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The Influence of Parental Rearing Styles on Young Children's Peer Interaction Abilities: An Observational Study

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Abstract. Peer interactions remain a central component of their social lives. The ability to interact with peers gradually forms and develops through daily play and activities. It is an important reflection of their social development level and lays the groundwork for their future social engagements in broader society. Parents' styles exert an undeniable and crucial influence on the formation and development of children's peer interaction skills. This paper uses a combination of literature review and observation methods for a comparative analysis of the peer interaction abilities of children from different backgrounds based on a small kindergarten. It aims to figure out the varying types of parenting styles, exhibit different levels of social development and demonstrate distinct behavioral patterns during peer interactions. The study points out that children with authoritative parenting styles exhibit the highest level of peer interaction skills, while those with indulgent, authoritarian, and uninvolved parenting styles often encounter challenges in peer interactions.

Keywords: Young Children, Parental Rearing Styles, Peer Interaction Ability

1. Introduction

The study focuses on preschool children, specifically those defined by developmental psychology as typically falling within the 3 to 6 years age range. This developmental phase constitutes a critical period in the holistic growth of young children, during which their social development, particularly the cultivation of peer interaction skills, bears profound implications for their future social adaptation and interpersonal relationship-building. Parents, as the primary educators and caregivers, play a crucial role in influencing children's development through their parenting styles. Peer interaction skills are not only a key reflection of a young child’s social development but also constitute a foundational ability for future societal integration and the establishment of healthy interpersonal relationships. Therefore, investigating the relationship between parenting styles and young children's peer interaction skills carries substantial theoretical value and practical relevance.

Studies have explored the factors influencing children's peer interaction skills. Zhang et al. proposed targeted measures to facilitate the development of young children's peer relationships [1]. Yan, based on questionnaires, found that parental rearing styles influence young children's peer interaction ability, and put forward evidence-based improvement suggestions [2]. Fan demonstrated that fathers hold an equally important position as mothers in the child-rearing process, and emphasized that parents should support one another and practice collaborative parenting [3].

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Based on observations of children in a kindergarten, this paper attempts to explore the influence of different parental rearing styles on young children's peer interaction abilities, analyzes the underlying pathways of this influence, and proposes relevant educational suggestions. It is expected to enrich the existing body of research on young children's social development and peer interaction ability, and provide relevant educational suggestions for improving young children's peer interaction ability.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on parental rearing styles of young children

Research has been dedicated to the rearing styles of young children's parents. For example, Xu et al., gave the definition of parental rearing styles and explored potential changes and intervention strategies, which provided educational support to parents [4]. Young children's peer interaction ability encompasses many elements, such as temperament. Wang and her team through questionnaire surveys and analysis, identified a strong, predominantly positive correlation between parental rearing styles and children's temperament. They also found that significant differences exist in children's temperament and parental rearing styles across gender and age groups. Therefore, parents' education levels need to be improved, and a warm family environment should be created for young children [5]. Some scholars have also researched the relationship between parental rearing styles and young children's problematic behaviors, such as aggressive behavior. Mu Ran, by distributing questionnaires and analyzing the obtained data, clarified the mechanism underlying the relationship between parental emotional health and young children's problematic behaviors, and based on this, proposed a series of educational countermeasures and specific implementation measures [6]. Cui Can used research methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and observation to collect data, and found after analysis that family structure and gender factors exert a non-negligible effect on the formation of young children's aggressive behavior, and there is a significant correlation between parental rearing styles and young children's aggressive behavior [7].

2.2. Research on young children's peer interaction ability

The majority of current studies on peer interaction ability utilize daily kindergarten activities as an entry point, with the primary research goal being to cultivate or enhance this skill. For example, Lu used an action research paradigm, through observation, interviews, and data analysis, found that in block building games, young children lacked the initiative and skills to engage in active interaction, the types of peer interaction were relatively singular, and some children could not interact normally with peers. After improving the block activities and intervening with the children, their peer interaction ability improved [8]. Liu, by continuously optimizing children's musical activity plans and analyzing the obtained data, explored evidence-based cultivation strategies to effectively enhance young children's peer interaction ability, finding that the artistic interactive characteristics of children's musicals can promote the improvement of young children's peer interaction ability [9].

