Development of Conflict Resolution Skills in Infancy and Early Childhood

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Abstract

Conflict resolution skills begin to develop during the earliest interactions between infants and others. Research on the nature of conflict and how resolution skills develop provides parents, other caregivers, researchers, and early childhood educators including those providing health education in preschools and other settings, with insights into this critical developmental process. As a result, positive support of development and more effective education is possible. This paper describes many important aspects of conflict resolution skill development.

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable part of all human association. The term conflict is often given a negative connotation, however it is generally the process of resolving the conflict that is unsatisfactory and not the conflict itself. How one interprets conflict leads to either constructive or destructive outcomes (Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996).

Many positive outcomes can be achieved through conflict. According to Johnson and Johnson (1995), "conflict can increase achievement, motivation to learn, higher-level reasoning, long term retention, healthy social and cognitive development, and the fun students have in school. Conflict can also enrich relationships, clarify personal identity, increase ego strength, promote resilience in the face of adversity, and clarify how one needs to change" (p.64). With the use of proper conflict resolution skills this is often the case. However, conflict is often the cause of violent behavior in individuals with under-developed conflict resolution skills.

Children live in an ever-changing society in which conflict is a predominant issue. Violence and aggression due to conflict are pressing issues in schools and education (VanAcker, 1993). Early childhood educators are faced with mitigating this conflict before the children are ready to learn. This goal is accomplished by creating a peaceful and non-violent environment and educating children on amicable conflict resolution skills (VanAcker, 1993; Johnson & Johnson, 1995).

The literature regarding conflict resolution is extensive and much of it is focused on problem solving skills. Four reported problem solving skills are (1) generating alternative solutions, (2) understanding means-end linkages, (3) evaluating the consequences of alternatives, and (4) choosing the most effective solution. These skills assume and are embedded with a variety of cognitive-behavioral constructs including cooperation, assertion, responsibility, self-control, empathy, externalizing, and internalizing. Knowledge of the constructs and use of problem solving skills help children respond to conflict in a pro-social manner (Carlson, 1991; Dubow, Tisak, Causey, Hryshko, & Reid, 1991; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Magnuson, 1995; Lamb & Sherrod, 1981; Lewis, 1987; Maccoby & Masters, 1970; Shure 1982; Shure 1994).

A means-end linkage is the process of thought that enables one to formulate ways to reach a predetermined goal, to consider plausible deterrents that may interfere with attaining the goal, and to realize that one may not receive immediate gratification (Shure, 1982). Generating alternatives and appreciation of consequences are in part based on the understanding that the behavior of others is sometimes contingent upon one's own behavior. This in turn is the basis for two significant developmental attainments including learning that others can be relied on and recognizing that one is a competent, effective individual in partial control of ones experiences (Lamb & Sherrod, 1981 p. 160).

Defining Conflict Resolution

Although conflict is an inevitable part of all human association, there are differing opinions as to what conflict is and what determines the resolution of such conflict. Piaget, as cited in Valsinger (1992), refers to conflict as "the lack of fit between the existing schemata of the person and the perceptual challenges of external events and objects" (p. 17). Resolution of conflict occurs when there is a "modification of both the new information (assimilation) and the cognitive schema (accommodation)" (Valsinger, 1992, p. 17).

Conflict has also been defined as distress where "distress involves high arousal and unpleasant affect" (Lamb & Sherrod, 1981, p. 159). The resolution of the conflict or distress occurs when "the multimodal intervention that follows facilitates a transition to a state of more controlled arousal and receptiveness" (Lamb & Sherrod, 1981, p. 159). With this definition, the importance of the distress and the relief of the distress enhance the likelihood that the association between the event and the solution will lead to a prompt linkage. Plomin et.al. also refer to conflict as distress when related to temperament. In their theory of temperament, Buss and Plomin refer to distress as "the tendency to become upset easily and intensely, which is assumed to differentiate into fear and anger in the first year of life" (Plomin, 1987, p. 395).

Maccoby and Masters (1970) offered another definition of conflict. They perceive conflict to be "the drive or strength that serves as a moving force" (p. 87). What is implied here is that the distress or conflict itself creates the response and generates the intensity or dynamic.

