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Children's Perceptions of Behavior Problem Peers: Effects of Teacher Feedback and Peer-Reputed Status

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In a Reputation \times Feedback \times Actor type ($3 \times 3 \times 3$) design, we examined the influence of teacher feedback on children's evaluations of a hypothetical peer presented as having one of three reputations. The subjects (91 first and second graders) listened to an audiotape in which two boys described five hypothetical peers. Reputation information (liked, neutral, disliked) varied for only one of the actors (the target); the others were described in neutral terms. Then the subjects watched a videotape of the five boys in a classroom scene. In the video, two actors exhibited behavior consistent with that of rejected, behavior problem children; the three other actors behaved appropriately. Teacher feedback to one of the behavior problem actors (target) varied across three conditions: (a) positive, (b) neutral, and (c) derogatory feedback. Analyses specific to the target actor revealed a significant effect of feedback, with no effect of reputation or its interaction with feedback. Feedback produced differential perceptions of the target actor across feedback conditions and had a discriminative influence on the subjects' perceptions of the other actors. Methodological improvements of the reputation manipulation and implications for classroom intervention are discussed.

Keywords: Peer perceptions; Reputation; Teacher feedback; Classroom intervention.

Children have a tendency to make rapid decisions about a peer's potential as a friend and the degree to which he or she fits in with the peer group (Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982). Being rejected in childhood places children at risk for adjustment problems such as dropping out of high school, juvenile delinquency, and mental health problems in adulthood (Parker & Asher, 1987). Based on the assumption that their social status was due to maladaptive social

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interaction styles, intervention has typically focused on improving peer interaction skills through behavior modification programs (e.g., Bierman & Furman, 1984; Ladd, 1985). However, research has indicated that enhanced social status does not always follow from improvements in behavior. Children tend to be resistant to changing their evaluations even when the disliked peer's behavior improves (e.g., La Greca & Santogrossi, 1980). The initial liking or disliking of a child seems to influence children's perceptions of peer behavior such that children interpret a peer's actions as a function of an "affective bias" (DeLawyer & Foster, 1986; Hymel, 1986). As attribution theory would predict, if a disliked child makes a positive overture, peers will be more likely to discount the behavior as being due to some external influence (e.g., the teacher is watching). Thus acknowledgment by the peer group of a rejected child's newly learned prosocial behaviors may be precluded because of a negative reputation (for a review, see Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990).

In addition to directly observable child behavior, other mechanisms are at play among the peer group that facilitate formation of reputation. Coie (1990) has suggested that even at young ages children may share their feelings about peers in the form of gossip, which serves to establish boundaries and norms for peer acceptance (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986). Children's opinions about their peers also are revealed in their behavior toward each other. Rejected children tend to be the recipients of more negative exchanges from peers than well-liked children (e.g., Dodge et al., 1982; Putallaz & Gottman, 1987). Negative communication modeled by peer group members may facilitate and solidify a group consensus of social rejection about particular children. Hence, verbal and nonverbal peer-communicated reputation seems to be an important source of information among children. Its persuasive influence is implied in studies of peer-mediated interventions (e.g., Bierman, Miller, & Stabb, 1987; Strain, 1985).

In evaluating the efficacy of interventions for rejected children, researchers (Coie, 1990; Dodge, 1989) have suggested a broader scope that addresses the dynamics of the peer group as opposed to maintaining an exclusive focus on the child's behavior excesses and deficits. To forestall the harmful consequences of negative peer reputation, we need to identify the factors that influence the ways in which children respond to their peers. Teachers are noted to be important socializing forces in children's early years, and their exchanges with students may have either beneficial or harmful effects on peer group perceptions (Weiner, Graham, Taylor, & Meyer, 1983; White & Kistner, 1992). Unpopular children are the targets of more corrective teacher feedback, whereas popular children receive more positive reinforcement from their teachers (Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen, 1975; Rubin, Daniels-Bierness, & Hayvren, 1982). Young children readily incorporate evaluations made by adults (Costanzo & Dix, 1983) and adopt them as their own. They are particularly attentive to both the affective quality and content of remarks made by teachers (Weiner, Graham, Stern, & Lawson, 1982) and other

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