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3. The internal relationship between parental rearing styles and young children's peer interaction ability

3.1. Types of parental rearing styles and their characteristics

Based on Baumrind's classic research theory on family parenting models, this paper adopts the classification framework of four typical parenting styles established in her empirical research, which include: permissive, authoritarian, authoritative, and the neglectful style later added by subsequent studies. These four categories essentially encapsulate the typical parenting traits exhibited in parent-child interactions, providing a theoretical foundation for further analysis in this paper. This is also an important theoretical basis in this paper.

3.1.1. Indulgent type definition and characteristics

Permissive parents typically impose minimal behavioral demands on their children while maintaining high expectations for emotional responsiveness. They often lack clear expectations for their children's conduct, rarely enforce punishments, and tend to fulfill their children's needs unconditionally. These parents believe that unconditional love and freedom are essential for healthy development, emphasizing warmth and support in the parenting process while neglecting the establishment of clear rules and boundaries. However, this parenting style may foster a lack of self-control in young children, making it difficult for them to adapt to social rules, which can in turn impede the development of their peer interaction skills.

3.1.2. Authoritarian type definition and characteristics

Authoritarian parents tend to impose high demands on their children while offering little emotional responsiveness. They emphasize absolute obedience and do not allow questioning or negotiation, expecting children to adhere strictly to their instructions. At the same time, such parents are often reluctant to express warmth and affection, resulting in a lack of emotional closeness with their children and, in some cases, even fostering hostility. Children raised in such an environment often exhibit timidity, a lack of self-confidence, or act out in rebellious behavior due to suppressed emotions, which can hinder their ability to form normal peer relationships.

3.1.3. Authoritative type definition and characteristics

Authoritative parents set high expectations for their children while also providing high levels of responsiveness. They are skilled at establishing clear rules and boundaries for their children and explaining the rationale behind these rules, emphasizing communication and discussion when enforcing discipline. At the same time, they are also sensitive to their children’s emotions and needs, offering ample care and support. This parenting style helps foster self-discipline, self-esteem, and problem-solving skills in young children, laying a robust foundation for the development of their peer interaction abilities.

3.1.4. Neglectful type definition and characteristics

Uninvolved parents exhibit low levels of both demands and responsiveness toward their children. They tend to invest minimal time and emotional resources in parenting, showing little attention to their children's behavioral development and overall growth, which results in weak emotional bonds

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between parent and child. Children raised under such parenting styles often display emotional indifference and insufficient social motivation, making it difficult for them to form deep emotional connections with peers.

3.2. Basic concept of young children's peer interaction ability

According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, social interaction is regarded as a key driver in promoting cognitive development. However, the theory emphasizes that such external social interactions must be assimilated or accommodated by the individual, and subsequently internalized and integrated into their existing cognitive structure, to truly take effect. Thus, peer interaction, as a crucial form of social interaction, is of paramount importance in promoting both young children's cognitive development and their social skills.

3.3. Pathways and mechanisms of different rearing styles influencing peer interaction ability

3.3.1. Indulgent style

Parents' unconditional fulfillment of their children's demands may lead to self-centeredness, domineering behavior, poor emotion regulation skills, difficulties in sharing and cooperation, a tendency to provoke conflicts, and an inability to cope with criticism and failure.

3.3.2. Authoritarian style

Parents' strict control and emotional coldness can easily cause children to develop anxious or avoidant attachment styles and an inability to regulate negative emotions. In interactions with peers, these children often exhibit either aggressive or withdrawn behavior. This means they may either not dare to express themselves within a group or transfer the pressure imposed by their parents onto their peers in an attempt to gain a sense of control.

3.3.3. Authoritative style

The stable, warm, and supportive environment provided by parents fosters a secure attachment in their children. In peer interactions, these children demonstrate confidence and are not afraid of rejection, along with initiative and emotional stability. They possess stronger communication and comprehension skills, intuitively grasp peers' feelings and intentions, can effectively resolve conflicts, and are more likely to establish equal and healthy peer relationships.

