



Practitioner Researcher

What strategies can educators use, within an ECE setting, to encourage pro-social behaviour?

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Current research within early childhood settings shows that there are varying degrees of teaching abilities, resulting in different teaching styles and ways in which educators manage challenging behaviour with young children. This is a possible weakness, as inconsistency in approach can leave a child feeling distraught and confused. This paper examines how teachers can promote pro-social behaviour, supporting children's rights, by using collaborative strategies for teachers and parents.

Pro-social behaviour

Eisenberg, Fabes and Spinrad (as cited in Hyson and Taylor, 2011) see pro-social behaviour as of benefit to each party involved. Similar to this is the classic definition from Harjusola-Webb, Hubbell and Bedesem (2012), who say pro-social behaviour "indicates a motivational component and innate feeling of empathy and concern for others" (p. 29). Wardle (as cited in Preusse, 2008) talks about pro-social behaviours, supporting relationships between peers and adults, allowing children to communicate in an appropriate manner.

When considering the skills needed for children in developing pro-social behaviour, Mosier (2014) highlights techniques that develop a child's social, cognitive and emotional development, which leads to children able to regulate self-control and accept responsibility for their own actions. Other literature outlines how educators show concern about children displaying physical aggression such as bullying. Hyson and Taylor (2011) believe it is imperative that aggression be addressed in early childhood, as this can otherwise lead to troublesome behaviour in the later years. In contrast to this view, Kaiser and Rasminsky (2003) say that challenging behaviour should be seen as appropriate 'sometimes', as it teaches children to regulate their feelings, allowing them to outgrow behaviour that can be seen as 'normal'.

Vitaro, De Civita and Pagani (as cited in Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003) suggest: "for an estimated 3-15 percent of preschool-age children, aggressive and antisocial behaviour continues well beyond the age of 3" (p. 11). Results of these statistics as stated by Coie and Webster-Stratton (as cited in Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003) show half of the children designated as 'disruptive' will lead them into unalterable aggressive patterns of behaviour. Supporting this is Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo and Hendrix's study (as cited in Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003), asserting that the longer a child is allowed to continue with anti-social behaviour the harder it is to change, and the more worrisome the behaviour will become.



Behaviour Specific Praise (BSP)

A research study undertaken by Moffat (2011) produced evidence that shows children who display anti-social behaviour such as hostility, disrespect, and defiance can show improvement when educators use pro-social behaviour, such as the appropriate use of praise. Moffat (2011) outlines how praising a child by simply stating 'Well done, Matt' at any time of the day, or specific praise such as 'Well done, Matt, for using your gentle hands' are both beneficial for a child to hear and support pro-social behaviour. Moffat (2011) advocates for praise to be given straight after the appropriate behaviour, and if this happens, children are more likely to repeat positive behaviour patterns more regularly. In contrast, Gartrell (2004), notes how words such as 'good' or 'nice' are used too often to encourage pro-social behaviour. Gartrell (2004) believes that common praise often isn't meaningful. If teachers are using the same phrase it becomes repetitive and non-meaningful for children, as well as teachers.

McKerchar and Thompson (as cited in Moffat, 2011) perceive the way in which a child who displays anti-social behaviour, and who is constantly reprimanded in a negative way, is more likely to repeat the anti-social behaviour to receive attention. More especially this occurs if attention is not forthcoming when pro-social behaviour is evident.

Positive behaviour support

Positive behaviour support is a strategy that, according to Fox, Dunlap and Powell (as cited in McCabe & Frede, 2007), is widely used and documented approach to positive encouragement of pro-social skills and reduction of challenging behaviours. This research shows that information about the child needs to be collected by means of analysing the behaviour, then using that analysis to maximise efficiency in meeting the child's needs. By completing these observations and removing triggers that may be causing anti-social behaviour, teachers are then able to eliminate disciplinary methods, particularly the use of time out. Dating back to the 19th century, Gartrell (2004) highlights how early childhood teachers have disapproved of disciplinary methods that are seen to hinder a child's pro-social development rather than positively teach them right from wrong. Flicker and Hoffman (2002) offer another perspective by calling this strategy a 'developmental discipline' approach, adding that teachers need to be aware of the child's comprehension, as well as knowing each individual child's uniqueness before they observe them within their environment. Flicker and Hoffman (2002) agree with this, adding: "with developmental discipline, teachers become researchers who collect objective information, reflect on that data, and then use it to intervene appropriately" (p. 85).

Considering parents as first teachers

When considering parents as first teachers, Hyson and Taylor (2011) see parents as the most significant teachers; however, some parents promote pro-social behaviour differently from teachers, in ways that undermine teachers' work. This may include treats, rewards or bribes to gain the desired behaviour. Research from Eisenberg, Fabes, Spinrad, Warneken and Tomasello (as cited



in Hyson & Taylor, 2011) support this finding, identifying how rewards may backfire, resulting in the possibility of children being less respectful if the rewards stop coming. The 'reward outcomes' are seen as short term, leaving the child feeling confused and frustrated when facing challenges back in the ECE setting.

Children need clear consistent guidelines. Research from Eisenberg, Fabes and Spinrad (cited in Hyson and Taylor, 2008) confirm the view that "when parents are very clear about the kind of behaviour they expect and what they do not want to see in their children, become more helpful and caring than when expectations are less clearly defined" (p. 79).

Conclusion

This paper has outlined pro-social behaviour and demonstrated how encouraging pro-social behaviour can be beneficial in a child's development, strengthening their peer relationships and providing for a more effective and positive ECE experience. The differences between parent and teacher management of pro-social behaviour is evident from research and clearly outlines how children can become confused with differing teaching/parenting concepts. The relevance of this knowledge and strategy is vital when encouraging pro-social behaviour, as this primarily benefits children and helps to eliminate challenges they may face in their ECE, primary, adolescent and adult years.

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