

understanding children's worlds



Peer Groups and Children's Development

Christine Howe

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Peer Groups and Children's Development

Understanding Children's Worlds

Series Editor: Judy Dunn

The study of children's development can have a profound influence on how children are brought up, cared for, and educated. Many psychologists argue that, even if our knowledge is incomplete, we have a responsibility to attempt to help those concerned with the care, education, and study of children by making what we know available to them. The central aim of this series is to encourage developmental psychologists to set out the findings and the implications of their research for others—teachers, doctors, social workers, students, and fellow researchers—whose work involves the care, education, and study of young children and their families. The information and the ideas that have grown from recent research form an important resource which should be available to them. This series provides an opportunity for psychologists to present their work in a way that is interesting, intelligible, and substantial, and to discuss what its consequences may be for those who care for, and teach, children: not to offer simple prescriptive advice to other professionals, but to make important and innovative research accessible to them.

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Peer Groups and Children's Development

Christine Howe

Series Editor's Preface

This is a most welcome addition to the series *Understanding Children's Worlds*, and more generally to the literature on children's experiences with their peers. The question of the impact of peers in the classroom and in breaktime at school on children's development is explored in detail. How do children experience their peers—do they facilitate mastery of the curriculum? Why do children differ in their relationships within the school environment? And what do we know about their peer experiences outside the school? What are the practical implications for teachers of the research on peers?

Christine Howe steers us through a large literature with care and precision, and identifies the gaps in the research as well as the lessons to be learned. Perhaps the broadest message is that an interdisciplinary perspective is needed, with both psychological and educational approaches and insights. She starts by highlighting the importance of cultural context—the impact of peers is not seen as a cultural universal—though commonalities in the themes and evidence are clear across countries and cultures. An important distinction is made between a *performance mode*, with a child as performer and peers as audience, and a *cooperative mode* in which children interact independently of the teacher as mediator. The former has little direct impact on children's mastery of the curriculum—though the social consequences are important and may therefore have an impact on what is learned. By contrast, the relatively rare cooperative mode impacts, she argues, on social judgment, and benefits mastery of the curriculum.

The chapters on status and on friendship, and their impact on children's wellbeing, are of particular interest and importance. She argues persuasively that it is inadvisable to look at status and friendship in isolation from each other. To understand the educational implications of friendship and status we should look at both; and it is evident that

friendship is of particular importance. It plays a significant protective role in terms of children's susceptibility to being bullied and victimized, and provides a buffer against problems in personal adjustment. The point is strongly made that so much research to date has focused on the negative impact of peers, rather than on the role of peers in children's wellbeing; more study of the positive impact of friendship, and the positive implications of sociability, is urged. The practical implications for teachers described throughout the book are brought together in the last chapter: for instance, the arguments that peers are currently marginalized from classroom teaching and learning, that opinion exchange can promote reasoning ability and curriculum mastery, that mixed-ability groups should be the norm within the classroom, that children who have high-achieving friends are helped academically. Established cooperative learning programs should be employed as a starting point, modified to encourage discussion of contrasting opinions. These important lessons deserve our attention, as parents and as teachers.

Judy Dunn

Acknowledgments

My interest in peer groups and children's development crystallized during my time as a member of Strathclyde University's Centre for Research into Interactive Learning. The Centre's remit was to study the learning that results from interaction among novices, interaction between novices and experts (parents, teachers, and computers), and interaction among novices under expert guidance. The aim was to inform psychological theory and educational practice. Peer interaction among children was a key theme from the outset, with studies conducted into the learning and development that occurs when children work together on a range of topics. Literacy, mathematics, science, health, safety, reasoning, and social understanding all featured in the Centre's research. Inevitably, the work engaged with a wide-ranging literature, which included educational studies of how peer groups are used in classrooms, and psychological investigations of how peers impact upon development. However, as I mastered this literature, I gradually realized that some of the themes were hard to reconcile. For instance, educational analyses of class size and single-versus mixed-ability teaching implicitly sideline peers as influences on academic attainment. Psychological analyses, on the other hand, indicate that peers have a profound impact on children's development, including their academic attainment. Realizing that something must have been missed, I resolved to try to integrate the disparate strands, in the hope of more complete understanding of children's peer group experiences and their consequences for development. This book is the result.