Many other definitions of conflict exist and include disagreement resulting from incompatible demands, the natural tension resulting from differing interests or needs, or an expressed struggle between at least two people with differing goals. Although there are extensive definitions of conflict, "conflict resolution is a recent concept and is still not part of any consensual understanding" (Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996, p.43). The few definitions that do exist for conflict resolution typically involve a process utilized by parties to bring a successful conclusion to a disagreement. Two assumptions regarding conflict resolution are that a variety of solutions are available to resolve conflicts and that there are different consequences based on which solutions are used.

Measuring Conflict Resolution

Different types of studies have been utilized to evaluate different aspects of conflict resolution. Maccoby and Masters (1970) measured conflict resolution skills by evaluating the correlation of dependant measures and independent striving which was based on five components. The five components included initiating activities, overcoming obstacles, completing activities without help, attempting to do things by oneself, and deriving satisfaction as measured by indications of tension reduction.

Children's ability to resolve conflict was assessed by comparing scores on dependency and independency striving. The issue here was whether children could appropriately seek help from others to resolve conflict when needed and to seek a resolution on their own when this would be most appropriate. Similar scores on both of these indicated that the child experienced difficulty in appropriately responding to conflict. Whereas if the scores differed, the conclusion was that the child was seeking suitable assistance to handle conflict (Maccoby & Masters, 1970). Although relevant data can be derived from this research, help-seeking behaviors, typified by a high level of dependency striving, were viewed as a negative resolution to conflict, which is contradictory to a majority of research in this area.

Observational studies have also been utilized at great length and indicate that young children possess an "impressive degree of knowledge about social rules, people's intentions, and social strategies" (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992, p. 76). Whether or not the young children utilize this knowledge to resolve conflicts depends profoundly on the quality of the relationship they have with their adversary (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992). In addition, since children may not actually do what they say can or should be done, a goal in the study of conflict resolution should be to understand how the process of problem solving thinking extends to behavior in real world settings. Studies done by Shure (1982) have delved into this area and will be discussed later.

Observational studies of conflict resolution in children often examine the arguments children have with their parents, siblings, and peers. Such observations provide insight into how children view and understand the feelings and intentions of others, how they categorize interpersonal relationships, and how they comprehend the social rules and regulations that help to initiate and maintain these relationships. "The study of conflict behavior can help us to understand children at any stage of development" (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992, p. 71).

Development of Conflict Resolution Skills

Lamb and Sherrod (1981) discussed conflict resolution occurring in infants that involves a distress relief sequence. The sequence allows the infant to: "(1) learn that distress predictability elicits an intervention that brings relief; (2) recognize the person responsible for facilitating the transition from displeasure to pleasure; (3) develop an integrated, multi-modal concept of the caretaker; (4) associate the person's

features with the pleasurable outcome he or she produces" (p. 159).

Lewis (1987) has taken this further by developing a series of stages of self-growth, which identify some key characteristics of an infant relevant to conflict resolution. The first period (0-3 months) known as biological determinism, includes reflexes and responses that enhance interaction that the infant receives from others. This interaction is crucial to the development of conflict resolution skills because it gives the basis for means-end relationships in addition to giving the infant experiences with generating and trying alternatives. Toward the end of this period, infants are able to differentiate between social and object interactions.

In the second period (3-8 months) the infant is capable of performing complex action-outcome pairings and means-end relationships in both social and object interactions (Lewis, 1987). At 8-12 months, or the third period, response inhibition is present when the infant is presented with a new stimulus. The self emerges as unique and permanent in time and space and the child is capable of recognizing more means-end relationships. The forth period, from 12 to 18 months, is known as the self-conscious period and the child is able to differentiate self from others. The final stage of Lewis' model looks at children from 18 to 30 months of age, or what some refer to as the terrible twos. This stage is characterized by simple language acquisition and the understanding of goodness and badness in self (Lewis, 1987). This is an exciting stage for children because of their acquisition of language, primarily the word no, the existence of the separation of self from others in relationships, and the beginning of relationships based on negotiation (Lewis, 1987). This model of self-growth provides a basis from which to deliberate additional works.

Several studies conducted by Rovee-Collier and her colleagues, as cited by Lamb and Sherrod (1981), would agree with the specifications made by Lewis in the aforementioned model of self-growth. The studies conclude that, "by 3 months of age, infants can remember associations between their behavior and interesting environmental consequences for as long as two weeks in a cued-recall paradigm" (p. 162), thereby giving them the knowledge to enhance interactions. In addition, three month olds can remember associations for up to 6 days without any cueing. What may be even more astonishing is "some infants show long-term retention as young as 20 days of age" (Lamb & Sherrod, 1981, p. 162).

