Fostering Children's Social Competence
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Building and maintaining relationships is complex and an important need for all humans. This development of social skills in young children takes a long time to learn and relies heavily on the patience and understanding of adults. According to Willard Hartup (1991) "The single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, school grades nor classroom behaviour but rather the adequacy with which a child gets along with other children."

According to Katz & McClellan (Fostering Children's Social Competence 1999) "children in early childhood settings may display diverse social difficulties that have a variety of underlying causes. From achievement of sufficient impulse control to successfully take turns, negotiate, or bargain to resolve conflicts. Some children may appear to have acquired a few beginning social skills but not have the confidence in their mastery of these skills to use them successfully. Some children are still so dependant on adults that they interrupt their interactions with their peers too frequently with requests from adult assistance"

Social difficulties can stem from a number causes including:

- Children's developing use of language
- Being excluded from play
- Shyness and withdrawn
- Behave as though they do not want to interact with their peers
- The inability to move beyond their peer's physical appearance
- Have unusual names which attract taunting from others
- Classroom environment e.g. activities too structured, difficult, not relevant to child's interests and likes or may present social situations that the child may not have in other social settings
- The group is too large for child to interact for the child's stage of social development.
- May depend on their home environment e.g. child may have more contact with adults rather than peers

Emphasis on strengthening social competence in young children does not imply that all children become "social butterflies" and are popular with all children. Assessing the social development should be based on the quality not quantity.

Children need several kinds of social knowledge to form friendships. This includes knowledge of the norms and social customs, sufficient mastery of language and opportunities for participation in various peer-group play experiences.

Suggested Strategies

The following strategies are just some examples which may be applied to support children's social competence. This list is only the start and it is dependent on a variety of factors such as environment, length of time child is in care, child's interest, likes, dislikes and skills already achieved.

- Set up routines or taking time to strengthen the room sense of "one for all and all for one" e.g. music and singing to experience being together or cooking.
- Encourage alternative interpretations of other's behaviour e.g. children may be using nicknames that are inappropriate such as "weirdo", "cry-baby" or "sissy". Cultivate a constructive environment to discourage labellers by asking the child to consider other ways of interpreting the labelled child's behaviour.
- Find "common ground" interests of each child to foster friendships.
- Provide opportunities for children to work in pairs. This helps with their self worth and self esteem.
- Utilise the dramatic play area for children to learn and understand about emotions and feelings and co-operative play.
- Provide small group experiences i.e. two children at one activity.
- Provide opportunities for the child to help a new child or younger child.

- If a child is uninvolved in any activity suggest ways to help the child enter the group e.g. getting toys for the group, offer to play something interesting and encourage the child to ask others to join in.

References:

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