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The Importance of Maintaining Healthy Relationships in Middle Childhood

Hailey Oyoque

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science

Introduction

My Capstone Project focuses on the importance of healthy relationships in middle childhood, ages nine to eleven. Middle childhood is a sensitive time period in the lifespan. Fourth and fifth graders in particular (9-11 years of age) are gaining a greater perception of the world around them as they are anticipating adolescence. These factors can have an influence on their peer relationships. In completing service learning at Henry F. Kammann elementary school in Salinas, California, I have learned that most students have dealt with peer conflicts (bullying, discrimination). As stated in an article called Middle Childhood, “Children in this age range are beginning to face issues of anxiety, depression, behavioral issues and more...” (Haring, 2023) It is important that they understand the significance of healthy relationships/how to ensure the success of relationships. To meet a service need, I will conduct a set of three lessons to a group of fourth and fifth graders that teach the importance of healthy friendships/relationships. These lessons will not only offer knowledge and awareness, but a setting where individuals can connect with each other as well. The lessons will focus on three areas. First, I will teach the importance of healthy peer relationships and relationship maintenance. Second, the students will be taught the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, as well as red flags and what to watch out for. Finally, students will be taught techniques on how to be a good friend. The expected location is to be Henry F. Kammann Elementary School.

The Needs Statement

Middle childhood, ages six to twelve, is an important time in one's life. Children are learning to navigate the world around them while also learning the significance of relationships. Working closely with fourth and fifth grade students, I have learned that children engage in a multitude of personal relationships that can often turn conflictual. As relationships with peers become more complex, it can be difficult to avoid conflict. To address this issue, I delivered a set of three lessons to students: teaching benefits of positive peer relationships, signs of unhealthy peer relationships, and how to be a good friend

During middle childhood, children often spend more time at school and participating in extracurricular activities, than they do at home. While experiencing life and relationships with the outside world, lifestyle changes are inevitable. Although children still need support and care from their parents/family units, peer relationships become increasingly common and essential to further cognitive development (Grusec et al., 2013). During this age period, it is typical to develop a close relationship with at least one child that is close in age. There tends to be a shift from simply wanting a playmate to desiring the acceptance and loyalty of others (Grusec et al., 2013). Early peer relationships set the standard for future relationships one may partake in. Being able to successfully interact with others can significantly help with problem solving skills. Children also come to the realization that they can act differently in different situations. There becomes a bit more self awareness in middle childhood. (Grusec et al., 2013).

Social relations are crucial for various aspects of development and are strong predictors of roles individuals will take on later in life (McCallum & Bracken, 1993). Peer relationships play a significant role in one's social-emotional development. They provide emotional security and help children understand how the world works around them. Relationships are often

influenced by parents, peers, teachers, and other aspects relevant to the lives of individuals. Parenting techniques (authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, uninvolved) can impact the way children perceive others and the roles they play in relationships (McCallum & Bracken, 1993). Due to families being the first experiences children have with relationships, it is from there where they learn what to expect, how to behave, and the skills needed to maintain relationships. Peers are influential to relationships since different perspectives provide more opportunities for individuals to develop various skills. Teachers influence relationships in many different ways, such as rule making/following within the classroom or at the school site. Children are often labeled due to their behavior at school, trouble-makers, good students, teacher's pets, etc. These labels can stick with children and predict future relationships and roles (McCallum & Bracken, 1993).

Relationships can typically be categorized in two ways: healthy and unhealthy. Healthy relationships are maintained by all parties involved and deliver desirable consequences. In healthy relationships, there is generally "active engagement" and positive communication. On the other hand, unhealthy relationships are imbalanced and fail to provide desired outcomes. Unhealthy relationships can consist of negativity and result in aggressive tendencies in children. Those that grow up with secure attachment styles to their caregivers tend to be able to develop healthy relationships with others. However, children that grow up with harsh parental behavior often fail to develop the skills necessary to maintain relationships in a healthy style. With failure to develop strong problem-solving skills from parents, children can find themselves more often dealing with conflictual relationships with peers (Espelage & Swearer, 2004).

Being a good friend is a positive trait to have. Qualities possessed by good friends include loyalty, honesty, kindness and respect. Having such characteristics can make you seem

trustworthy and have others enjoy your company. The quality of friendships are important to a child's overall wellbeing. Relationships among peers are significant to the development of prosocial skills, social-emotional skills, and problem solving skills. Friendships often display a mutuality of concern and willingness to behave in good manners for the sake of others. Friends spend their time together doing activities, providing support, and recognizing each other's feelings without judgment. Friends typically share common interests, values, and beliefs. A strong friendship requires basic respect, "appreciative regard," and devotion. In other words, a good friend is caring, generous, and supportive (Walker & Randall, 2016).

