

# CHILDREN'S SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

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*Development, Assessment, and Modification*

EDITED BY

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# **Children's Social Behavior**

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Development, Assessment, and Modification

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## PREFACE

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The increasingly complex nature of the developing child's social behavior has been the topic of theoretical formulations and empirical research for decades. Indeed the development of children's social behavior has drawn the interests of psychologists, educators, ethologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists alike.

In essence, the developmental study of children's social behavior has centered around three global themes, each of which is represented in the chapters on Development of Children's Social Behavior. The first theme represents what may be described as a search (both theoretically and empirically) for causal variables. The major question is, to what do we attribute the seeming universality of social behavior patterns and processes of influence? In the lead chapter by Dr. Robert Cairns we are provided with a comprehensive portrayal of biological and social variables that account for the very phenomena of concern in this volume. Additionally, Cairns offers the reader a careful analysis of the interdependence and interplay between biological and social forces on the child's developing social repertoire.

The second theme to dominate the developmental study of children's social behavior is the search for explanations for the remarkable stability of behavior across time and persons. Probably the most significant form of stability is that represented by intergenerational similarities in social behavior patterns. In the specific example of coercive interaction between parent and child, Wahler and Dumas provide a broad array of social learning mechanisms that may promote behavioral stability across generations.

A third area of intensive study has focused on variation in social behavior produced when children display general developmental deficits. Guralnick's chapter begins with a thorough account of the normal course of social development in the early years. Next, the reader is provided with an analysis of causative factors that influence peer interaction deficits in handicapped children. Guralnick also considers interactions between handicapped and nonhandicapped children in main-

streamed settings and the assessment and treatment implications that arise from such a context.

The assessment of children's social behavior is a multidimensional area of study that incorporates naturalistic or descriptive aims, efforts to discriminate those who may need some skill training, and evaluations of specific interventions. These broad aims of assessment are treated in each chapter in the Assessment of Children's Social Behavior section.

The combination of varying assessment goals and the practice of social behavior assessment by diverse disciplines has led to considerable controversy regarding the merits of specific assessment techniques. The range of methodology available to the social behavior researcher is summarized in the chapter by Gresham, who also suggests the principal uses for checklists, role plays, sociometric ratings, and direct observation.

By far the two most widely used methods of assessment are sociometric procedures and direct observation. La Greca and Stark provide the reader with a comprehensive review of the intricacies and issues surrounding the direct observation of children's social behavior. Their chapter examines the uses, advantages, and weaknesses of rate measures, qualitative measures, and sequential observation codes. The authors also address the influence of settings, development, and sex of interactors on naturalistic data.

In the chapter by McConnell and Odom we see that sociometric methods are quite diverse, often yielding data that bear minimal correspondence. These authors highlight the importance of multiple informants to accurate sociometric assessment and further argue for a multidimensional approach to assessment in which sociometric and nonsociometric indices are used collaboratively.

It has been approximately two decades since systematic attempts were begun to improve children's positive social interactions. Across this time span, many changes have taken place in the behavioral targets of intervention and in the nature of interventions. The chapters in the section on the Modification of Children's Social Behavior attempt to capture the spirit of these changes.

Early efforts to improve the social interactions of children largely ignored issues of target behavior selection. By and large, children's specific deficits dictated the focus of interaction. That is, if children did not greet others they were taught greeting skills, if they did not smile they were taught to smile, and so on. In this section's initial chapter, Strayhorn and Strain focus on the myriad issues associated with target behavior selection and the selection of intervention tactics. Specifically, these authors highlight the importance of (1) beginning intervention early, (2)



selecting skills that are functional for children in designated settings, (3) selecting powerful interventions, and (4) utilizing indigenous treatment agents (e.g., parents and other children).

As interventions on specific social skills have proliferated, highly specialized literatures have emerged. Arguably the most active area of research within a specific skill domain concerns efforts to enhance sharing and cooperation between children. The relative emphasis on sharing and cooperation can likely be traced to developmental and long-term social goals that are mediated by the ability to engage in such behavior. The chapter by Barton describes both laboratory and applied interventions that have resulted in increased sharing among children.

