

How Empathy Influences Aggressive Behaviors in Early Childhood

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Abstract. Studies have shown that empathy is a kind of emotional sharing and understanding ability, which is a kind of social ability, which stems from the complex interaction between unconscious neurocognitive, autonomic and neuroendocrine processes. A person who is empathic has the feeling to perceive and be sensitive to the emotions of others as well as the motivation to care for their wellbeing. In this essay, the different perspectives of empathy and how they influence aggressive behaviors in early childhood have been viewed. The study has found that the different forms of empathy influence behavior differently. In the normal sense and understanding, empathy tends to increase the chances for positive behavior and decrease aggression. In addition, in early childhood, emotional resonance is based on emotional inconsistency, which leads to empathic pain. This emotion is a self-directed response. At the same time, empathy pain becomes personal pain and needs comfort from others. Because the alternative emotional response may be out of control and may become disgusted at the same time.

Keywords: Empathy; aggressive behavior; childhood development.

1. Introduction

Aggression in children mainly emerges about one year old, he may show a state of physical aggression. Physical aggression usually reaches the peak stage in the second and third year of a person's growth. This is the time when a majority of children usually express physical aggression at some time during their young life. However, other forms of aggression, including verbal attacks, may lead to a decline in young children around the age of 4. As Lenneke noted, persistently high levels of physical aggression in early childhood have been considered to be essential risk factors for aggressive behavior as they develop later in life [1]. For this reason, this paper aims to study the risk factors of aggression in early childhood and how empathy influences these behaviors. Thus, it is critical to delve into the understanding of what empathy really is especially as far as children's behavior is concerned.

Impaired empathy over time has been seen as an essential risk factor. According to Panfile and Laible, empathy is the ability to understand and feel the emotions of others together, and can withdraw a person's social ability, which stems from the complex interaction of unconscious neurons-cognitive, autonomic and neuroendocrine processes [2]. Precursors of empathy, as Gini notes, may be already present even at the very early stages of growth since newborns as well as infants become distressed as they respond to other peers cries while not recording their own crying. It is worth noting that in early childhood, empathy is mainly caused by emotional questioning, which leads to empathy pain, which belongs to self-directed normal feedback [3]. In addition, empathy pain can be expressed externally as personal pain and comfort from others. Because alternative emotional responses are not controlled by others, they may become disgusted at the same time.

Other than empathic distress, there is an other-oriented emphatic concern which is known to occur in early childhood such as toddlerhood and infancy, which includes concern for the well-being of others as well as the need to understand the cause of the feelings of the other.

2. Influence of Empathy on Aggression

Impaired empathy may be a risk factor for aggression in children, adults and adolescents. However, the results may change in the child's preschool stage. In various studies, it is found that there is a

negative correlation between empathy and aggressive behavior, which examines the relationship between empathy and aggressive and hostile behavior. It is noteworthy that low levels of affective empathy may lead to high levels of aggression [4]. At a young age, children mainly learn from their parents, peers and the environment. Therefore, the kind of empathy that children express affects how they behave.

As far as their empathy behavior type is concerned, it is negatively correlated with empathy and aggressive behavior. Emotional behavior refers to the ability to share the emotions of others, and in most cases, it is associated with enhanced autonomic arousal. Most young children may not be able to accept objections from children and adults, which may cause them to become aggressive. As far as empathy is concerned, it is worth noting that childhood situations that evoke empathy are often emotionally challenging and can lead to excessive arousal. As Jenkins points out, excessive arousal may manifest itself as personal pain and seeking comfort. The emphasis on pain is mainly regarded as a basic expression of emotional sympathy because it is properly and effectively related to automatic and basic processes such as emotional empathy and emotional contagion.

Suurland noted that during the third and fourth years of life, there are various empathy-eliciting situations which tend to lead to empathic concern [5]. In general, empathy has been found to be expressed differently between genders. What this means is that boys and girls exhibit different forms of empathy and aggression. A study by Hymel and Bonanno showed that generally girls mainly express more empathic behavior than boys [6]. In addition, studies have shown that women tend to resonate more easily from birth to adulthood, and gender differences in empathy have been thought to be the root cause of neurobiology. On the other hand, boys tend to be more aggressive than girls. In addition, boys tend to show a highly stable aggressive trajectory from a very young age to puberty. Therefore, the relationship between empathy and aggressiveness may be different between girls and boys. A study by Decty and Cowell looked at a study of children between the ages of 4 and 7 and their expressions [7]. These children showed a positive correlation between self-reported empathy and aggression related to episodes in boys, but not in girls. Despite that, another study by Lenneke showed a negative association between parental-induced empathy coupled with psychopathic traits and most of them include aggression in boys aged between three to thirteen years [1]. However, the same study was conducted in adults and it showed that there exists stronger negative associations on aggression and self-reported empathy in women. Based on these findings, one can rightly argue that the correlation between empathy pain and empathy concern, as well as the mitigation effect, is not clear. A study by Shiller and O'Flynn showed that the association related empathy and aggression could be stronger for physical aggression as opposed to other types of aggression in early childhood especially toddler since physical aggression has over time been shown to emanate during the first year of life and increases in the second and third year of their growth but starts going down during the fourth year of life [8]. However, the other forms of aggression usually decline as one ages. If a child exhibits physical aggression at a young age, it could be an indicator of pending problems in later life. For this reason, parents have the responsibility of ensuring that parents develop mechanisms of solving these challenges as first as they spot them. Failure to do this may limit the control they have over their children. While aggression by children may be exhibited towards both parents, the aggression is more elaborate in mothers as opposed to fathers.

