



Decision making skills: Tools for enhancing social emotional Competence in Adolescents

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Abstract:

Decision making as a process is gaining importance as a skill. It is an important component of social and emotional development. The skills needed in the domain of decision making have proven through research of its teachable nature. This virtue is of utmost importance as the very nature of the skill needs critical thinking abilities, evaluation, the ability to discern and to be able to understand the consequences of one's behaviour. The impact of decision making furthers or hampers the relationships. Decision making skills enhance a child's self-concept, and the confidence of the child. Studies in this area have been researched extensively, as this is an important component of acquiring social emotional skills. The early childhood experiences play an important role and act as a foundations for this skill. The paper tries to explore certain critical components for acquiring and teaching decision making abilities. The paper shall focus on a few methods which can be of help to the caregivers/parents in promoting these skills in adolescents.

Key Words: Decision making, self-concept, critical thinking.

Introduction

The parental support is an important factor to influence the overall development of children. The relevance and importance of parents as source of emotional wellbeing in children has found acceptance across research paradigms. Parents need to be present, both physically and psychologically, enough to support them. This support fosters confidence and growth in

many areas. Just being physically present is not enough. Physical proximity by itself, loses its relevance if parents do not emotionally invest or are unresponsive. Such parents “tend to raise children who are more distressed and less engaged with their play or activities. A study investigating the connection between parent’s investment and children’s competence suggests that the emotional involvement of parents really does matter and affects the outcome of their child’s emotional competence and regulation” (www.coursehero).

Ainsworth’s Strange Situation experiments were explored by L. Alan Sroufe. The focus of the study was on the early attachment styles and their impact on later emotional development of children. Sroufe asserts that, “Such variations [of relationship quality] are not reflections of genetically based traits of the infant but of the history of interaction with the parent”(Sroufe, 2005). The important learning task in emotional development is the ability to regulate emotions. The children need to learn this skill early in life. Emotional competence has been defined “It includes an understanding of one’s own and others’ emotions, the tendency to display emotion in a situationally and culturally appropriate manner, and the ability to inhibit or modulate experienced and expressed emotion and emotionally derived behaviour as needed to achieve goals in a socially acceptable manner”(Eisenber, Cumberland, & Spinard, 1998). Coping behaviours are needed while dealing with stressful negative situations. Decision making as a process is greatly impacted by the coping behaviour of an individual.

“Children observe as to how the parents display emotions and interact with other people. The children imitate their parental responses to different situations and the methods they employ do to regulate emotions (Sheffield Morris et. al)”(www.nimhanschildproject.in, 2016). A child’s abilities at emotion regulation is influenced by the temperament. The style of parenting received by the child is often guided by the child’s temperament as well. (Pluess & Belsky, 2010).

Hostile and neglectful parenting has been found to be associated with children who display more of negative emotions along with episodes of anger frequently. The parents need to acknowledge the negative emotions in children and accept them. If the parents display criticism or do not show compassion, or empathy when the child is sad or angry; “this communicates that their emotions are not valid or appropriate, which can cause children to be even more prone to those negative emotions and less able to cope with stress” (Siegler, DeLoache, & Eisenberg, 2011).

Such experiences impact a child's abilities at decision making negatively. The child needs help and guidance in learning and exploring ways to express their emotions in an appropriate manner. This is a skill the children need to learn in order to cope and manage their negative emotions. Emotional regulation during challenging circumstance facilitates the academic and social competence among children. The proactive role of parents in making a child to understand the need to learn appropriate behaviour has the ability to safeguard the child from any behavioural challenges during later years. These skills and competencies help in enhancing the self-esteem, and confidence in children and adolescents. These abilities have the power to effect the decision making abilities.

The warm behaviour of caregivers plays an important role in the emotional development of children. Studies have been conducted to study the effects of depressed mothers on the emotional development of children. "Depressed mothers have maladaptive thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours, and these, along with being in a similarly stressful environment as the mother, put a child at risk of developing his own emotional problems"(Sroufe, 2005).

The depressed mothers have been found to be indifferent towards their children. As they themselves do not interact in social situations as a result the child does not get many opportunities of social interactions. Thus, leading to less stimulation for their children. The children get into the disadvantaged position for achieving normal emotional development.

