Guiding Three- to Six-Year-Old Children into Developing
a Social Sense of Decorum

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Abstract
This paper evaluated the hypothesis that a parent or caregiver must master three important child-guiding skills to help improve young (three to six years old) children's behaviors: empathy, setting boundaries, and early intervention. The best time to be empathetic with children, to begin setting boundaries, and to utilize early intervention techniques is when they are still very young (Garland, Stone, & Woodruff, 1981). This paper utilized Skinner's learning theory.

Keywords: young children, early intervention, a parent or caregiver, guiding, empathy, setting boundaries

Introduction

The theory of behaviorism posits that human beings see their daily life through their education and training. Skinner's (1957) method entails the idea of stimulus, rewarding the desired response, and ignoring the wrong response. Through training and time, the unwanted response is eliminated and only the desired response occurs for that particular stimulus, motivated by the concept of "reinforcement" (O'Donohue & Ferguson, 2001). Skinner believed that people were born as blank slates that were eventually molded and shaped like clay by the environment through the process he referred to as "operant conditioning." Skinner stressed the influence of the environment on individuals. The foundation of Skinner's learning theory consists of the following three parts: stimulus, response, and positive and negative reinforcement. Stimulus comes from the environment and response comes from the individual's reaction to the stimulus. Positive reinforcement can be defined as a positive reward following the performance of a desired response. Conversely, punishment is a negative reinforcement deterring the occurrence of an undesired response.

To test this perception, Hinson (2005) conducted an experiment with college students who were always tardy for class and used food for both positive and negative reinforcement to attempt to modify the students' attendance. Hinson informed the student participants that there would be food during the first ten minutes of class and thus they should be on time; after ten minutes had passed, the food would be taken out. Hinson found that food used as positive reinforcement to prompt the students' attendance for both male and female students. The experiment was a Skinnerian box via presenting a controlled environment (the class) to alter the students' behaviors.

The behaviorists' approach uses a stimulus-response pattern to condition a certain behavior. Pavlov, using a bell as a method of conditioning, was able to make his dog salivate without offering him any food by using the bell as a stimulus (Skinner, 1957). The essence of this approach is to use positive reinforcement to increase the likelihood of wanted behavior and negative reinforcement to decrease the likelihood of unwanted behavior. This model has often been misunderstood as constituting a model of reward and punishment. However, in behaviorism, it is a model of reward and withdrawal of reward, which, to some extent, can be considered a punishment, seen in both the Skinnerian and Pavlovian models of series of stimuli and reinforcement (Miller, 2011). It can also be seen in Bandorian's (1997) model of learning through observation, or second-hand reinforcement.

Children learn by watching how people behave (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1997), for example, was a behaviorist psychologist who added a cognitive focus to behaviorism. Bandura (1997) regarded reinforcement in terms of expectancy—an expectation of reward in the future, which is useful in observational learning processes. This expectation motivates the reoccurrence of similar positive behaviors and determines the outcome of a child's behavior. However, in Bandura's (1997) model, there is no need for conditioning or a series of trials and errors; instead, observation leads to the same social learning, i.e., second-hand reinforcement, via imitating a model of behavior. Therefore, at times, showing how is more effective than conditioning.

To conceptualize these theoretical stances, when a child performs a certain behavior and the other says "Thank you," he or she will be more likely to repeat that behavior.

S/he learns to associate the reinforcer, thank you, with the behavior. When the child performs an action parents do not like, parents may use a negative reinforcer by saying "No" or "That's not nice" to decrease the probability of the occurrence of the undesirable action. Therefore, in order to shape a child's behavior, a parent or a caregiver should first create the motivation in the child to perform certain actions via the use of a reward or reinforcer. Then, they can correct each behavior one at a time. Once a particular behavior is corrected and becomes a habit, the caregiver may gradually stop rewarding this behavior and move on to the next issue.

Bentham offers a utilitarian framework in which a good action is one that brings pleasure. Miller (2011) refined Bentham's hedonistic utilitarianism by distinguishing between higher-level and lower-level forms of happiness. However, a child's negative behavior often indicates that the child is coping with challenging (from the child's perspective) environmental and/or familial circumstances. If left unaddressed by parents or caregivers, such behavior could lead to serious developmental disorders. Thus, early intervention is required. Following the behaviorist approach, parents or caregivers can educate children to replace negative behaviors with positive ones (Garland, Stone, & Woodruff, 1981). In doing so, parents or caregivers may continue to encourage and reinforce positive behaviors and thus help the child elicit additional similar responses. This paper will investigate the thesis that children acquire their negative behaviors after birth (Aldred, Pollard, & Adams, 2001). Furthermore, it evaluates the hypothesis that a parent or caregiver must master the following three important child-guiding skills to help improve young (three to six years old) children's behaviors: empathy, setting boundaries, and early intervention. The best time to be empathetic with children, to begin setting boundaries, and to utilize early intervention techniques is when they are still very young (Garland et al., 1981).