Although these studies reveal marvelous abilities of infants, it must be noted that although the child has the ability to interact with and therefore affect the adult's behavior, the adult still controls the interactions. Therefore, a majority of interactions come not from the infant but from the adult. It has also been noted that "adults attribute to infants many abilities, including feeling, thinking, and knowing, long before children are capable of these activities" (Lewis, 1987, p. 431).

According to Piaget (1932), the newborn child is egocentric in the sense of not differentiating between the inner world, social world, and natural world. Infants consider the content of their minds, including moral laws, as external to them. Children are not however egoistic, because they can act out of altruistic feelings. The child's sympathy is, according to Piaget, the natural base of reciprocity and justice.

Kolberg (1981), defines the first stage of conflict resolution as avoidance-obedience orientation. In this stage rules are followed to avoid punishment. In empirical research there is more confirmation of the fact that unilateral respect is the basic motivation for young children not purely the avoidance of punishment.

In another series of studies by Affolter (1991), findings indicate agreement with Lewis' model in regards to infants interacting with their environments to enhance interaction early in the first year of life and the discovery of language around the middle of the second year. However, there was a negligible difference regarding means-end relationships. Although Lewis determined that avoidance and means-end behaviors were apparent as early as 3 to 8 months, Affolter notes the development of such behaviors at the beginning of the second year.

Prior to the development of skilled language, children develop sophisticated ideas regarding the nature of social interactions and about the behavioral inclinations of individuals involved in their lives. These ideas develop as a result of the experiences they have with the individuals. This is one of the reasons why we see differences among infants regarding social style and their expectations of others (Lamb & Sherrod, 1981).

When studying conflicts of young children, primarily around the “terrible two” age, the vast majority of disputes between age-mates are due to each child's common desire for the same object. These disputes are an essential part of the development of social skills. Behaviors exhibited during these interactions are an important observable display of emerging social skills which parents, educators and

researchers can use to understand children's development (Bronson, 1981). Although toys are the basis for many of the disputes, several investigations showed that toward the middle of the second year, children play peacefully with peers once conflicts involving toys are resolved. In other words, toys are vehicles for both positive and negative social contact (Hartup, 1970).

It was interesting to note that, in the works of Hartup (1970), in most cases where there were conflicts between two year olds, the larger child was generally more dominant. Yet, in twin confrontations the smaller twin tends to be more successful in confiscating toys. Noticeable individual differences were reported in peer responsiveness in all of the investigations reported.

Setting aside peer interactions and examining conflicts with two year olds within the family, it is noted that children begin to confront their parents and siblings more frequently and with more emotion during the second year. Between the ages of 18 and 24 months conflicts with parents and siblings doubled in frequency. One explanation for the escalating frequency is the increased use the word no which brings on a new level of independence and an awareness of self and others (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992).

The third year is characterized by an increase in accusations of a sibling hurting the child, reporting the wrong doing to the parent, and blaming the sibling for hurting another. This is an important indication that the child appreciates the causes and consequences of feelings and also understands that hurting others is unacceptable behavior. By the third year, children also understand that rules can be questioned and applied differently to different people (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992).

In the conflict resolution research there appears to be a gap between two and four year olds with the exception of the aforementioned and the fact that between the third and forth years, confrontations between the child and peers, siblings, and parents alike, become increasingly verbal (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992). One explanation for this lag in the literature is the dispute over the age at which children are capable of de-centering themselves. In other words, when they are capable of understanding that all others are not like oneself. This is a critical part of conflict resolution because in order to resolve conflict, one first must realize the existence of two selves; oneself and another's self, each having a separate identity and a separate set of needs.

The process of de-centering has been dealt with by Piaget, Flavell, and Brooke, among others. It is still unclear at what age the de-centering occurs. Piaget did not feel this process occurred before the ages of 4-6 years, while others believe the process begins as young as 2 years of age (Lewis, 1987).

Conflict resolution literature describing the third year of life is limited, in part, because theory on a three year old child's theory of mind is a rather limited. Although 3 year olds appear to be at somewhat of a stand still, there is some sort of watershed at about 4 years of age which leads to a whole new range of abilities. "There are many tasks that 3 years olds cannot perform that 4 and 5 year olds can. In all of these tasks, the older children's success appears to depend on a new understanding of the representational capacities of the mind, whatever the precise nature of that new understanding is" (Astington, 1991, p. 159).

