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Developing Life Skills to Eliminate Negative Behaviors Among Foster Youth

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Human Development and

Family Studies

Introduction

Due to their placement in the foster care system, foster children face a higher likelihood of future negative outcomes. Typically, foster youth behave more aggressively, lack social-adaptive skills, and struggle with emotion regulation (Deutsch, Lynch, Zlotnik, Matone, Kreider, & Noonan, 2015). To help resolve these behavioral difficulties, foster youth must learn life skills and social skills. At Chamberlain's Children Center, I will engage the children in a series of activities, focusing on the life skills associated with meal time. For the last activity, the children will invite staff members and peers to a final dinner, providing them an opportunity to showcase their newfound skills. The participants will be able to demonstrate mealtime etiquette and manners, starting a dinner conversation, and setting the table for themselves and their guest.

Needs Statement

Within a family environment, children acquire skills through the process of socialization. Social and life skills are not explicitly taught, but rather are modeled by parents, peers, and caregivers. Foster children in group care miss out on life skills associated with a typical family environment due to their placement in foster care. Implementing positive forms of conversation and manners can help replace the negative behaviors foster children usually display in social situations. Similarly, incorporating traditional family practices with foster children, such as group meal times, will build important life skills that may, then, in turn positively affect their future outcomes.

Foster children tend to have higher rates of aggression due to circumstances of neglect and child maltreatment (Linares, Li, & Shrout 2012). However, learning life skills promotes

developmental growth and discourages negative behavior in at-risk youth, such as aggression (Vugt, Deković, Prinzie, Stams, & Asscher, 2013). Implementing household-related life skills exposes children to prosocial behaviors such as healthy peer interactions and behavioral norms, which then discourages negative behaviors.

Youth face many challenges when transitioning out of foster care, including poor school performance and higher rates of delinquency (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney 2010). Additionally, the majority of foster youth do not receive enough services as they transition into adulthood (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney 2010). In order to mitigate the potential challenges with transitioning, it is necessary that foster youth learn particular life skills such as dinner table manners and conversational skills. Acquiring new skills that promote competence and independence greatly benefits foster youth as they transition out of the system as well as afterwards (Scannapieco, Cornell-Carrick, & Painter 2007).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Children and youth develop and learn skills through the process of observation and implementation. According to theorist Albert Bandura, individuals process information and acquire knowledge through observational learning. Bandura suggests that through the process of modeling, children observe events and memorize elements from the observation. With the use of memory, children then can apply it through actions that resemble the modeled event (Grusec 1992). Therefore, observational learning can provide groundwork for teaching life skills to children. As defined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), life skills are the "psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life."

Learning life skills within a group-home setting impacts youth development in substantial ways. Older adolescents who are near aging out of the foster care system need independent living skills in order to succeed as an independent. Therefore, foster youth care providers must prepare adolescents for these skills to promote social integration. However, unlike adolescents in typical families, foster youth may require more support with life skills. Mallon (1992) noted that striving for self-sufficiency and independence begins in middle childhood for children placed in out-of-home care, and is a necessary attribute of adolescence for these youth. Introducing tactics that promote independence addresses the disparities in social skills development faced by foster children. Further, Williams (2011) stated that integrating social skills training to foster children reduces the likelihood that they will encounter negative outcomes, such as homelessness and continuous aggression, later in life. In particular, aging out of the foster care system contributes an additional amount of stress to foster children being that they are more likely than in-home youth to be ill-equipped for independent living (Williams 2011). Both Mallon and Williams suggest that integration of social skills of children between the ages of seven to thirteen plays an important role in mitigating stressors later in life.

Moreover, Vugt, Deković, Prinzie, Stams, and Asscher (2013) studied if a social skills training program affected children with behavioral problems and supported their development of social skills. Different behaviors were measured, including changes of self-esteem as well as aggression. The authors found that the experimental group demonstrated positive effects from the training even after a year had passed (Vugt, Deković, Prinzie, Stams, & Asscher, 2013). Prior

findings support the use of intervention techniques in order to promote positive social skills

growth, and children experiencing behavioral problems especially benefit from such trainings.

Transitioning into adulthood is especially difficult for youth in foster care. Foster youth

face the uncertainty of eventually aging out of the foster care system. Osterling and Hines

(2006) discussed the importance of proper preparation during transitional periods for foster

youth. They described the significance of preparation via mentoring practices which establishes

trust while providing a positive social interaction. Mentoring can play a significant role in a

foster youth's future outcome, being that it involves a positive adult interaction (Osterling &

Hines, 2006). Integrating mentoring tactics and other techniques ultimately addresses a

number of positive social traits that may benefit foster youth.

