problematic behaviors, usually delivered in the most economical forum available. As a consequence, treatment interventions often fail to modify or restructure those particular values or cognitive structures that led to the adolescent’s misbehavior.

Adults’ feeling of superiority concerning children, or “adultism” (Bell, 1995), prevents adults from viewing children as social equals. Inherent in the context of adultism is the practice of making children a social class subservient to the adult population. This practice has systematically taught us that it is acceptable to show disrespect toward children, and it has added to a mindset that has devalued the importance of youthful contributions. According to Bell, classroom practices designed to create order have historically embraced elements of adultism:

- Teachers sometimes yell at students with impunity, but students are disciplined if they yell back at teachers.
- Young people are sometimes punished unfairly because adults feel frustrated.
- Students are forced to accept “grades” that, over time, cause students to eventually internalize a life-long view of themselves as “smart” or “average” or “dumb” – with profound impact on many aspects of their lives. However, students do not get to officially “grade” teachers. If a student receives an “F,” it is assumed the student failed, not the teacher. (p. 4)

Common views of the child as the “villain” have produced programs that are designed to control undesirable behaviors (Bazemore & Terry, 1997). This view has led to a resurgence of punitive methods in treating troubled adolescents. Increasing numbers of boot camps and juvenile prisons, as well as legislation that has constantly lowered the legal age of responsibility for criminal behavior,

have become common ways of dealing with this population.

Often viewed by the mental health community as “victims,” troubled adolescents are frequently regarded as incapable of making life-long behavioral changes (Bazemore & Terry, 1997). The interpersonal problems they display are often considered pathological, and adult professionals are charged with the mission of treating illnesses or preparing adolescents for the next in a series of illness-focused interventions.

Both of the previous views eliminate the possibility of incorporating elements of peer influence in any meaningful way to help troubled adolescents become more skilled at problem solving. Furthermore, neither focuses on the cognitive restructuring and value formation necessary for developing ongoing interpersonal competence.

Viewing troubled children as resources allows the educator or childcare practitioner to become involved in an active partnership with adolescents and their peers. Children become actively involved in the problem-solving process, and they find fewer reasons to engage in unproductive power struggles with adults. The honest expression of feelings is encouraged, and the door is open to helping troubled adolescents examine how their behaviors result from ineffective problem solving.

Borrowing from Sutherland’s theory of differential association, Hartung (1965) posited that criminality is socioculturally learned in the process of interacting with family members and peers in small, intimate groups. This process includes learning the techniques to commit delinquent acts and developing the rationalizations to protect one’s self-concept. Adolescents make their own decisions and are not powerless against this peer pressure, but they become delinquent when their interactions with others give them more reasons to violate the law than to obey it.

This same learning process presents itself daily in classrooms, treatment centers, and group-living situations across the country. Guiding this process to a productive conclusion becomes the mission of the teacher or peer-group practitioner who views the child as a resource.

Dynamics of Problem Solving

Troubled adolescents typically have a difficult time with problem-solving tasks. *How* they go about seeking solutions may be more important than *what* alternatives they produce (Wasmund & Tate, 1996). Developing problem-solving processes (the “how”) promotes generalization to future problem-solving situations; what solutions they choose may offer only temporary relief from a momentary difficulty.

Developmental theorists have proposed that effective problem solving is at the heart of mental health and adjustment. Furthermore, the literature strongly supports the impact of peer influence in this process. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory on directive beliefs supports the idea that peer group microsystems contribute to an adolescent’s development as the adolescent organizes experiences to develop future plans.