Theory

Theorist Lev Vygotsky's social development theory suggests that children can learn and be guided through social interactions. He argued that learning is "active" and something to be done with the environment and social influences around an individual, rather than it being an individual journey. Vygotsky determined that, "socialization was key to learning language and culture," (Gowrie NSW). He also noted that there is a "More Knowledgeable Other," that guides children through their interactions. A More Knowledgeable Other is an individual that has a greater understanding of concepts that another is trying to learn (Gowrie NSW).

In terms of my project, I believe that this theory supports the idea that healthy peer relationships are crucial to the general well-being of middle aged children. When children are surrounded by positive influences, they have greater chances of success to lead positive lives and become positive influences to others as well. Parents and caregivers can be considered a More Knowledgeable Other and help to guide children in positive ways. By demonstrating positive

relationship characteristics, adults can teach their children about healthy relationships, unhealthy relationships, and kindness to others.

Consideration of Diversity

The ethnic diversity is quite low at this site, with mainly three representations, those are: Filipino (16), Hispanic or Latino (699), and White (23). The majority of students served are Hispanic or Latino. With this in mind, it is important to also point out that 52.4% of students are English learners, with only about 9% of students being English proficient. With this data, 47.6% of students speak Spanish, 4.6% speak Mixteco, 0.6% speak Tagalog, and 0.3% of students speak other languages (EdData). The participants in my project are majority hispanic, as well as, white/hispanic and black/hispanic. Three out of six participants are English language learners. With consideration to diversity, the three lessons were conducted to be easy to understand. Defining vocabulary, introducing topics, and checking if clarification is needed, helps ensure student success in participating.

Learning Objectives:

With the deliverance of two lessons directed to fourth and fifth grade students, it was important to assess their understanding of the material presented. This assessment requires the creation of learning objectives, to better understand the children's understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships:

1. Students will be able to identify 3 benefits of healthy relationships with peers.
2. They will be able to list 3 signs of an unhealthy peer relationship.
3. Students will be able to list 3 ways to be a good friend.

Method

Location and Participants

The project was conducted at Henry F. Kammann elementary school in Salinas, California. There were 6 participating students, recruited conveniently at my service learning site. Participants were children in 4th and 5th grade, aged 9-11 years, 3 being fourth graders, and 3 being fifth graders. Half of participants (3) were male, and the other half (3) female.

Procedures and Materials

Over the span of 2 days, I delivered a set of three lessons to the participants. Lesson 1 & 2 were delivered on day 1. In the first lesson, I focused on the benefits of healthy peer relationships. First, using a self-made powerpoint presentation (see Appendix A), I introduced our topic and made students aware of their learning outcome. Then, we reviewed the necessary vocabulary in association with healthy peer relationships. Next, I opened a discussion regarding healthy relationship qualities and the benefits that come with one. We then went over a scenario regarding a healthy relationship (see Appendix B). Finally, students were assessed and asked to use a pencil and paper to write down three benefits of healthy peer relationships. Assessments were graded on a three point scale, 3 being the highest amount of points possible, and 1 being the lowest. The first lesson was considered successful, since 5 students received maximum points and only 1 student received partial points.

In the second lesson, we focused on the signs of unhealthy peer relationships. First, I introduced the topic and reviewed necessary vocabulary. Then, I opened a discussion regarding unhealthy peer relationships and how to detect them. Next, we went over a scenario regarding unhealthy peer relationships (see Appendix B). Finally, students were assessed and asked to use a pencil and paper to list 3 signs of unhealthy peer relationships. On a three point scale,

assessments were graded, 3 being the maximum of points, and 1 being the least. This second lesson was considered to be partially met, with a 33.33% success rate. Only 2 students received the maximum amount of points, 2 students received partial points, and 2 students received the least amount of points possible.

The third lesson focused on ways to be a good friend, and was delivered on the second day. To begin, the topic was introduced and students were made aware of their learning outcome. I opened a discussion regarding friendships and positive friendship qualities. Students then shared their own experiences either being a good friend or moments where their friends displayed positive qualities. Students were then assessed on their understanding and asked to use a pencil and paper to list three ways that they could be a good friend. Assessments were again graded on a 3 point scale. This lesson was considered to be successful, with 5 out of 6 students receiving maximum points, and 1 student receiving partial points.

