

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF AGGRESSION AMONG PRESCHOOL CHILDREN AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR PREVENTION

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Summary: The report presents the intervention program for the promotion of a ‘culture of rights and responsibility’ for the creation of an optimal climate and the prevention of aggression among kindergarten¹ children. The findings show a significant advantage to the intervention group in the understanding of the processes in the solving of conflicts, the understanding of rights and responsibility, a prominent advantage in awareness of the other person’s internal world, and a variety of ways of solution in situations of conflict during a dialogue. These findings are important, since they indicate another way of improving communication and social functioning between the kindergarten children so as to create an optimal and respectful climate and to reduce significantly the aggression among preschool children.

Key words: Educational Environment, Social Behavior, Aggression, Prevention, Social Belonging

The difficult reality in which the children in Israel and in the world live may harm their sense of confidence and relations with others. This fact may be meaningful, since it was found that the social and emotional ability at a young age is related to the nature of the social relations and the quality of life in the continuation. Social understanding and empathy were found related to positive behavior and normal development. Children of kindergarten age depend largely on the adults around them, and thus their main relations with those around them are hierarchical predefined relations, such as those with their parents, their older siblings, or their kindergarten teachers. The place of the peer group is unique in the development of the kindergarten children, since the relations in it are not characterized by hierarchical relations. The equal relations of the kindergarten children

¹ In Israel the kindergarten refers to the educational frameworks for children aged three to five, in essence encompassing the preschool period. In this paper kindergarten will be used to refer to these institutions.

with those their age provide them with important opportunities to attempt cooperation as well as competition (Sarufe, Cooper, & Dehart, 1998). In the experiences in the peer group there is no mediating adult, and they therefore require the young child to address the viewpoints of others and attempt to understand the other and simultaneously to clarify himself effectively. These social skills constitute a basis for the social functioning in the future (Campbell, 2002).

There is evidence that kindergarten children express aggression towards their peers at a high frequency and more physically than do children in the school (Kavelson, 2002). In parallel, patterns of behavior of shyness or avoidance may harm the acceptability among the peer group (Phillipsen, Bridges, Mclemore & Saponaro, 1999). The lack of success in the management of the relations with other children in the peer group may lead to a situation of loneliness. This situation is defined as an unpleasant emotional experience that derives from the person's awareness of the gap between the existing patterns of social relations and those that are desired (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). In this context, it should be noted that relationships between the degree of acceptance by the peer group of kindergarten age and the adjustment in the school and even mental wellbeing in adulthood were revealed (Dong Hwa & Juhu, 2003).

It was found that young children can learn to use more effectively ways to solve situations of conflict and to broaden the variety of patterns of social behavior at their disposal (Browning, Davis, & Resta, 2000). Conflicts at an early age may constitute an opportunity for training in self-regulation and normal social interaction. This is through the presence of an adult who equips the children with positive techniques of communication, such as cooperation, sensitivity, self-awareness, conflict solving, culture of speaking, and recognition of their rights and personal responsibility (Chen, 2003; Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000). It is important to inculcate among young children more effective patterns of communication, and the educational counselors in early childhood are supposed to lead this process, through the kindergarten teachers' guidance. The importance of the relations in the peer group inspires the need to examine in-depth the development of the social understanding, which constitutes a basis that enables these relations.

In the recent period the requests for help on the part of the supervisors, the kindergarten teachers, and different educators have increased, because of the many acts of violence and fits of anger of children in the educational frameworks. This is behaviors of aggression towards other children (hitting, kicking, throwing objects, etc.), behaviors of aggression towards the adults in the kindergarten (physical and verbal responses and difficult objections).

The Director General's Circular 2010/1(a) that was published in September 2009 under the title Creation of an Optimal Climate discusses the many factors that influence the nature of the social behavior of the child in early childhood. The child's behavior is influenced by outside factors such as the culture and society in which he grew up and by internal factors such as the mood and personal characteristics. The educational environment has the ability to establish and regulate the behavioral expressions. An optimal climate in the kindergarten is a main factor that influences the development of the personal confidence of every child, enables every individual to form a positive self-image and sense of self-worth, and leads to the acquisition of social laws and life skills that build a sense of social belonging – all these establish among the young children socially accepted normative behaviors.

