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Why and How Can Empathy Be Developed in Children in Early and Middle Childhood

Dlaczego warto i jak można rozwijać empatię u dzieci we wczesnym i średnim dzieciństwie

KEYWORDS

enhancing empathy, teacher, kindergarten, socio-emotional competence, training

ABSTRACT

The ability to respond with empathy is one of the key elements of socio-emotional development, determining, among other things, one's behaviour towards others and the quality of social relationships. Taking into account the increase in social diversity nowadays, in order to understand the behaviour of peers and adults who differ from themselves in various ways, children need to be able to empathize with them from the earliest years of life. The purpose of the article is to show the importance of the process and ways of shaping empathy in children. The article begins with a brief theoretical explanation of the construct of empathy and outlines its normative development in early and middle childhood. It summarizes research results pointing to links between children's empathy and socio-emotional functioning. It also discusses environmental factors, related mainly to

activities within the peer group and child-teacher relationships, that promote the development of empathy. The presented ways of communicating, types of activities or elements of training which, based on literature review, are discussed in the text, might be valuable for practitioners interested in developing empathy in children. Preschool and school environments can play a key role in the development of children's pro-social behaviour, moral reasoning and good peer relationships, preventing the children's aggressive behaviour.

SŁOWA KLUCZE

rozwijanie empatii, nauczyciel, przedszkole, kompetencje społeczno-emocjonalne, trening

ABSTRAKT

Zdolność do reagowania empatią jest jednym z kluczowych elementów rozwoju społeczno-emocjonalnego, determinującym m.in. zachowanie jednostki wobec innych oraz jakość budowanych relacji. Wraz ze wzrostem różnorodności społecznej rośnie potrzeba, aby dzieci, już od najmłodszych lat, chcąc zrozumieć postępowanie rówieśników i dorosłych różniących się od nich samych pod różnymi względami, potrafiły „wczuć się" w ich sytuację. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie znaczenia procesu i sposobów kształtowania empatii u dzieci. Artykuł rozpoczyna się od krótkiego wyjaśnienia teoretycznego konstruktu empatii oraz nakreślenia jej normatywnego rozwoju we wczesnym i średnim dzieciństwie. Przedstawia wnioski z badań wskazujących na związki zdolności do reagowania empatią z wieloma obszarami funkcjonowania społeczno-emocjonalnego dziecka. Omawia także czynniki środowiskowe, związane głównie z funkcjonowaniem dzieci w ramach grupy rówieśniczej i w relacji z nauczycielem, sprzyjające rozwijaniu empatii. Ukazane sposoby komunikacji, proponowane zabawy czy też elementy treningów, które na podstawie przeglądu literatury omówiono w tekście, mogą posłużyć jako źródło informacji dla praktyków zainteresowanych rozwijaniem empatii u dzieci. Środowisko przedszkolne i szkolne może odegrać kluczową rolę m.in. w wyłaniającej się prospołeczności dziecka, rozwoju jego moralnego rozumowania, budowaniu satysfakcjonujących relacji rówieśniczych i zapobieganiu agresywnym zachowaniom.

Empathy – What It Is and How It Develops in the First Years of Life

Responding with empathy involves manifesting emotions that result from an understanding of the other person's emotional state, which are, at the same time, similar to the emotions that the other person is experiencing or should be experiencing (Vaish, 2020). Empathy is, therefore, defined as a mechanism for understanding and sharing

someone else's emotions, which is sometimes also conceptualized as the cognitive and affective components of empathy, respectively (McDonald & Messinger, 2011). The affective component is the sharing of emotional experience which can lead, among other things, to an individual experiencing an emotion that is more suited to someone else's situation than their own (Hoffman, 2006). The cognitive component, which enables the interpretation of the interrelated external, physical and internal, mental states of a person, is identified with the competence to take an affective perspective. Its gradual emergence enables an increasingly accurate conceptualization of another person's increasingly complex and diverse experience. Thus, empathy combines the effective taking of the other person's affective perspective with the tendency to accept the other person's emotions (affect sharing). Help-related behaviours, e.g. pro-social behaviours (Vaish, 2020), are considered to be related to empathic responding and sometimes conceptualized as a behavioural component of empathy. Through the development of empathy, a child who sees, for example, the tearful and saddened face of a peer standing over a mountain of blocks that moments earlier was a carefully stacked tower, can: understand that the peer is grieving the loss of something he or she cared about; also feel grief and/or sadness about the peer's experience; and take appropriate action to relieve the peer's negative emotions. The components of empathy emerge during the first few years of life, and their seeds can be seen in infancy.