Needless to say, the book is the outcome of many interactive experiences, often with peers. There are the collaborations over many years with other members of the Centre for Research into Interactive Learning, especially Donna McWilliam, Andy Tolmie, and David Warden. Pat Gallagher was the linchpin around whom our activities revolved. My

move to the University of Cambridge facilitated direct exposure to the research of colleagues whom I have long admired, including Robin Alexander, Maurice Galton, Linda Hargreaves, and Neil Mercer. Some of the ideas presented in this book emerged during work that Neil Mercer and I carried out together as part of a review of primary education in England. Once the book started to take shape, Brigit Schroeter helped me to identify further references, Ed Baines commented on a draft chapter, and Barbie Clark introduced me to literature on the role of technology in children's peer groups. Lyndsay Upex and Miriam Robertson assisted with manuscript preparation. Once the first draft was complete, Judy Dunn as series editor and an anonymous reviewer provided feedback. I hope they will recognize their contribution to the final document. Many people have therefore contributed to the production of this book, and I want now to express my gratitude to all of them. However, I wish, above all, to thank my husband, Willie Robertson, for his love, patience, and support throughout the project. Without Willie, I should not have had a study with beautiful views over Scottish mountains in which to write, and I should not have had the privilege of completing the manuscript in the wonderful setting of Deogarh Palace in Rajasthan, India. I owe Willie more than I can say, and I want to acknowledge this here.

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Chapter 1

Peer Groups in a Cultural Context

Introduction

This book is concerned with children's experiences of peer groups, and the implications of those experiences for children's development. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers two definitions of the word "peer," namely, "a person of the same standing or rank as the person in question" and "a person of the same age-group or social set as the person in question." According to Ladd (2005), psychologists typically emphasize the age dimension, referring "to people who are born around the same time as agemates or peers" (p. 2). Yet, like many anthropologists (Konner, 1975), Ladd also draws out the extrafamilial quality of peers: they are non-family members of similar age to the person in question, and (potentially at least) of similar standing or rank. Children's peers are conceptualized in a parallel fashion for the purposes of this book, in other words as other children who are of similar age to the child under scrutiny and potentially also of similar standing or rank, and who are not members of the same family. The interest is in children's experiences of the groups to which they belong together with one or more peers, and the groups containing two or more peers who they witness as outsiders. The developmental consequences of these experiences are analyzed with a view to informing both research and practice. Thus, the book is intended to address the research interests of psychologists and educationalists, as well as the practical concerns of teachers, parents, counselors, and policy makers. It is also intended to inform theoretical development.

While one of the book's goals is to be theory informing, the starting point is emphatically not a position of theoretical neutrality. On the contrary, facts about the status of peer groups in children's lives demand a perspective that is broadly sociocultural. This does not necessarily mean

sociocultural in the specific sense developed by Vygotsky (e.g., 1962, 1978) and his numerous followers, and no doubt familiar to many readers. Rather, it means merely a perspective on peer groups that recognizes the broader cultural and historical contexts in which these groups are embedded. This perspective is consistent with Vygotsky but more general, and the present chapter starts by showing why it is necessary and what it implies. In particular, a sociocultural perspective on peer groups imposes constraints upon how developmental influences should be theorized, and the chapter's central section spells these constraints out. Having specified what amounts to a theoretical framework for taking matters forward, the chapter concludes with an overview of the material that follows. Key constructs like "groups," "children," and "development" are defined, and the structure and contents of subsequent chapters are summarized. The manner in which the book serves practical and research goals is outlined.

Cultural Dependency

I can perhaps best explain why a sociocultural perspective is needed through sketching two scenarios, both involving one day in the life of a 9-year-old girl. The first girl lives in the small village in Scotland (United Kingdom) where I myself resided for more than 20 years. This girl rises at about 7:30 a.m., has breakfast with her family, gets washed and dressed, and shortly before 9:00 a.m. is driven by her mother to the village primary school, which is located about one mile from her home. At school, she is placed in a class with 24 other children of similar age, but most of the morning's activity takes place with a subset of her classmates. After registration, she sits down with her "math set" (six children of similar mathematical ability), for instruction in mathematics. This involves cycles of teacher instruction directed at the whole set, followed by individual problem solving in workbooks while the teacher focuses on a different set. Mid-morning, the class breaks for playtime, and the girl goes outside to relax in the playground with her three closest friends (all girls). The second half of the morning is mostly occupied with language instruction (primarily reading and writing) in further ability-defined sets. The composition of the girl's language set differs slightly from the composition of her math set, although once more the session is structured around teacher instruction directed at the whole set followed by individual study. Shortly after midday, the class breaks once more, and the girl rejoins her close friends to eat lunch and play