The entry into the educational framework serves for the children an initial encounter with the surrounding world and with its requirements, in the transition from the culture of the family and the child's near environment. To create an optimal educational climate, it is necessary to implement a systemic strategy, which is planned, consistent, and long-term, which simultaneously addresses the construction of a secure climate, the promotion of the mental wellbeing of every child, and the coping with emotional difficulties when they arise (Director General's Circular 2010/1(a), 2010).

The interaction between children is related to different factors, including the environment in which they live. There is no doubt that the everyday reality in modern society is not easy for children. They are influenced by steadily worsening social problems such as poverty and violence.

The document ‘Standards for Optimal Culture and Climate in the Kindergarten’ (Ministry of Education, 2009) reflects the prominence and importance attributed by the management of the office for the promotion of a best educational climate and the mechanisms that the system structures so as to motivate the kindergartens to act to create a non-aggressive scholastic environment, which is secure and optimal for the students’ development. The document was written in connection with the policy of the educational system of standards-based teaching (Ministry of Education, 2009) and built from cooperation between the units of the Ministry of Education that have connection to the topic, and standards in it were characterized and defined for the climate and culture of rights and reasonability. The standards present an educational outlook, a shared language, strategy and tools for the kindergarten staff for the creation and management of an optimal climate and for its assimilation. The standards serve as a basis for a systemic program and are based on three main dimensions:

1. Organization of the kindergarten: procedures, routine of activity, schedule, and design of the educational environment.
2. Interactions: between the adults in the kindergarten’s educational staff, between the adults and the children, among the children themselves, and the children’s parents and the community to which they belong.
3. Developmental program for learning, responding to the emotional-social needs, and establishing values.

Aggression is harm to the person’s dignity and basic rights, whether the person is a child or an adult. The treatment of aggression will respect all the involved parties as people and will uphold their human dignity and their rights and especially their rights for the protection of their mental and physical wellbeing, for a fair process, and for privacy.

A research report (Horowitz & Amir, 1981) “Patterns of Coping of the Educational System with the Problem of Aggression” indicated that the phenomenon of aggression in the schools crosses demographic and social boundaries and from a phenomenon that was common in certain regions has spread to other regions of the middle class and the upper class. It was found that there is a relationship between aggression and the non-sensitivity of the system to the failing students, who cannot cope

successfully with the scholastic requirements. The recommendations of the report focused on the creation of a clear and obligating system of values and parents' involvement in the school. The research of Horowitz and Amir is the examination of a milestone, since this is the first research study that placed before the education leaders a view based on research on the phenomenon of aggression in the schools. Moreover, the recommendations that the researchers proposed did not disappear for half a generation, even if the educational system required many more years until there was recognition that this is a severe phenomenon of broad scope and that it is required, as they recommend, to have comprehensive systemic treatment so as to reduce its dimensions. The educational system established a parliamentary investigation committee that would examine the characteristics of the phenomenon of aggression and will recommend the ways of coping with it and will determine the means of implementation. The recommendations that emphasize the need for a comprehensive systemic policy include the focused reference on the educational system.

It is necessary to obligate the entire educational system to implement in the school framework educational programs for the prevention and intervention against phenomena of aggression. These programs must be based on emphases of education for values, human dignity, patience, and culture of speech, as a structured part of the core program. Thus, in the educational system a great number of prevention programs were implemented, which differed in scope, in their target population (students, teachers, parents), in the topics they focused on, in the required way of teaching, in the instruction towards the implementation and the evaluation of the implementation and the effectiveness of the program (see the review in Horowitz, 2000; Shedmi & Rokach, 1999). Dozens of the programs that were implemented were intended for the inculcation in the students of abilities for the solution of conflicts in ways of peace, for the shaping of attitudes against aggression, for the strengthening of the self-control, for the establishment of social values of patience, tolerance, and acceptance of others, and so on.

Influence of the Intervention Program

The influence of the intervention program for the development and promotion of a culture of 'rights and responsibility', for the reduction of the scope of aggression, and for the creation of social interaction and improvement of the scholastic achievements among the kindergarten children was examined empirically in the year 2015 among 120 children in 20 kindergartens in the Southern region (half in the experimental group, half as a control group). The research was conducted by the author of the paper.