Theorists generally accept that problem solving consists of several interrelated skills, some of which are developmental in nature and necessary for improved social functioning. The development of alternative thinking teaches children how to anticipate potential social problems. Adolescents who understand the way they relate to others and anticipate the results of those actions become more successful in social situations than those who rely on habitual (and ineffective) solutions. By facilitating peer feedback regarding alternative solutions to problems as they arise, practitioners exhibit

a nonjudgmental role that enhances learning. The more alternatives generated, the more likely adolescents are to find good solutions that generalize to other situations. Examples of questions adults may ask to stimulate discussion include the following:

- What other things could John have done to get what he wanted?
- What alternatives could the class (group) offer to help Jane find different ways to accomplish her goal?
- Does the class (group) know if John or Jane considered any other ways of handling the situation?

Adolescents who experience difficulty in means-end thinking often exhibit characteristics of impulsivity. Engaging peers in a discussion that helps the youth identify potential obstacles that must be overcome (the means) facilitates a process whereby the child actually reaches his or her intended goal (the end). However, unless the practitioner helps the peer group accurately identify the youth's goal (e.g., power, recognition, acceptance), she or he is unlikely to generate an accurate discussion of potential obstacles. Examples of questions adults may use to stimulate discussion include the following:

- Does the class (group) know specifically what Jeff was trying to accomplish?
- Has the class (group) discussed with June the kinds of things that could get in her way of accomplishing the goal?
- Have class (group) members shared with Jeff or June how they have run into similar difficulties?

Social consequences must also be considered in effective problem solving, although egocentricity during adolescence often delays the development of this skill. *Consequential thinking* and *perspective taking* help the adolescent anticipate social reactions to behaviors. Socially competent people know how other people have influenced them, as well as how their own behavior may influence others. Developing consequential thinking involves an awareness of social and personal motivation in one's self and in others, and it contributes to the development of *empathy* for other people's feelings. Knowing why one behaves the way one does allows the adolescent to alter future interactions instead of repeating the same mistaken patterns. Examples of questions adults may ask to stimulate discussion include the following:

- Does the class (group) know how the youth in question expected others to react (or respond) to his or her behavior?
- What made him or her think that?
- Did the (class) group see anything (or anyone) influence the youth's behavior?
- If so, how (who)?
- Is the class (group) willing to discuss with the youth the effect of his or her behavior on others?
- How did the youth make him- or herself look when he or she said that?
- Does the class (group) know if that was his or her intention?

Finally, teachers and practitioners need to consider cultural biases in facilitating discussions with peers. One study on the social environments of a number of peer group agencies (Yang, Davis, Ryan, & Wasmund, 1999) found that African American students perceived their learning environments less positively than their European American and Hispanic American counterparts. Further study is

necessary to determine the elements that contributed to this phenomenon.

Implications for Practice

The literature clearly highlights the potential for adults to capitalize on the influence of peer relationships in facilitating adolescents' cognitive development. The only thing that gets in our way is our mindset regarding the value of adolescents as partners in this process. The phenomenon of adultism, much like other "isms," relies upon the adult's unwillingness to view adolescents as social equals. In addition, those adults using peer influence solely for behavior management purposes continue a process that is both discouraging and dehumanizing for adolescents.

Teachers who resist entering into partnerships with students point out that their role is to educate – not raise – children. However, preparing students to responsibly solve life's problems is a primary function of the educator's role. Failure to recognize the impact of peer relationships on this process only serves to make teachers' jobs more difficult and results in more troubled adolescents facing ejection from public school settings.

Because the literature suggests that peer and familial influences interact to help children develop healthy cognitive problem-solving skills, the importance of substitute caregivers cannot be understated. In the family's absence, teachers and childcare practitioners provide valuable points of reference for the developing adolescent and potentially could have an even greater impact on those students experiencing poor parent-child relationships. Seita, Mitchell, and Tobin (1996) argued for a concept they labeled "connectedness," which entitles every child to significant relationships with his or her adult caregivers.

Adults unwilling to accept an expanded role in the child's development should be encouraged to examine their biases and stereotypes about families. When the family has been unable to fully meet a child's needs, other adults who play a significant role in the child's life have extraordinary potential for influencing the child in taking charge of his or her life.

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