

## From Theory Into Practice; Teachers Supporting Children's Self Regulation In Conflict Situations within an Early Years Setting

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### Introduction and Background

*"Human relationships...are the building blocks of healthy development."*

(Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000: 4)

Early Years teachers are pivotal in shaping a young child's first experiences of being in a society outside the family and in scaffolding their learning to adapt, cope and succeed in emotionally and socially demanding situations. The child's early learning of particular 'rules' for the classroom or school essentially becomes the basic framework for ways of behaving in general life, in any group, where the needs and desires of others as well as oneself have to be taken into account and reflected in behaviour. This paper reports a small piece of research in one early years classroom which explored the extent to which conflict situations can be used to promote young children's social and emotional learning.

Social and emotional competence in the early years classroom requires children to develop emotional regulation, social knowledge and understanding, and specific social skills. A child's capacity for emotional self-regulation is essential to social competence and acceptance amongst peers because the skills of emotional control are necessary for managing aggressive impulses, responding appropriately to a peer's feelings, affirming friendships and co-operating within a group. Emotional self-regulation is also important for formal learning because capacities to follow instructions, focus attention and co-operate with teachers and peers in a classroom require feelings and behaviours to be managed.

Conflicts are common in three and four year olds' peer relations (Parker and Gottman, 1989; Shantz, 1987), but they are rarely terminal to relationships and children of this age do not regard conflict as incompatible with friendship (Shantz, 1989). Because co-operative play occupies an increasingly central place in social relations, preschoolers tend to regulate their squabbles so that they do not undermine the broader purposes of working together. In this respect, peer social relations appear to evoke certain types of behaviour more frequently than do family contexts. Dunn (1988), for example, examined the use of reasoned argument by three year-olds at home with mother and siblings and by the same children when alone with a close friend. It was found that conciliatory, reasoned argument was more common in peer conflicts (at twenty-two percent) than in domestic strife (at nine percent). Not only does emotional understanding with peers enhance the incentive for pro-social behaviour and reduced aggressive conduct among

pre-schoolers, it also contributes to the quality of social skills that elicit peer acceptance or rejection and fosters the emergence of lasting friendships in early childhood (Dunn and Herrera, 1997). In this sense, rather than being an entirely negative experience, conflicts between young children can be an important source of emotional and social learning.

The key objective of the action research project reported in this paper was to support children within a particular pre-school setting in exercising control over their actions specifically within situations of conflict. Recent research has shown that young children are capable of developing greater self-regulation than previously thought in a number of areas of development (Bronson, 2000; Whitebread *et al.*, 2005). The present project explored the extent to which three and four year-old children's emotional and social self-regulation can be enhanced by supporting them to resolve common conflict situations within an educational setting.

### **An Example of Conflict: The Problem of 'Lining Up'**

During the course of the present project, a number of conflict situations were identified and worked upon. As a consequence, a particular methodology was developed which is exemplified here in relation to one situation, the problem of 'lining up'. This methodology consisted of the following elements:

- detailed observation and analysis of the conflict situation, and the children's conflict behaviour;
- presentation of the problem to the children;
- consultation with the children, leading to some proposed solutions;
- further consultation and evaluation with the children of the success of the revised procedures.

### **Observations**

Video recordings, tape recordings and observations were made of the lining up routines and the types of conflict observed were categorised, as 'power struggles' (e.g. wanting to be the 'leader' of the line), 'possession disputes' (e.g. 'I was there first' or 'That's my space') and 'mild physical aggression' (e.g. pushing or barging into the line).

Analysis of the observations of these behaviours revealed that children seemed to be confused about the objective behind lining up as well as the process of doing so. Some children evidently did not realise that they were supposed to go to the end of the line, some did not understand the concept of the 'end of the line', some children seemed to think they were being sensible by 'filling in' a gap in the line, not realising that others may see this as 'pushing in' and other children simply left huge spaces within the line for no discernable reason. Moreover, it was clear that, although the children used the term 'the end of the line' quite freely in telling each other how to queue up, many children had

not yet grasped the concept of finding the intangible 'end', which led to many instances of 'pushing in'!

First of all, the staff discussed some options surrounding the routine of lining up, to see what would be workable and how the children's forthcoming discussion might need to be shaped. The discussion even considered whether there is any real benefit to the young child in learning to line up appropriately at this age. It was concluded, however, that queuing is a necessary social competence with whose rules even a three year old child is expected to comply in the real world - at the supermarket checkout, or the ice cream van for example - and that the problem of lining up presented the children with an educationally valuable social and emotional problem.

### **Presentation of the Problem to the Children**

Within the 'Feelings' Circle Time of the two weeks leading up to the 'Discussion Week', the focus had been upon 'being fair', in terms of treating other people as they like to be treated themselves. During 'Lining Up' time after Circle Time one morning, a situation was stage-managed, where the teacher commented on how many faces displaying 'negative feelings' could be seen and heard; some children looked cross, some sad and some children were even shouting or crying in the line. The question was posed 'What does this show?'. One or two children said that it showed that there was a problem, so the teacher asked what could be done about it. The children suggested talking about it, so everyone went back into the classroom and re-formed the Circle.