The research population included children in the kindergarten, and the sample included 120 children, 60 children from the experimental group and 60 children from the control group, all of whom learn in the kindergarten (compulsory² level) and are aged four-five. The children's characteristics were similar, and all are on an equal socioeconomic level. The program was implemented in ten kindergartens (six children from every kindergarten), and the control group consisted of ten kindergartens (six children from every kindergarten) where the program was not implemented. We used the research instrument of the semi-structured interview. We conducted interviews for children in the compulsory kindergarten with experts with whose help we built the questionnaire. During the school year the children in the intervention kindergartens participated in 20 sessions in small groups and together, when the sessions were guided by the kindergarten teachers who received instruction and engaged in topics of communication, regulation of behavior, and practice of conflict solving, speaking culture, and social interaction. The children in the intervention group were compared to the children in the comparison group before the implementation of the program and at its end, through a semi-structured interview for the mapping of the processing of social processing and the recording of a video in which the children participated in role play of dialogue between friends for the resolution of a conflict.

The research hypotheses were that the children who participated in the intervention program would see a great improvement in the social skills in the understanding of what is a right and what is a responsibility, in the ability to solve

² In Israel the compulsory kindergarten is the year before first grade, when most children are five years old. Prior preschool attendance is elective.

conflicts, and in the culture of speaking and a decline in the tendency to respond with aggression in the comparison to children who did not participate in the program.

The influence of the 'Culture of Rights and Responsibility' Program for the reduction of the aggression and construction of a respectful climate was examined with regard to the responses of the children in the personal interview.

The findings indicate a direct and linear relationship between the teaching of the program and the reduction of aggression. In the test of implementation, which examines use of the rules learned in the past in new situations, changes were found in three different levels:

1. A decline in the scope of the aggression. From the kindergarten where there were expressions of aggression, we reached during the year a harmonious kindergarten that acts almost without expression of aggression.

2. The level of achievements rose in all the classes.

3. In the kindergarten there is a respectful way of life, which is expressed in respectful language, acceptance of those who are different, in the management of conflicts by peaceful methods, and in teamwork.

The findings that were obtained indicate changes that occurred in the experimental group to a greater extent than in the control group in most of the aspects that were supposed to be influenced by the program. Among the children in the experimental group there was a decline in the tendency to respond with aggression.

Increase in the awareness of responsibility and right. In the experimental group the knowledge regarding the definition of a right increased fivefold (reaching 75% of all the children) and declined to 1.67% lacking knowledge, while in the control group there was an increase in the incorrect definition of right, 15%, and a decline to 13.33% of those lacking knowledge, while in the control group there was an increase in the incorrect definition of right, 15% and a decline to 13.33% among the children of the control group who lacked knowledge of the definition of what a right is.

In the correct definition of what is responsibility in the control group there was no significant gap between the two dates of measurement, while in the experimental group

the percentage of respondents who defined correctly responsibility before is 23.33% and after 48.33%.

It appears that this improvement was made possible because of the learning of the intervention program that provided the conditions appropriate for the understanding of 'rights and responsibility' among kindergarten children and the regular and consistent coaching of the children as mediated by the kindergarten teacher who provided the appropriate conditions for the understanding of the right and responsibility among kindergarten children.

The children received positive incentives for positive behavior and setting clear boundaries regarding negative behavior. The children learned that alongside every right there is responsibility. The kindergarten teachers clarified to the children that a right they deserve is also deserved by their friend and if they do not give this right then they will not receive it and clarified the rights and responsibility, in close connection to the personal world of every child. She obligates to obtain the agreement of the children (the parents) for the rights and responsibility in the kindergarten. The children wrote a shared pact, the pact of the kindergarten, which is summarized as a system of binding laws obligating consistency in implementation.

The implementation of the rights and responsibility in the everyday behavior of the children in the kindergarten obligates the use of the laws of the kindergarten with emphasis on a respectful dialogue, use of dialects and sayings and management of conflicts. The findings show, as expected, differences between the groups in the field of the understanding what is 'right and responsibility'. The children who participated in the intervention program were aware of their rights and personal responsibility.

1. On the question of 'what is aggression?' in the experimental group there was an increase in the negative emotions and a negative attitude towards verbal aggression and physical aggression from 6.67% to 81.67% as opposed to the control group, for which a change did not occur in the negative emotions and the percentage of children remained as it was, 13.33% before and after.