Review of Literature

Parenting makes a profound difference in a child's life (Chidekel, 2002). According to Faroog, Jefferson, and Fleming (2005), "Parent education [is] the purposive learning activity of parents who are attempting to change their method of interaction with their children for the purpose of encouraging positive behavior from them" (p. 23). Human development occurs both through and within relationships over time (Siegler, DeLoache, & Eisenberg, 2010). A calm and friendly environment is important in the development of children's behavior. When parents find it challenging to soothe their child, the child's irritable behavior affects the parents' feelings of competency. In turn, this can decrease the parents' ability to provide a calm and loving environment. Ultimately, the child perceives the parents' tension, which increases the child's irritability—and the cycle continues. As with many other issues, realizing the problem is the first step toward solving it, and developing an awareness of the situation is an important step in achieving behavioral change and improvement (Chidekel, 2002). Thus, it is necessary to teach concrete skills to facilitate better parenting and to be more effective in raising children aged three through six. Here, age is indeed relevant since it is an optimum age at which to achieve behavioral change in children.

According to Mann, Pearl, and Behle (2004), parents should learn more about their children's developmental behaviors to enable them to understand, communicate, and deal with them more effectively. Moreover, Shaffer, Obradovic, Burt, Herbers, and Masten (2009) observed that parenting styles directly influence the kind of parents

children will become. A good (positive and emotionally supportive) parenting style produces quality parents in the future, while maltreatment and harsh and abusive parenting produces a similar parent. Therefore, parenting style is an indicator of the child's future behavior. A child's behavior can reflect his or her underlying range of emotions, including fear or frustration. Chidekel (2002) mentioned that a calm and coherent household is the ideal happy environment for children. It advances the notion that a "calm house" refers to a stress-free environment and care for the children, in which good behavior, love, and warm treatment become sources of trust and secure attachment. It is essential that parents serve as effective role models and set appropriate examples for their children to follow as they mature.

In addition, Cook (2000) contended that children need physical responses and interpersonal relationships. Security is always established according to the nature of attachment. To illustrate this, the child sends cues to the mother, which compels the mother to respond. The mother's responsiveness produces a sense of control over the environment within the child. This encourages the child to become outgoing and extroverted. By acquiring this sense of security and assurance from the mother, the child becomes willing to explore the environment he or she lives in and learn social skills (sense of social decorum). Additionally, Sears and Pantley (2002) found that children are influenced by each other through their shared environment and through good and bad times. This shared situation in the family context of interdependency results in an increasingly strong attachment and in love and affection for one another. Thus, allowing children to share the same room leads to more positive emotional intimacy, suggesting that children perceive togetherness and living in shared social circumstances.

Children are significantly affected by the environment in which they live. Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, and Jones (2001) assessed the influence of socioeconomic factors (e.g., poverty and neighborhood) on parenting style, on parents' behavior, and, consequently, on the children's behavior. Measuring parents' levels of warmth and harshness in their interaction with their children, Pinderhughes et al. (2001) found that, when a family lives in poverty and in a poor neighborhood, the dissatisfaction with quality of life reduces the level of warmth and intensifies the harshness of treatment.
In light of the preceding, Carpendale and Lewis (2006) argued that engaging in and being exposed to unhealthy behaviors as a child (or the absence of a desired behavior) often prevents a child from leading a normal life as an adult. Various unhealthy developmental behaviors, such as social isolation, may be displayed by a child's lack of engagement with peers in games or conversation and/or by their poor language expression and comprehension (due to lack of attention). These factors may be apparent in a child's difficulty in expressing him- or herself, which may lead to crying or screaming. Such situations may descend into a lack of control, which may prevent the child from following directions. Although this may be construed as a sign of rebellion, it could be due to the child's inability to self-regulate or to the child's inability to effectively express him- or herself.