The Results Section

Two forty-five minute lessons were delivered to a total of six elementary students, three fourth graders and three fifth graders. Assessments were conducted immediately following each lesson. Students were given sheets of paper and a pencil to complete a brief “exit-ticket” assessment. Each learning outcome had a corresponding question, which was graded on a three point scale. Three being the highest possible score, one being the lowest. These scores indicate whether or not the learning objectives had been met. A score of three indicated that the student fully met (requiring at least 75% success) the proposed learning outcome, two indicating that the learning outcome was partially met, and one showing that the learning outcome was not met.

Learning outcome 1 is students will be able to identify 3 benefits of healthy relationships with peers. In order to assess the students' understanding, I had them list three benefits of healthy peer relationships, following our discussion. Doing this allowed me to gain further insight of what the children felt were beneficial aspects of healthy relationships. Five students received a passing score of 3 (3 fifth graders, 2 fourth graders). One student (fourth grade) received a score of 2. With 83% of participants receiving a passing score, this indicates that learning outcome 1 was fully met. 17% of participants did not meet the learning outcome.

Learning outcome 2 is that the students will be able to list 3 signs of an unhealthy peer relationship. To assess their understanding, I again had them list three signs of unhealthy relationships, following our discussion. This allowed me to determine whether or not the children understand signs of unhealthy relationships. Two fourth grade students received a score of 3, meaning that 33.33% of the participants met the learning outcome. Two fifth grade students received a 2, meaning that 33.33% partially met the learning outcome. One fifth grade and one fourth grade student received a score of 1, meaning 33.33% of participants did not meet learning outcome expectations. Based on these findings, learning outcome 2 was partially met by students.

Learning outcome 3 is: Students will be able to list 3 ways to be a good friend. Once again, students were instructed to list three ways to be a good/positive companion. With this information, I gained a greater understanding of ways the children choose to be good friends. Five participants (3 fifth grade, 2 fourth grade), received scores of 3, indicating that 83% fully met the learning objective. One participant (fourth grade) received a 1, indicating that they did not meet the learning outcome (17%). With this information, I determined that learning outcome 3 was successful in being fully met by the majority.

Discussion Section

The focus of my Capstone project is the importance of healthy relationships in middle childhood, ages nine to eleven. In terms of successful implementation, out of the three learning objectives, it was determined that learning objective one and three were fully met, whereas learning objective two was not met. I do believe that the participants seemed to be interested in the material presented to them. All participants were able to share thoughts, ideas, and feelings throughout our discussion, allowing them to be fully engaged. Each participant was encouraged to share personal experiences regarding healthy and unhealthy peer interactions. This allowed them to make connections between the lessons and their personal lives.

Regardless of the successes of my project, I did face limitations as well. Learning outcome 2 was not met in terms of success (66.66%). Learning outcome 2 called for a list of unhealthy relationship signs. It is possible that the lesson was not easily graspable for participants. There were a few students that had difficulty following along, due to outside distractions and noise levels.

In the case that I should implement this project again, I will expand my material to include younger students as well. It is never too early to learn about positive and negative connections/influences. I feel it would be beneficial to add a segment on the understanding of personal emotions and emotional regulation, as these play a role in the contribution of relationships (familial, peer, educational, etc.), as well as personal satisfaction. In the future, I hope that children are taught more about healthy and unhealthy relationships, as well as self regulation. When these positive skills are learned early on, we have more room for success and better self esteem.

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Appendix

Appendix A

[Presentation used during lessons 1 & 2](#)



Appendix B

Scenario 1

Mary worked really hard on her English essay. When her graded essay was returned, she was excited to see that she had earned a 94%. Mary was very proud of the grade because she had worked so hard. Caroline started laughing and said, "So who did you get to write that for you? You stink at writing!"

How do Caroline's words affect Mary's self-esteem?

What if Caroline had said, "Wow, that's great. I know you worked really hard on your essay"?

What kind of a relationship do you think Mary has with Caroline? Healthy or unhealthy?

Scenario 2

Brian and Kyle are on the baseball team. Brian has not gotten a hit in the last four games. Before the game, he confides to Kyle that he doesn't want to play tonight because he doesn't think he will get a hit. Kyle slaps him on the back and says, "Hey man, we all have a few off games. Don't get down on yourself."

Appendix C