2. Proposal of ways of response to a conflict – Most of the children of the experiment, 85.00% moved from passive solving to active solving, when most of them preferred to solve the conflict through a committee of arbitrators (mediators) and a minority (11.67%) went for a solution through the help of the kindergarten teacher. In contrast, in the control group there was no change in the solving of conflicts, 6.67% remained as it was before and after. The percentage of those who are angry that force was exerted increased from 3.33% to 21.67%. Problem solving among the control group remained low, 6.67%; there remained a clear preference for the use of aggression or the kindergarten teacher's help.

3. The experimental group children (85%) moved from lack of knowledge how to respond or passive solution in response to a conflict (withdrawal, anger) to the proposal of a solution actively and verbally and not violently. The decisive majority (70%) said that they will use the skills of solving conflicts they learned in the program and dialogue (30%).

The students need to receive the knowledge they require so as to understand the conversation for the understanding of the world in which they live, to take responsibility in a complex society, to manage a satisfactory life, to develop a moral background, and to be able to make decisions for themselves. They must be generous and fair in their relations with others, have a sense of justice and decency, understand the country and the world and the challenges they face, know the rich heritage of their society and other societies, be active and responsible citizens who are willing to think about issues in-depth, listen to contradicting opinions, and reach rational decision (Ravitch, 2010).

The purpose of education is to educate the child to display responsibility regarding himself and his community in a way that will be expressed in his everyday behavior (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). He will speak respectfully, will behave respectfully, and will act to improve his life and his environment. The responsibility will be expressed in the assimilation of values and basic skills of integrity, fairness, self-discipline, volunteering, and willingness to put forth effort. The responsibility will be expressed in the construction of the child's personality: reference with respect, self-

control, consideration of others and their emotions. To achieve this, it is necessary to translate the knowledge and awareness into the value of respect for respectful behavior, and it is necessary to practice cognitive and social skills, with the preservation of consistency (Hyttten, 2006).

Use of respectful language. There was a considerable increase among the children in the experimental group who used request words when they asked a game from the friend, from 18.33% to 60%, while among the children of the control group the number of children who used request words declined slightly and the percentage of children who take without permission rose, from 10.00% to 31.67%. The purpose of education is to educate the child to take responsibility regarding himself and his community in a way that will be expressed in his everyday behavior (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). He will speak respectfully, will behave respectfully, and will act to improve his life and his environment. The responsibility will be expressed in the assimilation of values and basic skills of integrity, fairness, self-discipline, cognitive and social skills, with preservation of consistency (Hyttten, 2006).

The children will know to translate the knowledge, values, and skills they obtained in the program for respectful and nonviolent behavior. 63.33% of the children in the experimental group after the intervention feel respected by their peers and only 5.00% feel that the friends do not treat them with respect as opposed to 15.00% of the children of the control group who feel that their friends respect them and 30.00% do not respect them.

The findings indicate a direct relationship between the experience and involvement and the optimal climate.

1. The scope and quality of the sense of respect of the child in the group are what motivate the child's behavior and determine whether he will turn to harmonious cooperation or aggression, and it is necessary to invest most of the effort in this field.

2. There is an increase of 31% among the children of the experimental group who moved to use request words (thank you, please, sorry, etc.) that they learned in the program as a means of the prevention of conflict.

Hence, the level of aggression among children who were exposed to the program declined from marginal dimensions and in certain learning environments vanished completely. The children learned to implement skills of the management of conflicts in peaceful ways. There was a copying of the respectful patterns of behavior from the kindergarten and in the home the children's level of violence decreased.

The findings indicate a direct relationship between a respectful climate and improvement in the level of the scholastic achievements.

1. In the test of knowledge (which examines the recall of ideas, material, or phenomena in relation to the facts, trends, criteria, abstractions, and generalizations) it was found that the scope of the knowledge of the children in the experimental group increased significantly and in most questions there was not a single child who said 'I do not know' or who gave an answer that was not relevant. There was a fivefold increase in the number of children who knew to define rights, a twofold increase in the percentage of children who knew to define responsibility, a nearly twofold increase of the percentage of children who knew to define their rights in the kindergarten. Thus, the number of children who knew to note the types of emotions he knows increased by 85%.