Consideration of Diversity

Parental figures socialize their children through everyday interactions. The types of

interactions often vary from family to family due to environmental influences and constraints.

For foster youth, lack of parental care leads to being placed in a foster home. Additionally,

foster children also miss out on critical socialization from their parental figures while in out-of-

home care.

The children living at Chamberlain's come from many different counties in California.

According to the Student Accountability Report Card (SARC; 2016), Chamberlain's school is 20%

African American, 50% Hispanic or Latino, 10% Pacific Islander, and 20% White. Of those

attending the school, 50% of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged. All of the

students at the school experience some sort of disability, including learning disabilities and

emotional disturbances. Being that my project requires the children to cooperate as a group,

potential problems can arise due to their current social and cognitive abilities. Although I may not interact directly with these specific children, the demographics from the on-site school represents the greater population at Chamberlain's. Even though the exact ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds of the children in my project are not known , I anticipate that the children should reflect the demographics of the onsite school at Chamberlain's.

Although the children at Chamberlain's are placed in foster care, I am unaware of the status of the current life skills they have previously received from their parents or others. Some of them may have had more time with their parents or others who provided some types of life skills.

During my project, I will implement my activity on the basis of a strong relationship built over several months. Through an established relationship, background information is gathered and individual nuances are also identified, making it easier to undertake the importance of diversity of the activity group. A series of activities will promote the importance of my prescribed learning objectives, and ensure continuity amongst the participants. Even though the participants are unique, each child will become familiar with the scenarios involved in the activity.

Learning Outcomes

In order to promote prosocial behavior, foster children should be exposed to real life scenarios. In my project, the children will carry out a dinner that incorporates positive dinner time interactions and manners, correctly places the table setting, and engage in dinner conversations with their peers. By the end of the activities the children should be able to

1. Recall and inform the guests about two meal time manners prior to starting the meal

2. Assemble the proper dinner placement on the table

3. Participate in dinner conversation with the other people at the dinner table

Method

Introduction

Prior to beginning the project, I will sit down with the children in order to briefly describe the project. I will introduce the topic to them, including what I have planned to do and how it will involve dinnertime. Additionally, I will explain the specific elements I need to address, that being the learning outcomes. After explaining their role in the project, we will brainstorm ideas of what they want to include in the final presentation of our project. In order to demonstrate their success with the learning outcomes, we will hold a Final Dinner from them and their chosen guest.

Day 1

As a group, the children and I will establish mealtime guidelines and rules via discussion. First, I will give them the definition of etiquette, and then ask how we can have etiquette during our meal times together. Also, I will give the definition of politeness. I will ask them if they could give examples of being polite and being impolite. I also will provide an example of a dinnertime rule I had when growing up. Next we will create a poster, outlining each manner they will create. See Appendix A.

Day 2

On day 2, we will talk about place settings at the dinner table. Through a discussion, we will address the importance of how the table is placed, and we will also look at good and bad place settings. We will then discuss each item of the place setting example. Each child will then

organize their own place setting on a worksheet. See Appendix B for samples of the place settings.

Day 3

On day 3, we will discuss how to have different conversations while at dinner. I will provide a mixed list of "good" conversation topics as well as "bad" conservation topics, and together we will determine the "good" topics. Next, we will brainstorm ideas, and each child will write down a topic or question on a slip of paper that they will want to talk about during the meal. We then put each slip in the "Conversation Bowl", and everyone will have a turn picking a slip at random to practice during dinner. See Appendix C for the list of conversations.

Final Dinner

During the Final Dinner, the children will be assessed on each learning outcome. In order to assess their knowledge of dinnertime manners, they will be asked to inform their guest about two manners. Their answers will then be transcribed for analysis. See Appendix D for the answers. Learning outcome 2 will be evaluated after the children assemble each place setting for their guest. The place settings will be grade on a four-point scale. Finally, the final dinner conversation will be recorded and analyzed in order to identify how the children engaged in conversation at the dinner table.

