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Talking with Young Children about Social Ideas

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Reading about young children's ideas of social issues such as justice, friendship, and sex roles is not enough. We need to hear the children speaking in their own voices before we can retain usable knowledge about their social and moral reasoning.

Teacher: "Do you have a sister, Seth?"

Seth (age four): "No, we have a baby. She will be my sister when she's big enough to play with me."

During the early childhood years, children's understanding of many social and moral issues undergoes immense changes. We became interested in learning more about these changes and supporting them through our laboratory preschool curriculum. One major change, for example, is that children come to classify themselves and others into sex, age, and kinship categories and to learn social role expectations. Children also show greatly deepened understanding of

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such moral issues as fair sharing, obedience, authority, and friendship.

These areas of development are part of what can be called social cognition, or "children's *understanding* of social behavior—what children *think* about their own behavior and the behavior of others" (Moore 1979, p. 54). Recent research on social cognition has generated a great deal of new information very useful to educators. This research describes the typical developmental stages in children's social thinking, and is based on Piagetian theory. Stated briefly, "Understanding others is not merely a matter of 'learning more' about people in some quantitative sense; it is organizing what one knows into systems of meaning or belief" (Shantz 1975, p. 266).

Most published social cognition activities have focused on children's role-taking skills. Forman and Hill (1980), for example, offer many ingenious examples of how teachers can help children to understand what specific information is like from another person's perspective. Out of this grows the ability to better understand the other person's behavior. Educators have also developed curriculum ideas for stimulating children's *interpersonal problem-solving*. Teachers can help a group of children to learn to notice and name a problem, generate alternative solutions, and evaluate the consequences of the alternatives (Spivack and Shure 1974; Copple, Sigel and Saunders 1979).

While we used these activities as a foundation for our social cognition curriculum, we also wanted to venture into new program areas. We began to develop learning encounters concerning equally important issues such as social roles, justice in sharing, and the distinction between moral and conventional rules. Our goal was not to transmit either our values or factual information to the children concerning these issues. Rather, we had two major aims:

1. To present intellectually challenging problems that children could discuss either individually or as a group. This we believed would stimulate them to think about social and moral issues.

2. To learn about the varied aspects of the children's social and moral thinking, and then to use this information as a basis for less authoritarian guidance and management.

In implementing our goals, we focused on three different kinds of learning encounters: the *dramatic skit*, presented to a large group or the entire class; the *thinking game,* aimed at an individual child or a very small group; and the *spontaneous discussion,* relevant for a teacher interacting with any number of children.

The dramatic skit

The dramatic skit was considered to be a major type of learning/teaching activity for the two- to four-year-old children and teachers in our program. Skit time took place once a week at the end of the day and came to assume a festive, ritual air. A large platform used during the earlier part of the day was pushed aside by the entire class in anticipation of the upcoming drama. The characters in the skit were acted out either by puppets manipulated by adults, or by a group of teachers. The skits always *posed* problems, never solved them.

For example, in a skit about the meaning of *age* the children are told by a teacher I moderator, "Both Anna and Carolyn have birthdays today!" Teacher Anna, 5 feet tall and 60 years old, stands smiling next to student teacher Carolyn, 5 feet 11 inches tall, but 16 years old.

In one hand the moderator holds a birthday cake with many candles, and in the other she has a cake with just three. She poses the question, "I have two birthday cakes for my two birthday friends. Who should get the cake with more candles?"

After listening to all of the children's opinions and probing their reasons for choosing, the moderator concludes, "Some of you thought Anna was older, but some of you thought Carolyn. That's interesting. Thank you for talking about your ideas."

Children become involved in discussions on issues presented in skits that present a genuine conflict.

This skit, which fascinated our class, provokes children to think about how body cues tell who is older and who is younger. Very young children generally place inordinate stress on relative height, yet they seem to sometimes notice other cues such as facial features, grey hair, and clothing, too (Britton and Britton 1969; Kogan, Stephens, and Shelton 1961; Looft, Rayman, and Rayman 1972). They cannot yet coordinate conflicting dimensions, however, as in our skit. Preschoolers therefore center on one dimension, almost always height, in making their choice. Nevertheless, they express uncertainty and puzzlement when talking in the group about their reasons.