However, a dysfunctional family can create a traumatic or even a depressive experience for the child, which may even silence him or her. Such a family environment produces insecurity or uncertainty among the children. According to Baxendale, Frankham, and Hesketh (2001), both of the aforementioned behaviors— social isolation and poor language expression/comprehension—are similar to

symptoms of autism or Asperger's syndrome. It is always advisable for the child to see a specialist for diagnostic testing if such symptoms are persistence. Difficulty communicating verbally and nonverbally, late language development, and difficulty in making and maintaining eye contact with others are symptoms associated with language development disorder. These outcomes may be demonstrated in the structural and pragmatic aspects of language. Additionally, the lack of social skills, short attention span, and a narrow range of interest may lead to social isolation, which may be evident in the child's indulgence in repetitive behaviors (Baxendale et al., 2001). Rather than being inherited, most of these symptoms are acquired after birth (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). Being inattentive to children's emotions or traumatic experiences early in life could lead children to demonstrate unhealthy behaviors or prevent the appearance of healthy ones. Left unaddressed, such behaviors may cause the child to cope with experiences using his or her own devices. As a defense mechanism, children tend to subconsciously disengage from the world around them and adopt a routine that mitigates the frustration they experience when dealing with others. Over time, children view this routine as their comfort zone and they feel threatened when they are asked or forced to emerge from it (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006).

The Three Important Child-Guiding Skills

It is critical for parents to master the following three important skills to help improve their (three- to six-years-old) children's behaviors: empathy, setting boundaries, and early intervention.

Empathy

The perception of empathy starts at a very young age and is probably developed by the manner in which infant and parent are attached to each other emotionally. Secure attachment is an important outcome of empathy. According to Howes, Galinsky, and Kontos (1998), secure attachment is an important outcome of empathy. This attachment is established by parents or caretakers who respond to the infant's feelings positively, so that the infant learns to trust and be concerned with the feelings of others.

Additionally, Berkman, Glass, Brisette, and Seeman (2000) contended that effective and sensitive emotional support provides one with a valuable sense of comfort, which instills feelings of care. In turn, this leads to an overall sense of mental and psychological well-being. Spinrad and Losoya (1999) saw that supportive parenting has a substantial influence on the overall health of the child, both physically and psychologically. Thus, emotional support plays a critical role in developing healthy behaviors among children. Burleson (2003) identified a number of skills that constitute effective, sensitive, and emotional support, such as listening and understanding; expressing love and empathy; and showing concern by being available to address stresses, fears, anxieties, and hurt. These skills should be qualified as "sensitive" to be effective. In his study, Burleson focused on the message as the central point of sensitive emotional support. Thus, the emotional support provider should avoid self-centered messages because these suggest a denial of the recipient's feelings. Rather, messages should recognize and legitimize the feelings of the other.

Setting Boundaries

Boundaries make a child feel safe, and failing to set them appropriately does a great injustice to the child. Without proper behavior, children will eventually sense that other people at home, at school, or in public places are avoiding them, which can lead to damaged self-esteem. Boundaries serve as the foundation for raising children who conform to proper social behavior. When setting boundaries, it is important to keep in mind that they should be reasonable, age-appropriate, consistent, clearly defined, and easily understood. Of course, boundaries must be enforced by reasonable and consistent consequences (Faroog et al., 2005, p. 27). Baumrind (1991) identified four common parenting styles: indulgent (also referred to as "permissive" or "nondirective"); authoritarian (highly demanding and directive, but not responsive); uninvolved (low in both responsiveness and demandingness); and authoritative (both demanding and responsive). After examining reported parenting and disciplinary practice in 144 working- and middle-class African American mothers of children aged 5–12, Bluestone and Tamis-LeMond (1999) found variation among parents in their disciplinary strategies; reasoning, which is typical of authoritative parenting, was the most regularly reported strategy. Poor parenting practices, such as inconsistent use of positive parenting, have been associated with delinquent behavior in both children and adolescents (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Zelli, & Huesmann, 1996). Conversely, according to Baumrind (1991), the authoritative parenting style is the most successful in establishing boundaries that are responsive to children's needs. In short, parents must provide an environment structured around well-defined rules and consequences.