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Results

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In order to document learning outcome 1, the children recited the dinner time manners to the guests. Refer to Appendix A for dinner time manners. Out of the three children who participated, two of them were able to tell correctly tell their guest the manners. One of children needed assistance in recalling a manner and used the list of rules that we created in

the earlier activity. In addition, one of the children prompted the others to follow the created

manners throughout the final dinner. When she addressed the other children, they then

corrected their behavior to follow the manner. Only three reminders were given during the

duration of the meal: one was in regards to the use of inappropriate language, and the other

two were reminders to avoid smacking their food. Based on the results, the participants

partially met learning outcome 1.

The second learning outcome was for the participants to assemble their guest's place

setting for the meal. The place settings were assessed on a four point scale, with each point

representing one setting piece that was correctly placed. Out of the three guest place settings,

two of the participants set their placement almost completely correct (75% correct), and one

participant was half correct. All of the participants incorrectly placed their cups, and one

participant placed a fork the wrong direction. Appendix C provides examples of each place

setting from the final meal. Table 1 shows the point value for each participant. Based upon the

results, learning outcome 2 was partially met.

For the third learning outcome, the participants were assessed on the types of

conversations they had at the dinner table. The finale dinner conversation was audio-recorded

(approximately 20 minutes of recording) and then reviewed for analysis. The following

attributes were considered when assessing the conversation: initiation, contribution (i.e.,

partaking and providing input in the conversation) comments/remarks (i.e.,

commenting/remarking on the conversation), questions and answers (i.e., asking someone else

a question, or answering that was asked), and positive language (i.e. saying excuse me, saying

please and thank you). All of the participants contributed to the dinner conversation and

provided comments throughout the conversation. Although the dinner guests posed many questions and the children answered them, only one participant asked a question directed to their peer. The use of positive language was also lacking, due in part that the children were less reliant on adults during the project. The participants' grading is outlined in Table 2. It was also noted that each participant interrupted another person at least three times during the meal. After the analysis of the conversation was taken into account, it was determined that learning outcome 3 was partially met.

Discussion

Although the three learning outcomes were only partially met, several noteworthy outcomes emerged in regards to the participants' behavior and actions during the project. Not only did the children actively participate in the manners they created throughout other mealtimes, but they would frequently correct and remind their peers, if they were not following them. However, small transgressions still emerged during the dinner, like talking with their mouths full or interrupting when some else was speaking. Compared to previous conversations, the conversation during the final dinner lacked the usual lively features, such as bickering and confrontation. A possible culprit of this point could have been that the children were more engaged in the event itself, rather than the conflicts with their peers. Although not all the learning outcomes were met, there were still unintended, positive outcomes.

The project was developmentally appropriate, in that some concepts were easier to execute than others. All of the participants were partially successful with the learning outcomes. The concepts were easy enough to fulfill, while also being challenging enough to allow for improvement. Being that the participants were from an at-risk population, teaching

life skills was an appropriate goal, being that foster children are more likely to lack life skills.

When assessing the level of inclusivity, it is important to take into the account the nature of the

activities. Initially, the project began with the premise of involving all of the participants. We

engaged in multiple discussions, which allowed the children to express their input. Although the

project focused on the interests of the children, more could of been done to incorporate

diversity. For example, including and encouraging a more diverse set of dinner conservations

could have provided an opportunity to explore varying topics. Ultimately, involving diversity

takes a dimensional and thoughtful approach, but is necessary in order to expose children to

new experiences.

Albert Bandura's social learning theory reinforces modeling as an excellent source of

childhood learning. Providing modeled behavior for life skills presents learning as a natural

occurrence. Throughout the project, the adults would model the targeted behavior, in this case

using table manners and partaking in appropriate dinner conversation. Based upon the results,

implementing the social learning theory proved to be advantageous. Nevertheless, modeling

must be supported through consistent interactions. Past research emphasizes that follow-up

activities are an integral part of maintaining the impacts of projects such as this one. Therefore,

reinforcing these concepts in future activities continues the beneficial effects and deters the

use of negative behaviors.

In the future, it would be optimal to implement this project over consecutive days,

rather than only one day per week. Children learn best when activities are led consistently, and

there is often more of an impact. Being that the children who participated live in foster care, an

at-risk population, it would be ideal to conduct further activities in order to promote more growth.

Overall, this project had beneficial impacts apart from the learning outcomes. In particular, the children were able to perform the mealtime tasks without resorting to the usual forms of behaviors, like aggression. Learning life skills provides an opportunity to eliminate negative behaviors. Furthermore, considering that foster youth often lack skills associated with the family environment, creating activities that help build these skills better prepares them to transition out of care. Even though the children may not retain all the concepts from the project, the experience allowed them to expand on positive behaviors, rather than emphasizing on negative ones.

