

Social Groups and Development

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Children spend an increasing amount of time in social groups as they age. Preschoolers begin to interact with their peers around playsets, though at this stage, these early social groups are loosely organized. It is not until they reach school age that children begin to feel as true members of a peer group. A peer group interacts on a regular basis, provides a sense of belonging, has implicit or explicit norms, and has a hierarchical order. Within these groups, social status becomes important, with some members being more popular and having a greater social impact than others.

The popularity and social status of group members can be assessed through sociometric techniques. One example would be to ask children to rate who they would and would not like to spend time with. Based on these positive and negative nominations, children can be categorized into five different categories: popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, or average.

Popular children have many positive nominations, meaning they are well-liked and have a high social impact. Rejected children also have many nominations, however, these are mostly negative. Neglected children do not have a lot of nominations, but the few that they get are usually negative. Controversial children have many nominations with nearly equal amounts of positive and negative ones, meaning they are either loved or hated by their peers. Average children receive few positive and few negative nominations.

Being part of a group provides children with a sense of belonging and social identity. Children quickly begin to view other group members positively and eventually view non-

members negatively. This is the beginning of in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. It starts with gender and expands to include race, ethnicity, religion, and other characteristics.

By preschool, and leading into the school years, children begin to segregate into same-sex groups. Boys prefer to interact in larger groups, while girls prefer to interact in smaller, more intimate groups. Boys and girls also have different play styles that serve to create a closer bond with same-sex children. Children also exhibit a racial bias before age 6, which begins to decline by age 7 and virtually disappears by age 12. Some researchers, however, have suggested that in-group favoritism begins as early as infancy, with some infants as young as 3-months-old showing a preference for faces of their own race. Evolutionarily speaking, identifying members of one's social group would have been important for survival, and being born with the ability to recognize group members became beneficial.

Out-group discrimination is also present at these early ages. Preschool and school-age children view peers who play with out-group members less favorably than peers who only play with in-group members. However, this early out-group discrimination is not so much hostility against the peers who break the group norms as it is having a strong attachment to the in-group identity. That such biases appear at such an early age and that are seemingly universal, suggests that group identification develops naturally as a result of regular social interaction.

To successfully interact with other members of the peer group, there needs to be a certain level of cooperation and understanding. Prosocial behaviors are those that impact social relations in a positive way. Some examples of prosocial behaviors include comforting, sharing, volunteering, and helping. Children and adults alike engage in these behaviors willingly with the goal of helping others. From an evolutionary perspective, these behaviors have been difficult to explain, after all, there is seemingly little personal benefit from engaging in these actions.

Altruism, for example, is doing something for another at one's expense, meaning more costs with no benefit. Altruism and other similar behaviors can, however, be explained by the inclusive fitness theory, which states that an individual can pass on its genes to the next generation by considering the shared genes which are passed on by the individual's relatives. This means that individuals are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors among those who are closely related. This is in an effort to foster their development and the continuation of their shared genes. There is also the concept of reciprocal altruism, in which an individual will help those with whom they will interact again in the future. The idea is that the cost of prosocial behaviors will be offset when others reciprocate those behaviors in turn. Cooperation within a peer group, then, became an effective strategy for social success.

Further Readings:

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