Teacher intervention and U.S. preschoolers’ natural conflict resolution after aggressive competition

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Summary
The role of teacher intervention in preschoolers’ peer conflicts is controversial, with one view suggesting that children should resolve conflicts on their own, and another that socialization accounts for conflict resolution’s development. This study strives to clarify this issue using a short-term longitudinal, observational design to examine teacher intervention and 91 preschoolers aggressive competitive conflict. By delimiting the form of conflict, the study examines whether the role of teacher intervention varied by conflict behavior (e.g., physical and verbal aggression) and the form of conflict resolution. Results support the view that teacher intervention disrupts the conflict resolution cycle, especially in terms of preschoolers’ on-going interaction and using alternatives to temporary separation. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: conflict resolution, aggression, reconciliation, teacher intervention, preschool, competition.

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Introduction

The early development of conflict resolution is typically attributed to socialization processes, whereby adults use facilitative strategies to intervene on children’s peer conflicts and model constructive means of resolution (DeVries & Zan, 1994; Bayer et al., 1995; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Katz & McClellan, 1997; Perlman & Ross, 1997). However, research in the comparative and child development literatures suggests that children’s conflict resolution may also emerge naturally out of children’s interactions with others, especially with peers (Piaget, 1932; Killen & de Waal, 2000; Killen & Smetana, 2006). This study strives to integrate these perspectives by investigating how socialization relates to preschoolers’ natural conflict resolution.

Conflict is traditionally defined in terms of incompatible goals, such as when one individual does something another individual opposes (Deutsch, 1973; Shantz, 1987). While this definition disconnects conflict from its form and function, researchers nevertheless often conflate conflict with competition and aggression (Shantz, 1987), with conflict commonly equated with the possibility of harm, hurt, or violation of rules (Perry et al., 1992). This one-sided view of interpersonal conflict is a mistake, of course, as conflict does not necessarily involve competition for limited resources, as competition assumes interdependence between two individuals (Deutsch, 1973). Nor is conflict necessarily aggressive, as aggression involves behaviors causing intentional harm (Dodge et al., 2006). Nor does conflict necessarily harm interpersonal relationships (Deutsch, 1973; Shantz, 1987; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Collins & Madsen, 2003), as constructive conflict resolution may yield mutually satisfactory outcomes, more positive relationships between conflicting parties, and less destructive forms of future interpersonal conflict (Johnson & Johnson, 1995).

This study focuses exclusively on preschoolers’ aggressive, competitive conflict. This focus is consistent with research showing that the largest percentage of preschoolers’ peer conflicts involves resource possession (e.g., Dawe, 1934; Bakeman & Brownlee, 1982; Hay & Ross, 1982; Sackin & Thelen, 1984; Shantz, 1987; Killen & Turiel, 1991; Chen et al., 2001). More practically, this focus also seems most relevant to teacher practice (e.g., Killen & Turiel, 1991; DeVries & Zan, 1994; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Grusec, 2006), especially if the results indicate that teacher intervention may encourage rather than discourage higher frequencies of preschoolers’ aggres-