Myrna Shure did extensive research in the area of conflict resolution skills in four year old children. Through her work with her colleagues it was determined that when evaluating interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills in young children, enough range could not be noted by testing means-end thinking, as was the focus of many of the studies on infants. Studies showed that the process, not the content was the relevant indicator for adjustment. It was therefore determined that it would be more conducive to look at alternative solutions to age relevant problems (Shure, 1982).

In a series of studies, children as early as 4 years of age expressed forceful ways to solve disputes, while most children also thought of some form of asking with differences in the amount of and range of non-forceful ways. Using the Preschool Interpersonal Problem-Solving (PIPS) test, Shure and her colleagues measured alternative solution thinking in four and five year olds. Distinctions were noted in 4 and 5 year olds' ability to conceptualize ways to play with a toy another child was playing with, and avert their mother's anger after having damaged property. Consistent throughout seven studies, children could usually offer at least three or four solutions to each problem (Shure, 1982).

Shure went on to examine two critical aspects of conflict resolution: (1) does a lack of options increase the chance of failure and possible frustration or distress and (2) what role does thought about consequences of actions play in the behavior of these children. Using the What Happens Next Game (WHNG), children were asked to anticipate what would happen if a child grabbed a toy from another child and if a child took something from an adult without asking. A step-wise

discriminate analysis on 257 children revealed that those who scored low on both the PIPS and the WHNG were most likely to be inhibited in their confrontations. In contrast, impulsive children often times had low PIPS scores, yet may not have had low scores on the WHNG (Shure, 1982). An explanation for this may be that the children are aware of the consequences, yet they are unable to solve the conflict without forceful acts because they have fewer options from which to choose. Inhibited children, who scored lower on the tests, appear to be unaware of both solutions and of consequences. The children "may have experienced failure so often that possibly they find it safest to simply withdraw from people and from problems they cannot solve" (Shure, 1982, p. 193).

The process of generating alternatives or solution thinking is somewhat reliant on the ability to discern when a conflict is occurring, what the cause is and what effects it will have on oneself and on another. "It appears that 4 and 5 year olds who are deficient in solution thinking may or may not consider the effects of their actions on others, probably do not recognize the prior event(s) that lead up to the present problem, and are probably not even cognizant of the real problem that exists" (Shure, 1982, p. 140). For instance, when a child is hit back they may focus on being hit instead of the real problem, of being hit because they hit first.

The inter-correlations between these skills suggest that sensitivity and causal thinking may enhance interpersonal problem solving skills. Being able to generate alternatives, even in the case of failure, is a cognitive skill that best prevents distress and the subsequent need for impulsive or inhibited behaviors. Although the ability to generate alternatives is present at the age of four, the tendency to think of and utilize conflict resolution strategies that promote active social interchange, for instance trading a toy or taking turns, increases between age four and first grade. In addition, the number of strategies increases about the same time (Shure, 1982).

In tying the aforementioned together, a cascading effect emerges. From Piaget's perspective, the child's transformation from egocentrism, which is present in the early years, is a gradual process. This process depends on both cognitive development and social interaction opportunities. Significant changes are noted at the ages of 4 and 5 due to the integration of larger social circles in preschools and other social opportunities. In addition, children develop skills which enable them to differentiate psychological perspectives of others which help them in their interpersonal relationships (Karniol, 1982).

Individual and Environmental Factors

Many individual characteristics exist that may aid or hinder the development of conflict resolution skills. In addition, some environmental issues are intrinsic to this development. Many studies regarding genetic links to social skills focused on twins. Therefore, more behavioral genetic data exists for twins than for non-twin family members such as siblings and parents or parent and child. Twin data consistently support the hypothesis that individual differences in emotionality in infancy are strongly affected by genetic factors (Plomin, 1987).

Studies measuring genetic continuity of social skill development from infancy to adulthood, including studies among adoptive infants and their biological parents, have not shown significant continuity between parents and offspring. Nonetheless, the data provide a hint of possible genetic influence in that a significant correlation emerges between biological mothers and the emotionality of infants given up for adoption (Plomin, 1987).