A second example is a skit exploring conventional versus moral rules. The teacher moderator announces to the audience, "Here we are at the Yellow Blanket School where there are no rules. Children can do anything that they want." The audience indeed sees a yellow

blanket spread on the floor where two teachers portray children playing with toys. The moderator goes over and begins picking up some of the toys.

The teacher acting as Child 1 says, "I'll help you pick up, teacher," and says to Child 2, "Come on! We're finished playing. You pick up, too."

Child 2 protests, "No, I don't have to if I don't want to."

The moderator turns to ask the class to resolve the dispute. "Do you think she can keep playing, or does she have to pick up?" If some children insist that Child 2 must pick up, the moderator may ask, "Why do you think so, when there are no rules at the Yellow Blanket School?"

This is not the end of this skit, however, because it goes on to portray the two children later playing with blocks. Child 2 takes a block from Child 1, who hits her hard.

Child 2 sobs, "You're bad," but Child 1 declares, "I'm not bad. I can hit if I want."

The moderator now asks the audience, "What do you think? Is it okay to hit at the Yellow Blanket School? Why (or why not)?"

This skit is based on Turiel's (1978) research that demonstrates that even very young children have an intuitive appreciation of the difference between moral rules (which prevent people from aggressing against one another) and social conventional rules (which maintain smooth social interaction through dress codes, manners, and other social routines). Early childhood teachers tend to enforce both kinds of rules equally, but children feel moral rules are more important (Nucci and Turiel 1978). For example, with the skit, children are adamant that hitting would be wrong even if there were not a school rule, whereas their opinions are divided about pick-up time.

A successful skit creates rapt absorption and thinking by the children. Not all children will reply to the moderator's questions, but often those who do respond vehemently, while the other children listen attentively. The most thought-provoking skits are those that arouse controversy in the group. The difference of opinion helps the

children to understand that there is more than one way to think about the problem.

Preschoolers do not find it easy to articulate their reasoning or to answer "why" questions during a group discussion. Sometimes a long thoughtful silence best indicates to the teachers that they have succeeded in posing a genuine conflict. Sometimes a child goes away from the skit still wondering about the issue or dilemma posed. On occasion a child will come up to a teacher later to discuss the skit further, or will share something with a parent about it. Such instances indicate that the skit has achieved its purpose.

With younger children, simple skits work best, and two-year-olds and young three-year-olds respond better to puppets because the children know that they have entered the world of pretend (Smith 1979). Also, younger children will get more involved if the question posed by the skit calls for a concrete choice on their part, as in the following skit about *sex roles*.

Two teachers portray a mother who goes to work at an office and a father who stays at home to cook, launder, and care for the baby. The moderator enters carrying a large box. She announces, "I have a lot of presents here for the man and woman. You have to help me decide who gets each one!"

The audience watches in great suspense as the moderator takes out each gift and asks who should receive it and why. The gifts include an apron, iron, briefcase, sewing kit, and typewriter. The conflict posed for the children is whether they should distribute the gifts according to roles as presented in the skit, or whether they should be guided by traditional sex roles. Cognitive tension arises because societal roles are newly learned and therefore seem to be respected with awe. Sometimes children resolve the discrepancy by altering the facts of the skit. "Give the typewriter to the father! He goes to work."

The role of the teacher moderator is to pose questions and to create and maintain an atmosphere of authentic respect and curiosity about what the children think. For the teacher to answer the questions or even to form questions that give the impression that there is a right answer undermines children's ability to speak freely.

Topics with moral implications require particular effort to resist the temptation to moralize to children. For example, the following skit, drawn from the research of Damon (1977), provokes children to discuss their conceptions of *fairness*. The skit poses a mother and three children decorating cookies for a party. One "daughter" who works very hard decorates many cookies, one decorates just a few, and one, the "baby," only a single cookie. The mother then gets up to leave, saying, "You girls can have *five* cookies as a reward for helping me. You decide together who should get them."

The moderator asks the audience to help decide. Our children readily agree that each "daughter" should get one cookie but are not at all sure what to do with the extras. Jesse says, "The little one should get them. Because she's crying."

Sean disagrees, "The big one gets the most."

"Is that fair?" asks the teacher moderator in a carefully neutral voice.

"Yes," says Sean, "Because she's biggest."