Early Intervention

Garland, Stone, and Woodruff (1981) addressed the idea that early intervention involves a number of principles that parents and caregivers should follow in order to improve their children's unhealthy behaviors: goal setting (should be realistic); activity planning; following the child's lead; following the observe, wait, and listen (OWL) principle; stimulating and maintaining the child's interest in activities to gain results; and encouraging the child's positive behavior to elicit additional similar responses. According to Garland et al., early intervention is important because most human learning and development occurs early in life. If intervention is not conducted at the appropriate time, the child may experience difficulty learning a particular behavior later in life. Children's unhealthy behaviors can be treated using the behavioral method, which includes training them to replace negative (unhealthy) behaviors with positive ones (keeping in mind that early intervention is required to ensure success).

According to Baxendale et al. (2001), there are a number of principles involved in the intervention-based approach, and parents and caregivers should follow these in order to improve their children's unhealthy behaviors: goal setting (should be realistic), activity planning, following the child's lead, following the OWL principle, and encouraging the child's positive behavior to elicit additional similar responses. To illustrate the Hanen Parent Programme developed by Baxendale et al., children are greatly affected by the environment in which they live, and this environment is shaped by the child's parents. Here, the objective is to help parents understand the development needs of their late-speaking child and to establish a strategy that will help the child develop receptive and expressive skills. The first principle is that

parents should follow the lead set by their children. The child must be given a chance interact, which will help him or her acquire new skills while having fun. To enable the child to lead, this approach suggests following the OWL principle. Parents should first observe the child carefully to assess his or her every movement. Then, they should wait to give the child a chance to send a message—or they should encourage the child to do so. Finally, parents should listen to every sound the child makes. If the child is experiencing difficulty interacting, the parents may offer a choice and then wait for the child to choose (the choice may be an activity the child enjoys). Alternatively, the parent may entice the child's interest with an object he or she desires in order to prompt the child to ask for it. For example, the mother may offer a closed box of candy and wait for her child to ask for it. There are a number of approaches a parent may use to follow the child's lead. A parent may join the child in play, imitate the child's actions or sounds, interpret messages or actions, and comment on or respond to what the child says or does—or a combination of all of these approaches.

Another means of engaging the child in communication, as Baxendale et al. (2001) noted, is by taking turns with the child. Taking turns means that both sides participate equally in a balanced conversation. Here, the parent must match the child's pace and interest. Parents may use a daily routine as their opportunity to engage the child in interaction. Sometimes a parent must cue the child when he or she does not know how or when to take a turn. Such cues may include asking questions, using gestures, or offering an expression of expectation. Additionally, a parent may use words or short sentences repeatedly to help the child understand the environment and express his or her opinions. In conversation with their child, parents should highlight their language by making words stand out so the child understands them properly and learns to say them. Parents should speak slowly, use short sentences, and stress important words when communicating with their child. Furthermore, all of these skills must be framed appropriately to be successful. Parents should set communication goals that are useful, specific, and realistic. Children love to play and spend many hours playing. Parents should thus use that to their advantage. Playing with children provides them with the opportunity to develop their language and imagination. Again, parents should choose the game that the child wants to play. The kind of play that parents can do with their children include the following: functional play where children explore objects around them and their functions; constructive play where children build something with blocks; and pretend play where children use their imagination, i.e., pretending to sell things or talking on a toy phone. Most importantly, when a parent plays with or engages in a conversation with the child, besides following the child's lead, a parent must interact with the child face to face (Baxendale et al., 2001).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the hypothesis that a parent or caregiver must master the following three important child-guiding skills to help improve young (three to six years old) children's behaviors: empathy, setting boundaries, and early intervention (Garland et al., 1981). These approaches or principles are the best way to guide three- to six-year-old children's behaviors.

A sense of empathy and setting boundaries should go hand in hand with the process of early intervention. Thus, parents or caregivers should be aware of the importance of early intervention. Therapists agree that early intervention is a crucial remedial factor

in correcting existing developmental problems (Baxendale et al., 2001). It helps to enhance the child's development since learning and development occur most rapidly during the preschool years. If intervention is not conducted at the appropriate time, the child may experience difficulty learning a particular behavior later in life.

In summary, this early intervention approach enables parents to know how to draw the child's attention in a process of joint communication because joint attention helps late-talking children develop language skills rapidly. This family-centered intervention enables the child to learn more than language. In a loving and familiar setting, the child can learn about the world and can also develop social skills by interacting with his/her family, parents, siblings, and others. This approach recognizes that the parents are the people who are most concerned about their child. The parents want to dedicate as much time as possible to help their child, and since they are the two people who spend the most time with the child, the best approach is to show them how to help the therapist in the treatment of their child (Baxendale et al., 2001).

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