3.3.4. Neglectful style

Parental neglect often leads to insecure attachment in children. These children may display emotional indifference or a lack of control and have an inability to empathize. Furthermore, they crave attention, but due to a lack of social skills, their behavior can be awkward,so they often struggle with collaboration. In this case, it is easy for them to become socially isolated and thus targets for peer neglect or bullying.

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4. Research design

4.1. Case selection and grouping

This study employs the observational method to examine and analyze the interactions among 16 children from a kindergarten class during their self-directed activities. According to the definitions of the theory, 16 children were divided into four groups, and a 6-hour kindergarten day trip was conducted for comparative analysis. The parenting styles of the first four children's parents were permissive, the next four had authoritarian parenting styles, the following four had authoritative parenting styles, and the final four children's parents exhibited uninvolved parenting styles.

4.2. Observation dimensions

To systematically assess peer interaction abilities, this paper categorizes the key manifestations of young children's peer interaction abilities into several dimensions, including social skills, emotional competence, social cognition, and prosocial behavior. Specifically, by observing children's specific behaviors in activities, such as whether they initiate social interactions, engage in sharing or cooperation with peers, recognize and regulate emotions, demonstrate an understanding of problem-solving, and manage conflicts. These dimensions are used to analysis the development of their peer interaction abilities.

5. Results and findings

5.1. Observed peer interactions across parenting style groups

For the indulgent type children, when the toys distributed were insufficient, most of them turned directly to the teacher for help instead of trying to negotiate a rotation plan with their peers, showing weak independent judgment and problem-solving abilities. They showed weak emotional control ability in the face of unexpected situations and lacked the ability to judge and handle problems.

Authoritarian-type children in games usually played the role of followers, rarely expressed their own opinions, performed on averagely, and mainly cooperated with peers in actions. While swinging, two of the children suddenly pushed their companion, exhibiting aggression stemming from repression. But after the conflict, they quickly withdrew, looking uneasy.

After several quarrels from disputes over snacks, authoritative-type children are always able to step in to stop the fight and comfort the other crying children. When a playmate is left out, these children are able to promptly notice and invite them back to the game. They were in games, usually performed well, often assumed leadership roles during peer interactions, and when encountering unexpected events, could think calmly, promptly develop solutions, and effectively address the issues.

Most of the neglectful type of children preferred solitary play during games, and did not initiate interactions with peers. And when encountering unexpected events, I merely stood by and watched other peers address the problems.

5.2. Findings

Observation reveals that due to differences in parenting styles, young children exhibit varying abilities in peer interaction. Children raised under an authoritative parenting style tend to demonstrate stronger peer interaction skills and a higher level of social development. In contrast,

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children raised under indulgent, authoritarian, or neglectful parenting styles generally encounter challenges in peer interactions, highlighting the need for parents to adjust their child-rearing approaches.

6. Practical implications

After observing young children under different parenting styles, this paper finds that children's peer interaction skills are influenced by their parents' parenting methods. Specifically, the more scientifically sound the parenting practices, the higher the level of children's social development, and the stronger their peer interaction abilities. To better promote the social development of young children, parents should adjust their child-rearing styles, increase the quality of time spent with their children in daily life, and optimize their educational approaches. Additionally, kindergartens and teachers should provide more educational resources and introduce more scientific educational methods to young children's parents.

7. Conclusion

This paper reviews existing literature on the parenting styles of young children's parents, young children's peer interaction competence, and the influence of parenting styles on peer interaction competence. It is found that existing research primarily focuses on parenting styles, while studies on peer interaction competence often center on daily activities in kindergarten settings, with the goal of enhancing children's PIC through activity optimization. Through case analysis, this study explores in detail the impact of parenting styles on young children's peer interaction competence. The research finds that different types of parenting styles influence the development of children's peer interaction competence by affecting their attachment relationships, social cognition, and behavioral patterns. Among these, authoritative parenting is most conducive to the development of children's social skills, while permissive, authoritarian, and neglectful parenting may inhibit the development of children's social skills to varying extents.

However, this study has certain limitations, such as the lack of large samples and short-term investigations. With limited literature reviewed, the results overlook other factors. Future research is encouraged to further explore this field by expanding sample sizes and conducting practical investigations.

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