Cognitively neither of these children is able to consider the perspective of more than one character in the story and so each impulsively focuses on the character who appeals to him most. When these children are a little older, they will rigidly insist that to be fair all characters must get *exactly* the same amount even if that means throwing out the extra cookies. Later still they will be able to coordinate everyone's point of view and consider such factors as merit (who worked the hardest) and need (who is hungriest). By not lecturing the children or even implying with her voice that their answers are wrong, the adult discovers how different the children's standards of "justice" may be from her own.

Daniella undressed the doll to find out if it was a girl or boy, but what interested her was its hair.

The thinking game

Piaget (1932) pioneered the use of the open-ended interview to explore children's moral thinking. Kohlberg revised this approach for individual and group moral discussions with his well-known moral dilemmas (Scharf 1978). These are excellent for children seven years and older, but too abstract for preschool children. Recently, Damon (1977) has developed interviews to explore young children's concepts of fair sharing and obedience.

We call the interview the thinking game, which involves a private time between a teacher and one or at most a few children. Some children who rarely speak in response to a skit become talkative and animated during the thinking game.

The format of the thinking game is flexible enough to provide spontaneity, but standardized enough to allow comparison among different children's responses. The thinking game is intended to be a fun, mutual learning experience for teacher and child, not a formal assessment of a child's developmental level. Within the context of an intimate exchange, the thinking game poses the same problem presented in the skit for that week. The one-to-one situation provides the opportunity for the teacher to revise questions that a child appears not to understand or to follow up unexpected thoughts of the child.

For example, in a thinking game concerning *gender differences*, the teacher presented Lillian (age three years) with two baby dolls. The dolls had realistic genitals under their pink or blue outfits, and the teacher wished to find out what criteria Lillian would use to decide whether each doll was a boy or girl. Lillian talked about the dolls' mouths, toes, and hair but never mentioned or even looked for their genitals. The teacher thus learned that Lillian's concepts of gender differences were still very limited. However, she also learned something unexpected from the fact that she had trouble getting Lillian to say whether the baby was a boy or girl at all. She learned that to Lillian, babies were not either *boys* or *girls*, they were just *babies*. For example, when the teacher asked, "How can we tell this is a baby boy?" Lillian answered, "Cause he has baby toes and baby hair and everything."

To Lillian, as to many young pre-schoolers, the labels *boy* and *girl* apparently are seen as age categories almost more than gender categories (Edwards 1984). The social world seems to be divided for them into three main groupings: babies, boys and girls, and grownups.

Another thinking game focused on the concept of *friendship* (Damon 1977; Selman 1980). The teacher made two dolls play together with tiny cars and asked Elspeth whether they were friends.

"Yes," replied Elspeth, "Because they play and both have red mouths." In making judgments of who is a friend, pre-school children focus on the concrete and the immediate—who is dose together, who looks alike, who is playing and sharing toys, who is liked at that time. Friendship is not yet conceived of as an emotional, ongoing relationship between two people. When the teacher made the dolls fight, and Sam took all the cars from Jerry, Elspeth then said, "Sam is the friend because he has all the cars. Jerry isn't a friend; he doesn't have cars."

The chief benefit to the teacher of the thinking game activity is that it allows one to develop questioning skills that are more directly applicable to daily, naturally occurring situations in the classroom. We found that through interviewing we learned to avoid moralizing or preaching in talking with children about social and moral ideas.

Five pitfalls to avoid when interviewing children

Do not assume too soon you understand what the child is saying. An interview about gender illustrates the advantage of not making hasty assumptions about the child's reasoning. After her first question, the teacher in the following interview could have assumed the child knew about the genital basis of gender, but wisely she asked another question.

Teacher: "How can we find out if this is a boy or a girl?"

Child: "We can tell if we undress it."

Teacher: "What would undressing show?"

Child: "We could look at the hair. If she has long hair, it's a girl." (The child then went to look for herself.)

Never ask rhetorical or leading questions. The teacher's second question below negates the effectiveness of the interview.

Teacher: "If we didn't have a rule about hitting, then would she be allowed to hit?"

Child: "No, you can't hit kids in school."

Teacher: "You shouldn't hit anyone, anyway, right?"

Child: "Right."

Do not reinforce children's answers with evaluative terms like "Good," or "That's right." Children talk much more fluently and honestly when you merely give them total attention and say

"Hmmm," or "I see." They grasp that you are not looking for a particular right answer.