outside. The afternoon's teaching is mainly devoted to an ongoing project on the Roman Empire, and in contrast to the morning involves teacher instruction directed at the whole class plus follow-up exercises, which the children address collaboratively in small, mixed-ability groups. School finishes around 3:00 p.m., whereupon the girl is taken home by car, has her tea, and in the early evening is driven to Brownies, where she finds many girls from her school (from her own class and from one age band above and one age band below). The girl's day ends with television and mid-evening bedtime.

The second 9-year-old girl lives in the remote village in the Gambia (West Africa) that I was privileged to visit during 2005. This girl's day begins at dawn, whereupon she rises, gets dressed, and helps to dress three younger members of the household (aged 2, 3, and 5 years) while her mother feeds the baby. Her mother then prepares breakfast, which the girl eats in a large family group that includes her father, her mother, her father's other wives, and her siblings and half-siblings. After breakfast, the adults go to work in the fields, taking the baby with them, and the 7- and 9-year-old boys set off on foot for the village school. The girl is left with the 2-, 3-, and 5-year-old children, who accompany her as she fetches water from the village well for washing up, and carries out other household chores. At the well, she chats with other girls of similar age, who are also accompanied by younger siblings and half-siblings. Once the chores have been completed, the girl has time for playing at home with the younger children before one of her father's wives returns to prepare lunch. Lunch is eaten with the full family group, and as far as the girl is concerned, the morning routine is more or less repeated from after lunch until supper. On the other hand, the 7- and 9-year-old boys do not return to school, but play soccer (and similar games) with other village boys. The family group reconvenes for supper, which is followed by music and dancing with other families from the village. With no electricity or gas, the village is poorly illuminated, so bedtime comes early.

There are many similarities between the two scenarios. For instance, both girls live in family units, receive care from their mothers, eat meals at similar times, and engage in alternating cycles of work and play. However, there are also many differences, including the one that is crucial for this book: involvement in peer groups. Construed as non-family members of similar age (and possibly similar standing and rank), it is clear that peers play a significant role in the Scottish girl's life, for she spends a great deal of time in groups that include her peers. Her school class is one such group, as are her math set, her language set,

and the mixed-ability group in which she is studying the Roman Empire. Further peer groups are the friends with whom she spends school play-time and the lunch break, and the Brownies whom she meets in the evening. It is possible therefore that peer groups make an important contribution to her development. By contrast, the Gambian girl spends very little time in peer groups. She meets peers when fetching water from the village well, and during the evening's music and dancing. However, most of her day is spent with individuals of lower age, standing and rank (younger siblings and half-siblings) or higher age, standing and rank (parents, other adults in the family group, and other adults from the village). Thus, her development into an adult member of her society must take place largely independently of peer groups.

The contrast between the Scottish and Gambian scenarios over peer group experiences should not be regarded as a categorical statement about the two cultures, let alone about other cultures. Within Scotland, the extent of peer group experiences is influenced by geographical location, that is, urban, suburban, village, or truly rural. In the sparsely populated highland and island regions, school classes (and therefore also within-class subgroups) normally contain widely divergent age groups (Wilson, 2003). Location is undoubtedly also relevant in the Gambia, as of course is gender. The older boys in the scenario have more extensive peer group experiences than the female protagonist, by virtue both of attending school and of playing games in the village. Anthropological studies in Kenya (Whiting & Whiting, 1991), New Guinea (Herdt, 1987), and Nigeria (Ottenberg, 1988) indicate that gender differences over peer group experiences are typical in traditional societies. One reason is thought to be the role of peer groups in patriarchal cultures in "weaning" boys from the feminine culture of the household, especially when entry into the more formal of these peer groups is often associated with demanding initiation rites. Nevertheless, despite within-culture variation, the cross-cultural differences over peer group experiences that are highlighted in the two scenarios do seem to be valid *on average*. Crucial evidence has emerged from Whiting and Edwards' (1988) study of children aged 2 to 10 years from 12 communities located in India, Japan, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States, but research has been conducted in other countries too (reviewed in Edwards, 1992). The general message is that while most children throughout Europe, and indeed North America and Australasia, have extensive experiences of peer groups, the limited experiences mapped here for a 9-year-old girl from the Gambia occur in other parts of Africa, and in many countries in Asia and South America.