One of the earliest observed precursors to responding with empathy is reactive crying, which is an example of emotion contagion (Simner, 1971). Infants, during the first few months of life, in response to the crying of other infants, cry strongly, vigorously and in a manner indistinguishable from the crying of an infant experiencing discomfort alone. Such crying, on the other hand, differs markedly from crying in response to other loud sounds, computer-generated crying of the same intensity or recordings of one's own crying (Martin & Clark, 1982), and appears to be a biologically determined predisposition to respond to others' discomfort. Its importance was also emphasized by Martin Hoffmann in his concept of the early development of empathic suffering (2006), the emergence of which he linked strongly to the emergence of a sense of Self. He explained the lack of ability to distinguish between self and others both by the fact that, towards the end of the first year of life, children react with negative emotions to the suffering of others, trying to alleviate their own discomfort rather than that of others, and by the attempts made at the beginning of the second year of life to alleviate others' suffering with actions that usually help the child himself, and not necessarily the person suffering. He believed that, from around the middle of the second and in the third year of life, with the emergence of a sense of self and the differentiation of self from others, children begin to focus on others' emotional experiences and take an affective perspective, thus becoming able to identify the other person as the source of their empathic response. This view is now sometimes challenged,

with research indicating that infants' reactions to others' distress may be the result of difficulties regulating arousal rather than mistaking self for other. It is believed that the first manifestations of empathic concern, as assessed by facial expressions, vocalization and gestures, can be seen as early as in 8–10-months-old infants who also make simple attempts to recognize and understand others' suffering (Roth-Hanania et al., 2011).

Between the ages of 14 and 24 months, children show an increase in manifestations of empathic responding in the form of: empathic concern (emotional arousal assessed by facial expressions, voice – e.g. sad look), hypothesis testing (attempts to recognize and understand the problem – e.g. question: "What happened?") and accompanying pro-social behaviour (acting on behalf of the affected person to change the situation or alleviate their suffering – e.g. physical/verbal comforting, asking "Are you OK?"; Knafo et al., 2008; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). At preschool age, children learn to regulate their empathic reactions more and more, the occurrence of which begins to be linked to the consideration of an increasing number of factors, such as, for example, the familiarity and proximity of the sufferer or the appropriateness and intensity of their reaction, given the type and strength of the stimulus which evoked it (Hepach et al., 2013).

Links Between Empathy and Children's Socio-Emotional Functioning

Empathy is crucial for the establishment and course of interpersonal interactions and the building of social bonds (Plutchik, 1987). The latter are a component of social support, which is a protective factor against many illnesses and the effects of stress or trauma (cf. Sęk & Cieślak, 2012). The social nature of human beings makes the recognition and understanding of mental states, as well as the ability to share and respond appropriately to them, among the most important skills necessary for living in complex, social contexts. Empathy is also thought to be fundamental to the development of morality; what is particularly important is understanding why it is inappropriate to harm other people, although the nature of the interrelationship between these constructs is very complex (Decety & Cowell, 2015). Research with the participation of children suggests that, even in early childhood, empathy may play a significant role in learning to distinguish between right and wrong and developing an inclination to engage in appropriate behaviour. Three-year-old children who display empathic distress in response to another person's distress and guilt as a consequence of their own misbehaviour are more likely to follow existing, established rules (e.g. cleaning up toys), even in the absence of supervision of their behaviour by others (Aksan & Kochanska, 2005).