### **Consulting the Children**

Analysis of the transcript of the consultation reveals that initially, the focus of the discussion time was on clarifying the objectives behind lining up. The reasons for going to the end of the line, what in fact constitutes 'the end of the line' or 'a gap' in the line, and the term 'pushing in' were all clarified through discussion:

JT: We could all go to the back of the line and if there's too much people, some people could go over there (pointing) so we could have a bigger line.

Teacher: Good idea, James ...I think you said you didn't want the line to be too squashy, so we could make the line longer, with enough space for everyone. Was that your idea, James?

JT: Yeah.

Teacher: So people aren't squashed?

JT: Yeah. We could leave a gap if someone wants to be in the middle.

Teacher: Hmm. Gaps in the line make us muddled up. Sometimes when children come out from the loo, they see a gap and go into it. They think it looks like the end of the line and they get muddled up.

- IS: Then some children might tell them they are pushing in.
- JT: But we don't want our friends to be squashed.
- Teacher: No, we don't.
- HW: How about if we just made a little space in between each person?  
(General 'yes' noises).
- Teacher: Shall I write that on our page of ideas? OK... Just a little space between each person in the line, so we aren't squashed.
- IS: Not big gaps though.
- Teacher: OK. (Writes) No big gaps in the line.
- EMc: When we squash people we might fall over.
- FC: We might fall over when we're walking. You might bump your head or get blood.
- IS: I hear people saying OW that's squashy.

In response to the issue about 'pushing in', one boy suggested having an 'end of the line person', to point out where there were gaps in the line and direct those children joining it where to stand. The children also decided that they wanted a line on the floor in the corridor, to mark where the front of the line was:

- IS: Maybe we need something to show all the children where is the front of the line too. 'Cause some children can't read their names like me.
- Teacher: Another good idea. I wonder what we could do?
- HW: We could make a sign.
- Teacher: Yes we could.
- GC: We draw a line on the floor like when we do the sweeping up when it gets sand on the floor. We could use the chalk.
- WD: No - chalk goes away.
- Teacher: Hmm. Yes, if all the children's feet walked on the chalk line it might get rubbed off.
- GC: We could use a teacher's pen so it don't come off.
- FW: We could put a sticker on the place.

It was agreed that the fairest way would be take turns as being 'the leader' of the line. The children asked that a list of the class be put on the wall and the names ticked off as each child had a turn day by day, so that they could see whose turn was next:

- Teacher: I wonder how we could remember whose turn is next, so we don't forget or miss anyone out by mistake?
- ?: Write it down!

- Teacher: Oh, I heard another good idea then.
- IS: I said it!
- HW: We could do the register!
- TE: We could have one register for the front and one for the back.
- Teacher: Would that be a fair way to sort it out, Tim? (He nods). Yes, because some people like being at the back of the line and they want their turn.
- HW: And one for the middle.
- Teacher: There are lots of people to go in the middle, Henry, aren't there?
- HW: (After a little while...) Yes but only one leader and only one back leader.
- Teacher: So, we're going to have a list of all the Nursery children's names, so we can see whose turn it is to be the leader every day and we'll be able to see who has already had a turn and whose turn it is tomorrow. And another list for the back of the line. Does that seem a fair way to do it?

### **Evaluation**

After several days of trying out the new system of lining up, a second, impromptu consultation took place in which the ideas the children had come up with were assessed in the light of their implementation. This discussion came about when one of the adults spotted the 'leader' of the line for that day, walking along the line counting the children. When she asked what he was counting, he replied that he was counting 'smiley faces'! The idea of counting 'smiley faces' as a measure of the successful implementation of the new system was stunning in its simplicity and logic! The assessment of there being a problem with lining up in the first place had been to look with the children at how many faces were showing 'negative feelings' within the line-up. Counting faces showing happy feelings was a direct extension of the same idea and one which the children themselves could effect, making the measuring of success immediate and relevant.

### **Discussion**

In line with recent work concerned with developing a pedagogy for self-regulation in young children (Whitebread and Coltman, 2007) the present project supported the view that, given the opportunity and appropriate support, three to four year-olds show a clear capacity for considerable emotional and social self-regulation. Key to the success of the intervention developed here was the identification, through careful observation, of a problem which was meaningful to the children, and the development of a process which supported the children themselves in articulating the nature of the problem and devising strategies aimed at its resolution. Once consulted, the children suggested ideas with a high degree of enthusiasm, originality and inventiveness, and showed the evident ability to collaborate effectively in a social group to solve their common problem.

The act of articulating ideas and understandings, of putting into words how they went about things and what they wanted to do in the future revealed a great deal about the children's learning - what they found interesting, what strategies they used for making sense of the world and even some misunderstandings - and undoubtedly helped them to be more reflective and self-regulating in the conflict situation itself.

In the process, the children learned that rules can protect as well as restrict and help a community to regulate itself. The consultation approach highlighted succinctly the relationship between individual and group self-regulation. The consultation process also appeared to very effectively bind the children together emotionally and socially, creating a real sense of community. The children also listened well to each other during each consultation process, which gave everyone time to reflect on what was being discussed. On several occasions, for example, one child endorsed and developed an idea or point of view expressed by another. Underlying the success of this whole approach, however, and perhaps most importantly, was the building of a relationship of trust and genuinely shared control between the adult educators and the children.

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