2. In the ability of synthesis (as a combination of parts and their assembly in a new way) it was found that in the response of the children of the experiment to a violent event there was a decline of 70% in the aggressive response and it left a small percentage of 6.7% of the kindergarten children who would respond with aggression.

The findings indicate a direct relationship between experience and involvement and an optimal climate. The program improved by 3.7 times the children's social and emotional abilities. 95% noted that it is fun for them in the kindergarten. 92% feel respected by their classmates in the kindergarten. There are no sad children in the kindergarten (0%), and only 3% noted that they feel that they are not respected in the kindergarten.

Among the children in the control group the trend is reversed. The percentage of the children who feel negative emotions in social terms increased, and there was barely a significant change in the positive emotions because of social involvement.

The summary of the findings delineates figures of the kindergarten children who respond positively to the curriculum in which there is balance between rights and duties, which maintain the feeling of self-respect and social respect of the child in the group and builds an optimal climate.

These children are different from children who were not exposed to the program in a number of aspects. They are not aggressive. They exchanged patterns of aggression in response to a conflict for patterns of conversation or conflict solving (also in conversation). In this process there was a broadening of the children's cognitive abilities in the context of the increase in the scope of knowledge, understanding, analysis, synthesis, and assessment and in the test of implementation they knew to translate the knowledge, the values, and the skills they obtained in the program for respectful and non-aggressive behavior.

Summary and Recommendations

The insights I obtained in the leadership of the educational process include the following:

- In the test of the result, the model implements the law of the goals of education and helps the education of the children to be fair people who are achievement-oriented and involved in society. A direct relationship was found between the teaching of the model that creates an optimal and respectful climate and the improvement in the scholastic achievements. A direct relationship was found between the development of a respectful climate and a sharp decline (to the point of elimination) of the scope of the aggression. The respectful language and the respectful social behavior of the children in the model indicate the assimilation at a high level of the knowledge and the learned values.

- The feedback from the kindergarten teachers who taught the model indicate that the model is not frightening since it does not presume to invent something new but

creates an axis of organization that is so lacking in the activity of some of the kindergartens. It is practical, easy to adjust according to the 'color' of every kindergarten and leads to clear success when implemented in the kindergartens.

In the kindergartens (in contrast to the school), the kindergarten teacher and the kindergarten staff are the primary factor of influence, and this is their power. They determine the educational perception and they implement it; and the consistency and personal example depend only on them. The construction of the curriculum around the organizing axis of human dignity enables them to act on a number of levels in parallel.

- To strengthen the children's sense of self-efficacy in such a way that enables them to respect themselves and from a place of self-confidence to respect others.

- To build a kindergarten climate that enables a tolerant, accepting, and pluralistic climate, a climate that encourages initiatives and development according to personal ability, needs, tendencies, and areas of interest.

- To develop skills of a respectful everyday life through the encouragement of attention and speaking, practice of self-control, management of conflict solving, and reinforcement of the interactions and collaborations between the children.

- To develop experiential and enriching learning environments, which challenge the children.

- To make the students and parents into active partners in the construction and implementation of the program.

The research findings indicate that the intervention program that encourages collaboration and involvement creates a respectful climate that improves the achievements and reduces the scope of aggression. The conditions for the achievement of a respectful climate are the reference of cognitive achievements and emotional-social achievements, emotional support of the child, quality interaction between the teacher and the student, support of learning, and an organized class, in the sense of the clarity of the balance between the rights and duties.

The intervention program, alongside the encouragement of the social involvement in the kindergarten, has become essential in modern society, because of the increase of

the aggression and feelings of alienation. Education for rights and responsibility empowers the child not only in that it instills in him values (respect, tolerance, fairness, equality, and self-discipline) and thus builds his personality (reference with respect, self-control, consideration of others) but also since it is expressed in the child's everyday conduct: obedience of the law, respectful language, respectful behavior, volunteering, and help of others.

A positive outcome is expected in an environment in which the education for rights and responsibility becomes the organizing axis of the educational program in the kindergarten, involves the entire population of the kindergarten, and is preserved consistently and from personal example. The systemic outcome expected from education for rights and responsibility, partnership, and involvement is the construction of a respectful climate, in the framework of which the empowered child is emotionally available for significant learning and the increased depth of value-oriented education.

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