Help-related behaviour is often associated with empathy. Research with the participation of parents confirms a positive association between their questionnaire-estimated levels of empathy, pro-sociality and socialisation in their 2.5–4-year-old children (Lasota, 2023). According to some researchers (Knafo et al., 2008), individual differences in the propensity to respond with empathic concern and in a pro-social manner to others' distress are not only quite stable in early childhood, but also predict pro-social behaviour and social adjustment at later developmental stages. In an experimental study with the participation of children aged 3 and 5–6 years, empathic concern for others induced in the first instance appeared to foster later pro-social distribution of resources, promoting sharing while lowering levels of envy (Williams et al., 2014). Children with higher levels of empathy than their peers are also more socially competent (Saliquist et al., 2009), and the cognitive component of empathy related to perspective-taking skills may play an important role in this relationship. In a study involving 6–7-year-old children, parents' ratings of their level of empathy were found to be positively correlated with the results of a task testing the ability to take perspective, name and justify the emotions felt by the characters in picture stories (Strayer & Roberts, 1989). Moreover, the ability to take perspective and the emotional component of empathy were positively related to imaginative, divergent thinking and the children's creativity of thought as assessed by the teachers. The development of the ability to take perspective and identify with another person's experience may play an important role in the development of help-related behaviour, allowing children to select increasingly appropriate and effective helping strategies as a result of their increasingly accurate assessment of the situation, their response to it and the state of the person who needs help (McDonald & Messinger, 2011).

One of the factors involved in helping and also linked to empathy may be physical proximity to a person in need of support. A study involving three age groups: 5-, 9- and 13-year-olds, showed that higher levels of declared empathy towards selected people viewed by children in different situations in films were associated with a tendency to place pictures of these people closer to themselves (Strayer & Roberts, 1997). In other words: the higher the level of empathy aroused, the closer the children placed the picture of the person who had aroused that empathy, suggesting that empathy may arouse the need for closeness to the person towards whom it is felt.

Somewhat more controversial are the findings on the link between empathy and aggressive behaviour (cf. Vachon et al., 2013). The nature of these links is complex and it is possible that they differ, e.g. depending on developmental stage. In one study, 2-year-old children categorised as aggressive on the basis of parental ratings reacted more quickly to others' distress, tested more hypotheses in such situations, and responded with more concern than their non-aggressive peers (Gill & Calkins, 2003). Data from longitudinal studies suggest that the negative association between lack of

concern for others and a tendency to respond with aggression may not become apparent until around 6 years of age, implying that, at least in the early stages of development, concern for the well-being of others may co-occur with behaviours that violate their rights and cause adult disapproval (Hastings et al., 2000). Based on questionnaire ratings by mothers of 6-year-olds, it was found that children rated as more empathic were also attributed to displaying more pro-social behaviour and less social withdrawal and aggression (Findlay et al., 2006). In addition, results from meta-analyses of research on bullying among children and adolescents suggest that bullying is negatively related to both the cognitive and affective components of empathy, which are instead positively related to taking on the role of bully victim advocate (van Noorden et al., 2014).

Ways of Developing Empathy in Children

A growing body of research points to the important role of discourse about internal states in children's cognitive and social development (cf. Stępień-Nycz, 2015). Researchers analyse, among other things, the quantity, quality and use in conversation of terms describing emotions (e.g. sad), cognition (thinks, believes), desires (wants, hopes), or perception (sees, hears). In the child's vocabulary, terms naming emotions begin to appear from the age of 20 months (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995), and the progressive increase in their number and complexity is considered an indicator of increasingly deeper understanding of one's own and others' experiences. Understanding emotions is associated with better ability to regulate them (Leerkes et al., 2008), which, in turn, is associated with higher levels of empathy and pro-sociality (Hein et al., 2016). Accordingly, a growing number of studies confirm the effectiveness of training sessions and programmes to develop the emotional vocabulary of preschool children. In one of these (Grazzani et al., 2016), groups of several 2- and 3-year-olds listened to short illustrated stories about different emotions and then participated in conversations about them, recounting situations in which they, their loved ones, or cartoon characters had also experienced them. The teacher used the story to focus attention on the causes and ways of expressing and regulating emotions, as well as on pro-social actions (helping, comforting). Compared to the control group, the children who participated in training showed a significant increase in scores on the empathy questionnaire completed by the parent. There was also an increase in the ability to understand emotions, in the observed number of pro-social behaviours undertaken, and in the terms used to describe emotions during everyday interactions.

Good results of such training sessions have also been observed in children between 3 and 5 years of age (Voltmer & von Salish, 2022). Such interventions seem important in light of data indicating the risk of relatively infrequent spontaneous use

of emotion vocabulary by teachers (King & La Paro, 2015). While groups of 3- and 4-year-olds were being watched, it was found that, of all categories of terms describing internal states, those referring to perception were the most frequently used by teachers, and those referring to emotion the least frequently. Contrary to the others, emotional terms referred more often to the teacher's own experiences than to states experienced by others.