Do not race ahead in your pacing of the discussion. It is probably impossible to go *too* slowly in a social or moral discussion with young children. Silence after and between questions provides the necessary time for reflection. Restating the child's responses in question form often encourages them to elaborate.

Child: "She should pick up."

Teacher: (Pause) "She should pick up?"

Child: "Yes, it's pick-up time, and you gotta pick up when it's pick-up time."

Phrase questions simply. Avoid hypothetical questions with younger children. Developing the art of asking short, clear questions takes practice. The common mistake is to ask too abstract a question and then, when the child does not answer, rush in to clarify it and overwhelm the child further. In the following example, the teacher asks the child about a magazine picture showing two babies lying together in a double carriage.

Teacher: "Do you think these babies are friends?"

Child: "Yes."

Teacher: "Why do you think so?"

Child: "Because they're babies."

Teacher: "Is it that babies are always friends?"

Child: (No answer)

Teacher: "All babies are all friends, all the time?"

Child: "They're big."

The child has actually explained why she thought the babies were friends when she said, "Because they're babies." (That is, they are the *same*.) When the teacher asked her the next two confusing questions, the child decided she must have said something *wrong*. "They're big," she now said.

The spontaneous discussion

For teachers to support children's social-cognitive development, a background of theoretical knowledge is required that is readily accessible at the moment when a teacher makes decisions regarding management and guidance. Our social cognition program helped teachers to act consistently and naturally using generally accepted early childhood principles of good discipline (see Read 1976; Hendrick 1980; Stone 1975).

For example, one day a student teacher was standing near the climber when she saw a boy, Justin, starting to come down the ladder backward—prohibited by the classroom rule. Rather than reprimanding him, she simply moved closer to him. Justin looked at her, then said, "Oh, yeah!" and turned around into the correct position. Later, describing this situation, the teacher said that she had recently witnessed a skit on rules and learned how complex and difficult it is for preschool children to act on rules in the absence of an adult. "I used to think children break rules mainly to be defiant. Now I realize how hard it is for them to think about rules when they are doing something like playing."

After working in our program, many teachers have become most adept in drawing upon social cognition theory during daily situations. Often they are able to turn situations into learning encounters that they had earlier seen strictly as discipline situations requiring immediate enforcement of a rule. As one teacher put it:

"In authority situations I find I talk differently with children. I used to think that they should always share immediately with each other, that it should just be a rule, and if they didn't they should be disciplined quickly. Now I allow all the children involved to express how they think about the situation and I encourage solutions to be developed by them. If that's not possible, I try to clarify all points of view and help with a fair solution, as defined by *them*."

Reading in books about young children's ideas of justice, friendship, sex roles, and other social issues is not enough. We need to *hear* the children speaking in their own voice before we can retain usable

knowledge about children's social and moral reasoning. The most effective teacher in helping children construct social knowledge appears to be the one who has listened carefully to children and acquired clear, accurate understandings about their thinking.

One of the authors entered a kindergarten classroom just as the teacher was ending a sort of lecture on friendship. "We are all friends in this classroom, aren't we, children? . . . *Are* you all friends?"

"Yes," responded most of the children—rotely.

"That's right," said the teacher. "We help each other, we are kind to each other, we care for each other, so we are all friends."

Immediately after the group dispersed, the following interview took place with one of the children.

Interviewer: "I guess you have a lot of friends, George."

George: "No, I don't. Jane is my friend. We go home from school together. Graham is my friend. He plays with me at my house."

Interviewer: "Are these your only friends, George?"

George: "Well, Tim—but Tim is in Paris now. So I'm not sure if he is my friend or not."

Here was a child who was thoughtfully constructing his own conception of friendship. Appropriately, his conception was concrete, action-oriented, and limited to the immediate present. What did the teacher's mini-lecture on friendship mean to George? Probably little, for it seems certain that the word "friend" did not mean the same thing to the teacher and to him.

Real communication and learning is always an interaction. The responsibility for its breakdown must rest with the teacher. Classroom activities such as skits and thinking games can open up communication. For the teachers, the encounters with the children's ideas will sharpen and extend their understanding. For the children, finding a place where it is safe and easy to express their own ideas will stimulate them into further construction of social knowledge.

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