3. Empathy Reduces Chances of Aggressive Behavior and Improves Prosocial Behavior

Empathy among young children has been known to improve prosocial behavior which is the opposite of aggressive behavior. Prosocial behavior is mainly used to refer to any action that is performed by a person in order to meet the need of another person or to improve the welfare of the other party. Therefore, children who are quite empathetic tend to show develop a loving attitude toward their peers and other people such as adults. van Goozen note that prosocial behavior tends to increase the fitness and wellbeing of the receiver and also carries, to some extent, some cost to the

benefactor [9]. Despite this, there exist some arguments that prosocial behavior is actually not “prosocial” in the specific sense since it offers a fitness benefit to the benefactor. Based on the evolutionary perspective, there does not exist any reason to show that prosocial behavior needs to be discounted since such behaviors do not appear to be selflessly motivated. Thus, the act of labeling any form of behavior as prosocial as long as it is positive is not the right way to do it. Prosocial behavior needs to be understood as it is based on the role it serves within a specific context.

While empathy is known to motivate prosocial behavior among children, it is imperative to realize that there exists a difference between such kind of behavior and empathy. There has been confusion among some scholars who have made the mistake of considering social behavior as the same as empathy. However, current studies have shown major differences between prosocial behavior and empathy. Although some forms of prosocial behavior such as consolation and helping others can be a result of empathy, several other forms of prosocial behaviors such as sharing things are not mainly associated with empathy or even elicited by empathy. For this reason, it is more appropriate to consider prosocial behavior as a form of multidimensional construct as opposed to a global concept as most traditional scholars viewed it [10]. Therefore, there is a lot that is to be learned by addressing the various facets of prosocial behavior.

Children can show their behavior towards others from as early as six months. Infants as young as six months have the capacity to show some positive behaviors towards other infants who are expressing distress. They tend to sympathize with their peers, feel for them and also engage in acts of comforting them. However, in doing this, they do not become distressed themselves. At around the age of eight months, children can robustly express sympathy towards others. Further, preverbal infants can show rudimentary empathic concern toward others as evidenced by their ultimate evaluation of characters’ interactions. van Goozen conducted a study involving 10-month-olds and found out that such children were able to manifest sympathetic responses as shown by preferentially reaching for victims who needed their help as opposed to neutral objects or aggressors after they had observed third-party social interactions related to aggression [9]. The study further found out that children who are aged one and two years mainly express comforting behaviors towards other children who are in distress and tend to go as far as surrendering their favorite or preferred object or thing as an empathetic action [9].

Even at very young age, children can show signs of internally motivated behavior that leans towards helping others who are in need of their help. Such children tend to fetch the required objects that may be outside the reach of their peers. Thus, such children tend to show signs of genuine concern for the wellbeing of others and also show signs of empathy as well as prosociality in a number of ways in which aspects such as socialization, experience and cognitive construction may not be able to be accounted for alone. By doing this, empathy, which is developed early in a child’s life tends to lessen and discourage cases of aggression while at the same time promoting positive deeds.

4. Different Forms of Empathy

There are different forms of empathy, such as cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. The two seem to have different effects mainly on participation in direct and indirect attacks. More specifically, researchers have identified a consistent link between emotional and cognitive empathy and direct aggression. In this case, the direct experience of pain signals is considered to reduce the possibility of aggressive behavior of individuals with complete emotional empathy. On the contrary, emotional empathy and cognitive empathy are considered to be less important in the regulation of indirect attacks. Since the social manipulation involved in indirect attacks may need to fully reflect the psychological state of another person, there is no confrontation and no direct signs of pain. Although the traditional empathy index is theoretically important for aggressive behavior, it is important to recognize that, to a large extent, the empirical picture is surprisingly mixed. For example, a study by Lenneke found a negative correlation between self-reported empathy and general aggression, such as conduct disorders, criminal behavior and crime [8]. There is an important consideration for the

explanation of the observed small effect of empathy. Studies have shown that the difference in a person's level of empathy is directly related to behavioral problems such as aggression and criminal behavior in later life.