Discussions of why peer group experiences are pervasive across some cultures and marginal across others have focused on schooling (Edwards, 1992; Rogoff, 2003). All cultures that provide schooling (and nowadays most do, to some degree) aspire to organize this around classes that are comprised of peer groups. This is not to say that the aspiration is always realized. As noted already in relation to Scotland, low population density is one factor that precludes this. Nevertheless, schooling is characteristically structured to approximate as closely as possible to the peer group target. Moreover, when schooling is organized around peer groups, other facilities follow. These include preschool institutions, such as nurseries, playgroups, and toddler groups, and formal out-of-school provision, such as sports associations (soccer, swimming), youth movements (Brownies, Scouts), and classes for the performing arts (dance, drama). Because informal relations like friendships are often forged in school and related contexts, these too will typically be peer based. The implication therefore is that in cultures where schooling is universal, most children will have extensive experiences of peer groups. In cultures where schooling is not universal, some children will have limited experiences. Insofar as gender often predicts access to schooling in such cultures, for reasons of patriarchy as discussed above, the influence of schooling is typically to perpetuate asymmetries over peer group experiences that already exist, while no doubt changing their form.

This book focuses on children who are members of societies where schooling is mandatory for all of the relevant age group, and therefore extensive peer group experiences are taken for granted. This is not to say that these experiences map precisely onto the Scottish scenario. On the contrary, there is, as we shall see, considerable variation within and between cultures in the form that the experiences take. However, the variation is in form not extent, for the extent of peer group experiences where schooling is mandatory can be assumed to be constant and substantial. Being constant as well as substantial, it is easy to forget that the experiences result from specific cultural practices, especially schooling, when (as here) focusing only on societies where schooling is mandatory. It is, in other words, easy to overlook Mueller and Tingley's (1989) point that peer associations are best understood as recent products of cultural evolution rather than as ancient outcomes of biological evolution. Nevertheless, overlooking the point would be a serious error, for, as signaled already, the sociocultural perspective that is necessitated carries important implications for theoretical analysis. These implications also apply to other "recent products of cultural evolution" such as television and the Internet, although not necessarily to the bonds forged between

mothers and infants; after all, these bonds (no matter how culturally overlaid) do have foundations in evolutionary biology. Thus, it is important to spell out the implications of cultural dependency, and this is what the next section attempts to do. A theoretical framework is developed that acknowledges the cultural dependency of children's peer group experiences. The framework is extended and embellished as the book progresses.

Theoretical Framework

The fact that peer group experiences result from recent (and non-universal) cultural developments does not render them inconsequential in the cultures where they occur. On the contrary, just as many have argued in relation to television and the Internet, they could have profound implications for children's development. It is indeed possible that, as Ladd (2005) suggests, "peers make a significant and enduring contribution to children's socialization and development" (p. 11), so long as this claim is not taken as asserting a cross-cultural universal. Nevertheless, because peer group experiences are culturally dependent, any implications that they do have in cultures where they are pervasive are unlikely to be specific to peer groups. Equally, the mechanisms by which implications are realized are unlikely to apply only in peer group contexts. Specialized functions and specialized mechanisms usually depend on biological evolution, and the evolution of relevance is cultural.

The implications of cultural evolution need to be emphasized, for specialized contributions have frequently been proposed in the context of children's peer groups. They are implicit in mass media portrayals, where there is a tendency to treat peer groups in a uniquely negative light. In particular, peer groups are frequently depicted as having unrivaled capacities for leading children astray by undoing the "good work" that families and teachers achieve. Beyond this, specialized contributions have been proposed in the research literature, including from some extremely influential theorists. The present section begins by outlining two examples, with a view not to criticize but rather to developing an alternative approach that respects the cultural dimension. The approach is then contrasted with a further model that shares the present sociocultural perspective.

Piaget and Sullivan

The two theorists to be considered are the Swiss developmental psychologist (or, as he would have preferred, "genetic epistemologist") Jean