The breadth of social behavior targets that have been treated successfully is evidenced well in the chapter by Michelson and Mannarino. These authors provide a broad panorama of the many target populations and specific social skills that have been studied. The contribution by Barton and that of Michelson and Mannarino highlight several recurrent trends within the social interaction arena. These trends include (1) the development of comprehensive, multicomponent intervention strategies; (2) the extension of social skill training efforts to more disabled groups of children; (3) the use of intervention procedures in increasingly complex naturalistic settings; and (4) the use of systematic procedures to enhance skill maintenance across time and generalization to new persons and settings.

The issues surrounding the where, when, and how of maintenance and generalization are elaborated more fully in the chapter by Stokes and Osnes. These authors provide both a historical perspective on this topic as well as new and promising tactics to promote maintenance and generalization of children's newly acquired social skills.

PHILLIP S. STRAIN

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**PART I**

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**DEVELOPMENT OF  
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL  
BEHAVIOR**



# A Contemporary Perspective on Social Development

*Robert B. Cairns*

## INTRODUCTION

A distinguished attorney and his wife, now in their mid-50s and living in the Northeast, have puzzled for years on what they should have done differently in raising their children. The four offspring are now young adults who have encountered problems at every turn since adolescence. At one time or another, one or more have been suspended from high school, flunked out of college, court-martialed by the armed services, arrested for felonies, and spent most of their adult lives unemployed and without direction. Looking back, neither parent anticipated this outcome, and for good reason. The family was close-knit, and both parents were loving and caring. As infants and elementary school students, the children were healthy, competent, and happy. The parents, well-read and well-intended, followed the then-current psychological thinking in rearing their children. When problems arose, they sought and followed the advice of qualified clinical practitioners. Despite these advantages, the offspring, as young adults, have found it difficult to cope with the basic problems of living. The parents, still loving and caring, are nonetheless worried about what the future holds for themselves and their children.

Give or take a few details, this depiction could fit a large number of American families nowadays. It seems reasonable to expect that a developmental theory should be a pragmatically useful one. But it is at this



critical point that traditional models have failed. At a practical level, we have few reliable guides on precisely what parents might do when their children are 5 and 10 years of age in order to enhance their adjustment at 20 and 30 years of age.

In this chapter, some features of the contemporary perspective on social development relevant to assessment and prediction are outlined. Our problem here is to be faithful to the logic of the perspective without getting lost in its abstractions. Accordingly I first highlight the seminal ideas and theoretical assumptions, then raise some questions about their implications.

First, it might help if I were to make some remarks on what the perspective is all about, and why it emerged. It came about because the empirical findings since the mid-1960's seem to have leaped ahead of the theoretical ideas that inspired the study in the first place. Although some support can be claimed for traditional social learning and psychoanalytic theories of social development, key assumptions of these models of human behavior have been consistently contradicted by empirical data. A major overhaul of these approaches seemed needed, moving toward a perspective that is more firmly grounded in scientific research.

The contemporary perspective begins with the observation that human personality and social development reflect the operation of ongoing, dynamic processes from gestation to senescence. Accordingly, biological and social networks converge to form identifiable stages of social development. In all stages, there is a strong, pervasive bias to form social relations even though the support for this bias differs as a function of the person's developmental stage. Precisely how the individual's social relations are organized within each stage depends on an integration of social network and internal factors. Within this framework, the assumption that early experiences are necessarily fundamental to later personality and social dispositions is rejected. Even though there are strong supports for maintaining continuity in patterns of interchange, developmental accommodations can occur at every developmental stage.

In this chapter, I do not dwell in depth on the practical implications of this approach for assessment, prediction, and change, although some implications for psychopathology are noted. Further, this revised view of social development suggests that much of the continuity in social behavior, including the prediction of individual differences, arises in the course of living. Hence the attention of the clinician and parent must be given to the conditions in which development is likely to occur, including the expected trajectory of biological changes, the social network, and