

# Social Development

## Self-concept

A major feature of social development during the preschool years is the development of **self-concept**.

Self-concept refers to all qualities and characteristics that make individuals unique. For example, if Chris's teacher asks how he is different from the other children, he might reply along the following lines: "I'm a fast runner," "I like the color blue," or "I'm a big brother." When preschoolers are asked this question, they almost never respond with negative self-statements because they have a **positivity bias** about themselves and others. A child's self-concept also depends on the culture he or she is brought up in. For example, children in Asian countries tend to have a **collectivistic orientation**, which focuses on interconnectedness within a group. Alternately, children in the United States tend to have an **individualistic orientation**, which focuses on emphasizing the independence and uniqueness of each person.

During the preschool years, a child's social world revolves around his or her family and friends. The typical **family composition** is not the stereotype that television shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Cosby Show* depict. There is a great deal of heterogeneity in children's family lives. Some live with both parents, some with only one parent, and some with a grandparent, an aunt, or an uncle. There are many others who live in foster care or institutions. Some children have no siblings, but some children have a large number of siblings, for example, the children on the popular TLC show *19 Kids and Counting*. Regardless of family composition, the attachments that children develop with their caregivers have a large impact on the relationships the children develop with others later in life.

## Parenting styles

The most important relationship that a preschooler has is with his or her parents. Parenting tends to fall into one of the four types of parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, authoritative, and uninvolved. Although there are four distinct parenting styles, parents may not always demonstrate only one style. Parents can be inconsistent and engage in behaviors of different styles. However, most parents have a dominant orientation toward one of the four styles.

**Authoritarian** parents tend to be controlling, inflexible, and stern with their children. When a child asks why a rule is enforced, an authoritarian parent would respond with "because I said so!" Authoritarian parents are extremely strict. They are not warm and nurturing, and their children tend to be withdrawn and immature.

**Permissive** parents are the polar opposites of authoritarian parents. Permissive parents do not impose any rules or responsibilities on their children. They are extremely loving and affectionate. Their children tend to be moody and dependent and lack self-control.

**Authoritative** parents are able to balance both warmth and control. They set and enforce rules

while being supportive and explaining the reasons for the rules. They compromise with their children and encourage their children to be independent. Their children are friendly, cooperative, and self-confident.

**Uninvolved** parents show no interest in their children and provide for only the basic survival needs of their children. In extreme cases, uninvolved parents completely neglect their children's needs, both physical and emotional. Children with uninvolved parents tend to be the worst adjusted. They often feel unloved and are emotionally detached from others.

## **Friendship**

Although parents are the primary social partners of young children, children gradually develop **friendship** with their classmates and siblings. The focus of friendship for children in the preschool period is mutual enjoyment and sharing. Chris likes classmates who are nice and share things with him. He is not yet focused on abstract concepts, such as trust and confidence.

When Chris first entered preschool, he played near his peers, with similar toys, but did not interact with them. This is called **parallel play**.

As Chris progresses through preschool, he begins to engage in **onlooker play**. During this stage, he watches his peers play with blocks but does not attempt to play with them.

It is not until children are closer to school age that they begin to interact with one another in more sophisticated forms of play. For example, at age five, Chris would engage in **associative play** with his neighbor. He and his neighbor might share blocks with one another but build separate towers.

At the age of six, Chris might play house with a group of children in his kindergarten class. They might take turns and agree to rules they would follow. This is called **cooperative play**.

## **Moral development**

**Moral development** occurs when children begin to differentiate between right and wrong. **Social learning theory** suggests that children learn **prosocial behavior** by observing and imitating others. For example, if a classmate receives a sticker for cleaning up his or her play area, Chris is likely to imitate that behavior to earn a similar reward.

Children also learn **aggression** and display **violent behaviors** through modeling. Aggression in the preschool years is common as children are learning how to be independent and how to interact with others. As aggression occurs when a person intentionally hurts another person, most developmentalists believe that infants are unable to behave aggressively. Most intentional aggressive behavior develops during the preschool years.

Different types of aggression occur during the preschool years. For example, if one of Chris's classmates is angry because Chris is playing with a toy he or she wants, the classmate might snatch away the toy from Chris. This is known as **instrumental aggression**. As the classmate's goal was to get the toy, he or she used aggression as an instrument to achieve this goal.

Some children also engage in **relational aggression**. In this type of aggression, a child avoids injuring a person physically but uses other means to damage that person's social relationships and hurts his or her feelings by spreading rumors or engaging in name-calling. Instrumental aggression is more common among preschoolers, while relational aggression is more common among older age groups. However, in some cases, relational aggression has also been noted in children in the preschool years.

### **Aggression**

It has been observed that aggressive parents tend to have aggressive children. Developmentalists have different opinions regarding whether they believe this connection to be due to genetics or the environment. However, the genetic basis of aggression remains poorly understood because aggression is a **polygenetic** trait (that is, many genes are responsible for this behavior). Twin and adoption studies suggest a biological basis for aggression, but research has not pinned down the specific genes responsible for this type of behavior. As technology and research methods improve, more information will become available. Most researchers agree that both nature and nurture (genes and environment) affect the development of aggression.

### **Bobo Doll Experiment**

The Bobo doll experiment became famous, and many parents and teachers became concerned about the implications for television viewing. Think about the characters in traditional cartoons that you watched as a child—Elmer Fudd, who wanted to shoot Bugs Bunny, and Coyote, whose only goal in life was to kill Road Runner. Children's television programs contain an immense amount of violence, not to mention the level of violence in many children's video games. Fortunately, observational learning does not lead to negative behaviors. Children also learn from nonaggressive behavior. Therefore, watching television programs that display prosocial behaviors encourages children to engage in similar behaviors.

**Albert Bandura**, a famous social learning theorist, decided to test whether children could learn to be aggressive by watching the behavior of adults. Therefore, he devised an experiment known as the **Bobo doll experiment**.

In this experiment, Albert Bandura divided the participants into three groups: Group 1, Group 2, and Group 3.

The children in Group 1 watched a video of an adult behaving aggressively with a doll. At the end of the video, the adult was rewarded for the behavior.

The children in Group 2 watched the same video. However, at the end of the video, the adult was punished for the behavior in this case.

The children in Group 3 watched a video of an adult behaving aggressively with a doll without facing any consequences.

After the children finished watching the video, they were allowed into a playroom with many toys, one of which was the same doll that they had seen in the video. The following observations were made:

- The children in Group 1 were extremely likely to behave aggressively with the doll.
- The children in Group 2 were unlikely to behave aggressively with the doll.
- The children in Group 3 fell in the middle of the previous two groups in terms of the aggression levels.

These results showed that children do observe and imitate others' behaviors.