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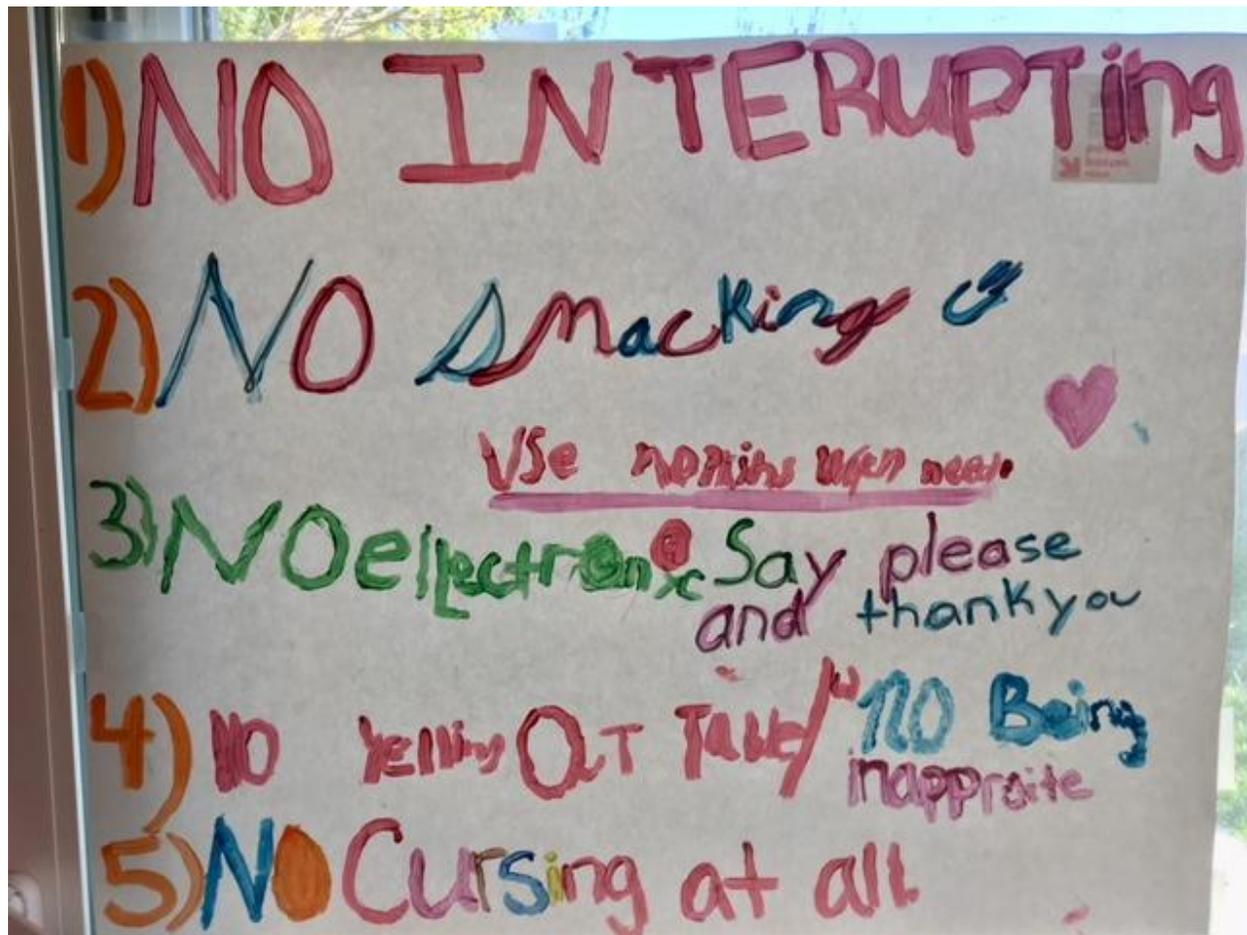
Table 1

	Plate Position	Cup Position	Fork Position	Fork on top of Napkin
Participant 1	X		X	X
Participant 2	X		X	X
Participant 3	X			X

Table 2

	Initiating	Comments	Questions/Answers	Positive Lang.
Participant 1	3	12	4	2
Participant 2	3	6	5	2
Participant 3	3	8	5	1

Appendix A

Appendix B

Appendix C