Young children who exhibit high levels of empathy tend to be active in actions such as cooperating, caring, volunteering as well as sharing. While such behaviors may be seen as normal and ordinary with human beings in general, it is never the case at times. For a person to exhibit such a form of behavior, it is an indication that they have high levels of empathy although this may be unknown to them as this is the case with young children. Empathy serves a critical role in the life of a person for, other than making a person have the will to help other people, it also helps the individual person to become a better person by helping them to take care of themselves. Further, it helps them to avoid negative states, elevate their physical health and also improve their interpersonal relationships. For young people, it is actually one of the vital aspects of their personal and interpersonal flourishing. For this reason, the exploration of factors such as gratitude, empathy and childhood maltreatment may serve to inhibit or even promote the prosocial behavior of a young child.

5. Strategies to Increase the Empathy Level in Early Childhood Children

In most cases, empathy is a learned behavior and therefore the child has to be trained to exhibit empathetic behavior. Thus, there exists various reasons that can be used to teach children about empathy in their early years. It has always been said that before judging a person, it is necessary to ensure that one walks a mile in their shoes. While the meaning of this saying may appear far-fetched, it is generally about empathy. Mainly, empathy is the ability to be aware of the feelings of others and imagine what they might feel were they in their position. Empathy is a key factor in the development of friendships and other forms of relationships [2]. For this reason, it is necessary to develop strategies for increasing empathy among early childhood children. It is noteworthy that teaching empathy to young children is not a hard thing since any skill can be taught to children as the life experiences and cognitive abilities that they develop over time will enable them to acquire these strategies.

One of the strategies that can be used to increase empathy in early childhood children is to model empathy. Any time that one wants to teach a skill to a child, it is essential for the person to model it themselves. By doing this, the child may understand what empathy looks like, feels like and sounds like. Further, it is easier to teach skills that one has mastered themselves. Thus, it is essential for parents to model empathy at all times irrespective of whether they are upset or not. By doing this, this method will reinforce the idea and belief that empathy can be used and applied even when one is feeling disappointed, angry or hurt. Modelling empathetic behaviour is also important. Children often learn by observing and imitating those around them, so it is crucial for adults to demonstrate empathetic behaviour in their own actions and interactions with others. For example, if a child sees an adult comforting a friend who is upset, they may be more likely to adopt similar behaviours when interacting with their peers.

The other effective strategy is using role-playing activities. Children can be encouraged to pretend to be someone else and to think about how that person might feel in a given situation. For example, if a child is playing the role of a sibling who was left out of a game, they may learn to understand and express feelings of disappointment and exclusion.

Another strategy is to read books and stories that portray characters with a range of emotions. This can help children to understand and recognize different emotions in themselves and others. It is important to discuss the characters' feelings and why they might be feeling that way. This can help children to develop their emotional vocabulary and to become more attuned to the emotions of those around them.

Providing opportunities for children to engage in activities that require cooperation and collaboration can also help to increase empathy levels. When children work together towards a common goal, they learn to consider the needs and feelings of others and to find ways to resolve conflicts and differences. Further, teaching children about different cultures and ways of life can

broaden their perspective and help them to develop greater empathy for others. This can be done through books, videos, and other resources that introduce children to different customs, traditions, and viewpoints.

6. Conclusion

Aggression in children mainly emerges during the first year of life and also manifests as physical aggression. The aggressive behavior may persist even into adulthood if it is not addressed early enough. As noted, persistently high levels of physical aggression in early childhood have been considered to be essential risk factors for aggressive behavior as they develop later in life. There exists both empathic distress and impaired distress. Impaired empathy has been considered a risk factor for aggression in children, adults and adolescents. The study has shown that the association related empathy and aggression could be stronger for physical aggression as opposed to other types of aggression in early childhood especially toddler since physical aggression has over time been shown to emanate during the first year of life and increase in the second and third year of their growth but start going down during the fourth year of life. The study has also noted that empathy among young children has been known to improve prosocial behavior which is the opposite of aggressive behavior. Young children are still in the stage of self-centered development, they cannot fully empathize with others and become not selfish at all. Moreover, when introducing the development of empathy, it is mentioned that each child has a different level of development of empathy. Some children can listen to and understand others well, while others may have to work hard to understand others. This article helps future researchers learn that parents need to adjust their expectations according to the characteristics of their children. In addition, when children show empathy for others, they should be encouraged and affirmed in time, so that their behavior can be strengthened and developed. People are born with the opportunity to resonate and link with others. In the process of getting in touch with the world, especially in the early days with our parents, if people can be nourished and cared for, and develop empathy, they will not be so lonely in the future, thus embracing the world better. To increase empathy in early childhood children, various strategies such as modeling empathy, role-playing activities and providing opportunities for children to engage in activities that require cooperation and collaboration can also help to increase empathy levels.

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