Discourse about emotions naturally emerges in peer interactions, including during social pretend play, which engages and enhances the ability to take on different roles and perspectives, understand and regulate emotions, or reflect before acting (McArdle, 2001). This makes it an ideal context for developing skills crucial to empathy, altruism or cooperation. Children begin to engage in play with elements of pretend play around 18 months of age, and its "peak period" is at preschool age (3–5 years; Singer & Singer, 1990). This play is considered to be a manifestation of a more general tendency to incorporate fantasy elements into thinking and acting, other examples of which include: having imaginary companions, pretending to be someone or something else (also while playing alone), or engaging in pretend activities with objects during play (Brown et al., 2016). Such a propensity has been shown to be a significant predictor of affective empathy in children aged 3 to 5 years (Brown et al., 2016). Although the data on the relationship between pretend play and socio-emotional development are inconclusive (Lillard et al., 2013), taking on a variety of roles in interactions with others is an opportunity for children to see, express and experience a diversity of internal states and perspectives, and for the teacher to deepen the understanding of this diversity and the resulting consequences. This, in turn, can influence the increase in tolerance (Hollingsworth et al., 2003).

The level of empathy is also related to the quality of teacher-student interaction. The interaction dimension relating to teachers' educational support was found to be significantly positively correlated with it in studies involving 6- and 7-year-olds (Siekkinen et al., 2013; Soininen et al., 2023). It was determined by estimates of the use of techniques to facilitate children's development of analytical thinking and language skills and the quality of feedback given in response to children's ideas. The higher the teacher performed in their observational measure, the higher the children's rates of empathy. Although the relationships found appeared to be bidirectional (Soininen et al., 2023), findings from studies with younger (Broekhuizen et al., 2016) and older children (Luckner & Pianta, 2011) suggest that it is the quality of teacher-student interaction that may translate into students' emotional and social development. In both cases, the dimensions of emotional support (e.g. teacher's sensitivity and responsiveness, respect for students' interests and perspectives) and classroom organisation (e.g. teacher's monitoring and guidance of behaviour, promotion of interesting and engaging learning opportunities) were also found to be important.

Summary

Empathy is central to our pro-sociality. In just a few months, children move from a simple, automatic contagion of emotions to responding on the basis of the operation of a complex and flexible mechanism that enables them to take into account an increasing number of different factors relevant to undertaking the behaviour that results from understanding and sharing others' emotions. The propensity to respond with empathy is based on many factors, such as heredity, temperament, personality, as well as environment, education or culture (cf. McDonald & Messinger, 2011). Empathy and pro-social behaviour may depend, among other things, on socialization practices, which vary depending on whether and how much it is valued in a given culture to be sensitive to others' emotions or to help others. One recent study, for example, found higher levels of empathy in collectivist countries as compared to individualist ones (Chopik et al., 2017). This was also a study that revealed Polish adults to have one of the lowest rates of empathy among the representatives of 63 countries surveyed.

Competencies related to empathy can be developed and practised in a number of specifically designed promotional or therapeutic programmes aimed at promoting the social-emotional functioning of children and adolescents and inhibiting their aggressive behaviour. These are programmes that have been implemented for a long time, e.g. in American preschools and schools, and the results of research on their effectiveness indicate that the earlier in development they are implemented and the more components of empathy they shape, the greater their effects (Malti et al., 2016). However, even the teacher's verbal reinforcement, encouragement or informing children of expected empathic or pro-social responses can contribute to their manifestation (Spivak & Farran, 2012). Together with the types of activity and communication described earlier, as well as aspects of group interaction, these can be a dimension of the early educational environment that effectively shapes children's empathic responses. Their formation at the earliest possible stage of development is extremely important also in light of the results of the report on the state of research on school aggression and violence in Poland (Komendant-Brodowska, 2014). At later stages of education, a large proportion of pupils experience verbal aggression on a daily basis, and between nine and a dozen percent are regularly bullied. An opportunity to prevent such situations is to develop early sensitivity to another person's emotions, perspective and situation.

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