Earlier researches focussed on adolescent's behaviour as a result of their hormonal activities per se. now recently the research studies have focussed on developing certain crucial skills which can make them better able to cope in their circumstances. The resilience research has focused on certain coping strategies during adverse situations. Critical thinking, conflict resolution and decision making are some such skills.

Studies have been conducted in the realm of decision making abilities. In one such study with adolescents a program was developed in a structured manner to help the adolescents to acquire skills which can aid and inculcate the ability of skills needed for effective and reflective decision-making skills. Self-correcting methods as tools have been tried out with a focus on repetition to train the adolescents' brain. This program aimed to train a young person's brain, through repetition. It uses self-correcting tools. The ability to learn from your own mistakes is an important skill in a decision making process. The results with such

research objectives were found to be positive in making adolescents understand and practice decision making skills (coursehero.com, n.d.)“Adolescents learn to make good decisions, when they understand which decisions are able to help them get more of what they want. They learn to eliminate those decisions which are not as fulfilling” (Lynn 2019).

The Study

Adolescents have been universally found to want to have more fun, independence, more control over their lives and to be able to spend more time with friends. This has a connotation that they want to experience more control over their lives by making their own decisions.

Adolescents, in spite of having more conflicts and arguments with parents, do not like it. They want to avoid social drama, or be dictated by adults regarding what to do and not do. These are based on interactions and interview conducted on about 50 adolescents in the age group 12-14 years by the author. The operational definition of decision making found most apt for the study was follows: “regulated decision making involves making choices that increases the chances that adaptive goals will be attained”(Byrnes, 2002). Paucity of research literature was felt when inculcation of decision making skills as a practical concept with activities was explored. Decision making as a process by adolescents has been conceptualized by (Byrnes, 2002) as a four stage process:

- Identify and establish the objectives which are desired to be achieved
- Exploring and compiling the possible alternatives to reach the desired goal
- Prioritize the alternatives according to their importance
- Select the best possible alternative

All these stages of decision making do indicate psychological wellbeing as well.

Subjective perception of wellbeing (psychological) needs to be developed in a structured manner for the adolescents in schools that creates opportunities for critical thinking and enhance their decision making abilities(Byrnes, 2002).

A structured approach was used to make adolescents understand about the workings of their Own brain. Simple statements were provided and children were made to arrive at a conclusion on their own. They were assured there are no right or wrong answers. They were given the opportunity to think about the consequences of their decisions. Different hypothetical situations were provided for them to facilitate the decision making process and strategy.

They were made to understand in a simple manner as to how the brain works. They were encouraged to ask questions, support was provided along with positive encouragement for good decisions. If the child displayed mature thinking, wherein parents' perspective was also taken and empathy towards the situation this was taken as a sign of good decision making. Children were made to understand that the brain can sense danger. If it is a physical or a psychological danger, the brain will process the information. Discussions regarding the same were held with reference from their own environments. They were made to understand it was best for their own safety and they need to pay attention to those signals. Situations were also discussed which could put them at risk.

Examples of shop lifting, drugs/ substance being used at a party.

They discussed issues of social and peer pressure and how to avoid such situations.

The adolescents were made to understand the importance of moving away instantly from such a situation.

Different situations were discussed.

Discussions with adolescents were held in order to make them understand simple ways, in case they perceive the situation to be unsafe

Different social settings like school, friend's home, while shopping or while being seated in a friend's car, in a shopping mall, or when being engaged in a telephonic interaction. The brain storming sessions were held.

In situations, when an adolescent is not in a formal setting like school; the child/ adolescent needs to explore alternative methods to move out of the situation. A parent or another trusted adult can come to their rescue. Many such issues which maybe a cause of concern regarding the relationship with parents and involves decision making taking into account the implications of a decision were discussed in the brain storming session.

The study was conducted for a month with adolescents participating for an hour for three days in a week.

The results were found to be promising with respect to relationship with parents, and an enhanced sense of responsibility with respect to the decisions taken and the resultant consequence as per the self-report of the participants

The study has its limitations, as it is exploratory in nature and no control group was taken up. This has its significance as it can be used with a wider group using statistical measures to establish its effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study supports the premise that good decision making skills can be inculcated in adolescents. Methods like brain storming in hypothetical conflicting situations were discussed as a mode of making children reflect on decision making abilities in adolescents. Programs for adolescents can be organized in schools as a whole school approach to inculcate critical thinking and decision making skills.

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