Post-conflict non-affiliative behavioural strategies and subsequent social interaction in preschool boys with language impairment in comparison to preschool boys with typical language skills

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Summary

Conflicts between 20 boys (4–6 years old) with typical language development (TL) and between 11 boys (4–7 years old) with Language Impairment (LI) were examined in naturalistic preschool settings. Post-conflict aggression, passive withdrawal (auto-manipulation/irrelevant vocalizations) and active withdrawal (leaving conflict scene) were examined in relation to preceding behavioural situations and the likelihood of social interaction after conflict management. The boys with TL tended to display aggression to a greater extent than the boys with LI in conflicts with pre-conflict social interaction and in the role of conflict victim. However it was revealed that the boys with TL displayed passive withdrawal significantly more often in conflicts without pre-conflict social interaction than in conflicts with pre-conflict interaction. When in the role of conflict victims the boys with LI conducted active withdrawal significantly more than the boys with TL. Reconciliation (former opponents exchange friendly contact following conflict termination) has been shown to facilitate social interaction after terminated conflict management. However, this link appeared to be weakened significantly when initial post-conflict responses were active withdrawal (more representative LI strategy) than after reconciled conflicts without active withdrawal. Clinical treatment and educational intervention should address emotional regulation and referential communication to facilitate developmental social interaction.

Keywords: language impairment, conflict resolution, aggression, withdrawal, behavioural regulation.

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Introduction

Peer interaction provides recurrent opportunities for exposure to accepted social norms and model language and behaviour, to build bonds, and to have diverse peer experiences with context specific socio-emotional language, all which continually shape a referential base for subsequent interaction, including conflict management. Children with Language Impairment (LI), or Specific LI (SLI), often have early peer experiences characterized by rejection and communication failures, leading to frustration expressed as aggression or withdrawal, which peers further view negatively. A negative reinforcement spiral evolves, in which the child becomes increasingly reluctant to initiate further interactions wherein language and social behaviour are otherwise naturally trained and developed. According to Rice (1993) these processes bring about increasing levels of social isolation, which entails that varied experiences of socio-emotional communication are lacking as points of orientation for emotional regulation (Rubin et al., 1998), which in turn entails increased risk for developing behavioural problems of a psychiatric nature (Goldstein & Gallagher, 1992; Benasich et al., 1993; Craig, 1993; Craig & Washington, 1993; Stevens & Bliss, 1995; Brinton et al., 1997, 1998; Hart et al., 1997; Brinton & Fujiki, 1999).

Early peer encounters entail coordinating individual perspectives that can be in opposition. How children cope with these peer conflicts forms the behavioural dynamics of subsequent peer interaction. Reciprocity and turn-taking of interaction is interdependent on the responsiveness of the play partners involved; each behavioural turn is a potential reference to subsequent behavioural responses (Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Göncü, 1993; Linell & Marková, 1993; Rubin et al., 1998; Verbeek & de Waal, 2001; Aureli et al., 2002), even within the progression of preschool peer conflict (Brenneis & Lein, 1977; Hay & Ross, 1982; Killen & Turiel, 1991; Ljungberg et al., 1999, 2005; Horowitz et al., 2006; Thornberg, 2006). In peer interaction, small children typically learn to refer to previous interactions (Saarni et al., 1998; Hedenbro & Lidén, 2002). Interpersonal referents in this way become essential to assert oneself and initiate interaction (Craig & Washington, 1993). Children with LI are at a disadvantage in this respect as they often have less varied experiences of social interaction to serve as frames of reference when initiating or navigating peer interaction (Rubin et al., 2001).

Language is used to label internal dialogue regarding evaluation of emotions that arise in response to various peer encounters, and for mediating