In a longitudinal study by Werner (1989) on resilient children two main personal characteristics were found. Resilient children tended to have dispositions that elicited positive responses from others and they were able to seek help or ask for alternative solutions when they needed them. These pre-dispositions were noted in the children and were carried into adulthood. The dispositions included fairly high activity levels, low degrees of distress, and high levels of sociability. "Even as infants the resilient children were described as active, affectionate, cuddly, easygoing, and even tempered" (Werner, 1989, p.109). At a year and a half they were responsive and had a tendency to seek out new experiences and to seek help when they need it. When these children began elementary school their teachers noted their abilities to concentrate, their problem solving skills, and reading proficiency (Werner, 1989).

Kilmann and Thomas (1975), described five modes of handling interpersonal conflict. The five categories were theoretically organized in relation to the extent to which the individuals try to satisfy themselves and the extent to which they try to satisfy the interests of the other party. The five categories include competing, collaborating, accommodation, avoiding, and compromising.

Using the Jungian personality classification system, Kilmann and Thomas suggested that personality is involved in the modes of conflict resolution adopted by people. This study showed strong correlations between collaborating and extroversion and between competing and psychoticism. Compromising was mildly correlated with both extroversion and psychoticism while avoiding was negatively correlated with extroversion. Accommodating was negatively associated with psychoticism (Kilmann & Thomas, 1975).

A conclusion from these studies was that some emotionality or temperament characteristics have a genetic link and that some of these characteristics influence individual conflict resolution patterns. Because individual differences in temperament play a role in how the individual perceives and reacts with their environment, it is practical to explore the interaction between temperament and the primary care giver's practices in the development of personality and social behavior (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Hershey, 1994).

Frustration is an important elicitor of help-seeking behaviors from child to care-giver. When a child becomes frustrated, if the caregiver is able to relieve the frustration, the child will become more likely to call upon the caregiver for help. Rothbart et al. (1994) showed that children experiencing frustration more frequently will have more opportunities for seeking help and will therefore have more opportunities for help seeking behavior patterns to be reinforced. This study provides another example of the combination of genetic and environmental factors. The genetic predisposition of being prone to frustration creates opportunities for parents and caregivers to provide an environment reinforcing help seeking behaviors (Rothbart et al., 1994).

An interesting aside to this was argued by Sears as cited in Maccoby and Masters (1970) that since the primary care givers actions are focused on removing many sources of frustration for the child, any state of frustration itself will become an occasion for dependency responses or help-seeking behaviors. In this, a state of conflict could be viewed as an adverse condition that the child will have learned to try to remove by securing the caregivers help and attention (Maccoby & Masters, 1970).

The manner in which individual differences in interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills are learned has not yet been established. Evidence does indicate that the role of parents and other caregivers is important. Shure (1982) stated that caregivers "can affect behavior of their children by the extent to which they encourage development of interpersonal cognitive problem-solving skills, a function, we have learned, that is somewhat dependant on their own abilities in this domain" (Shure, 1982, p. 146).

Mothers who exhibited competence in responding to hypothetical child-related means-end thinking were more likely to offer suggestions, state the consequences, and talk to their children about feelings when they were faced with real life situations. However, two separate studies showed that despite finding no gender differences in the children's interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills "mothers' cognitive problem-solving skills and childrearing style correlated with skills of daughters but not of sons" (Shure, 1982, p. 148). A possible explanation for this is that boys are normally more resistant to influence than girls and they may be even more so when they do not have fathers present in their lives. Peers may provide the missing link for boys. Young boys appear to be generally more vulnerable than girls to pressures and challenges from peers. They are more likely to consistently play with the same children whereas girls tend to have larger peer groups in which to play (Shure, 1982).

Conclusion

The development of conflict resolution skills begins with an infant's earliest attempts to relieve physical and emotional distress. Conflict resolution is an area warranting further research and is vital to the positive growth and development of children. Conflict resolution education needs to consider and be based upon the developmental stage of the learner and consider individual and interpersonal factors. Conflict resolution skills are personal resources that develop over time. The skills cannot be provided by others but parents, educators and caregivers can support development by modeling the skills and being mindful of the developmental process characteristic to conflict resolution (Dubow & Slomkowski, 1991).

Personality, initial attempts at resolving conflict, and the events that initiate these attempts are the roots of development. This implies that any individual concerned with the development of children can benefit from understanding that conflict resolution skills begin to develop from the children's earliest interactions with others. Working on the roots means stimulating development, reconstructing conflict situations, and acquiring new strategies to overcome distress (Affolter, 1991).

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