

Empathy in Children and Adolescents with Antisocial Behavior

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Abstract: Empathy Has Been Considered by Researchers to Promote Prosocial Behaviors and to Reduce Aggressive Behaviors Because It is Found That Empathy is Related to Some Forms of Prosocial Behaviors, and It Plays an Important Role in the Development of Antisocial and Aggressive Delinquent Behavior (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Thus, It Seems Appropriate to Assume That Interventions and Trainings That Seek to Improve Empathy Would Be Helpful in the Inhibition of individual's Aggressive and Antisocial Behaviors. the Purpose of This Paper is to Review Specific Approaches in Empathy Training as Well as to Examine the Effectiveness of Intervention Programs Which Aimed to Increase Children and adolescents' Empathy Awareness in Order to Inhibit Their Aggressive or Antisocial Actions to Others.

1. Introduction

In Order to Evaluate the Role of Empathy in Reducing Antisocial Attitudes and Behaviors [1], It is Essential to Define the Concept of Empathy First. According to Eisenberg and Miller (1987), Some Researchers in the Past Have Defined It in Cognitive Terms, That is the Ability to Understand Other people's Affective or Cognitive Feelings and Status; and More Researchers Tended to Define Empathy in More Affective Terms in the Past Few Decades, That is the Ability to Make an Emotional Respond Which is Congruent with other's Emotions, I.e [2]. "Feel the Same Emotion as Another, or At Least a Similar Emotion". However, More Recent Studies Took Consideration of Both Cognitive and Affective Perspectives and Indicated That without Comprehension (Cognitive), people's Interpretations of others' Emotions Might Be Incorrect [3]; on the Other side, Understanding another's Emotions But Fail to Share Affective Concerns and Show Appropriate Responsiveness (Affective) is Not Enough Either (Cohen, 1992).

2. Rationales

As Mentioned Earlier, the Reason of the Delivery of Empathy Interventions among Aggressive Children and Adolescents is That Most Research Findings Are Consistent with the Conclusion That Sympathy and Empathy Are Positively Related to Prosocial Behaviors (Eisenberg & Fabes, 2006) and Negatively Related to Aggression, Externalizing and Antisocial Behaviors (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988) [5]. Given the Significant Role That Empathy Plays of Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors, It is Not Surprising That Intervention Programs Developed to Reduce Antisocial Behaviors among Children and Adolescents Include the Goal of Promoting the Increase of Empathy [6].

3. Empathy Training Approaches

Training in Empathic Responding Children and adolescents could be taught what empathy is, how to recognize different emotions in themselves and others [7], and how to respond to others positively with empathy as well as effective communication skills. Empathic responding puts emphasis on a reflection of other's feelings rather than a simple paraphrase of the communication content [8]. By learning the skills of empathic responding, children and adolescents are able to have better interpersonal perceptions of other's emotive states and make appropriate responsiveness. Fraser and Vitro (2005) found that their experimental samples [9], who had exercises in responding

to counseling interview videotapes, a filmed demonstration of empathic responding, and then had role play exercises related to empathic responding, showed significant increase in levels of empathic ability.

Initial Focus on One's Own Feelings and Find Similarities Hughes, Tingle and Sawin (1981) developed a study to assess children's empathic understanding of other's emotions as well as their perception of "their own emotional reactions to the affective experience of another child". Children were asked to read slides stories about another child in emotion-provoking situations, and then they were asked questions to investigate the accuracy of their identification of the child's affect in the story, and also to which degree their own affect matched the child's affect in the story [10]. The findings showed that younger children's understanding of the story-child's emotions was improved if they were first encouraged to focus on their own emotional responses. It indicates that when encouraging children to understand other's feelings and emotions, it is important to have them initially focus on their own feelings, and then focus on finding the similarities between themselves and others would be helpful in enhancing affective empathy.

Role Playing Role play activities require children and adolescents to imagine themselves as another person and act out that person's feelings or behaviors. Chalmers and Townsend (1990) designed a study to investigate the effectiveness of an intervention involving role-play in improving social perspective-taking ability among socially maladjusted or delinquent adolescent females. 16 girls aged 10 to 16 participated in the training program which involved appropriate behavior modeling, coaching, student rehearsal of behaviors, role interpretations and oral feedback. The results showed that compared to control group which simply involved a fitness program, the intervention group achieved a significant improvement in female's empathy and their ability to take the perspective of another person in social situations and ability to have a successful resolution of interpersonal problems. It indicated that role-play training resulted in higher empathy and increased prosocial behaviors. However, another research developed by Iannotti (2008) failed to find significant effect on either aggressive or empathic behaviors among 6-year-old children who followed the role playing training. Nevertheless, an increase of altruism was found as a result of training.

Modeling Empathetic Behavior Kohn (1991) pointed out that when teachers are modeling the desired values and prosocial actions, children and adolescents are more likely to adopt those. For example, children who watched someone donated to charity would be more likely to donate than other children. That is to say, when teachers start to take actions to help others and express their concerns towards others, it would set a more powerful model to students than verbal instruction aiming at promoting a sense of empathy in students. Furthermore, it is not merely teachers at school, but also parents at home or even peers could set modeling prosocial behaviors for children and adolescents.

Through Human-Animal Relationship Daly and Morton (2006) gave surveys to 155 elementary children in order to determine whether there was a connection between human-animal interactions and empathy. One of the findings is that children who were highly attached to their pets were more empathic compared to those who were less attached. It indicated that activities which promote interaction between children and animals would be effective in facilitating children's empathetic behaviors. According to the Doris Day Animal Foundation, children's mistreatment of animal often is a warning sign that they are developing aggressive behavioral tendencies, thus parents, teachers and other adults should be concerned about children's treatment towards animals and include animals in the efforts to teach children empathy. For example, adults could ask children to imagine how animal feels when being mistreated and try to establish a positive bond between children and animals.

4. Conclusion

Even the debate with regards to whether children and adolescents with antisocial behaviors are associated with lower level of empathy or lack of capability to show empathy to others, it cannot be denied that the development of empathy plays an important role in facilitating prosocial behavior

and inhibiting aggressive acts towards others in children and adolescents. Therefore, it underlines the importance of empathy trainings or interventions in children and adolescents with antisocial behaviors.

However, the majority of the prior researches focused on either the relationship between empathy and antisocial behaviors or the effect of empathy training in children and adolescents with antisocial behavior, few has explored whether the effective empathy training would lead to the inhibition of children and adolescents' antisocial acts towards others. The future study should combine the objectives of empathy enhancement and antisocial actions inhibition, and further explore their relationship.

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