A Theory of Mind Based Programme for Enhancement of Children's Social Skills

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Theory of mind refers to the ability to attribute mental states to the self and others. This concept links up two very important areas of human development namely, cognitive and social. The quality of our relationships is affected by the extent to which we understand other people's feelings, needs and motivation. Social insight and understanding of the social environment are often considered to be important abilities that underlie socially skilled behaviour. Aspects of relationships ranging from shared humour, to manipulation of control and power within a dyadic relationship, depend on a sophisticated grasp of others' desires, needs, ideas and capacities. Theory of mind and identification of emotions can be seen as complementary to each other (Steerneman, 1994). Placing one's self in the position of others occurs with the help of a theory of mind. Social insight and understanding of the social environment are often considered to be important abilities that underlie socially skilled behaviour. He has introduced an intervention programme, a social cognition training which is based directly on theory of mind ideas. Children with difficulties in social functioning, often appear to have difficulty in attributing mental states to others, which contributes to a reduced ability to empathise with others. This recognition allied with other ideas concerning social-cognitive development provides the framework for Steerneman's training approach. In Steerneman's work, theory of mind is approached through tasks aimed at learning to recognise the difference between fantasy and reality, learning to assess a social situation and learning to recognise the intentions of others. Follwing the similar trend the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between Theory of Mind and Social Skills.

Objectives

Objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To study the relationship between theory of mind and social skills of children.

2. To develop and use a theory of mind based training programme to enhance the social skills of children with social skill deficits.
3. To modify the programme in a manner that it can be incorporated in the class curriculums of younger children and be taught by the class teachers.

METHOD OF STUDY

Design

This study followed a single-group pre-test-post-test design. The sample for intervention was identified based on Theory of Mind task and Social Skill questionnaires. Post-intervention assessment was done using the Social Skill questionnaire.

Participants

For the first phase of study a total of 150 students from grades 3rd, 5thand 7th were taken from two government schools of Delhi. For the second phase children showing social skill deficits were selected. Based on their assessment of social skills, a total of 66 children constituted the sample for intervention.

Tools Used

Standardised tasks and rating scales were used to assess the theory of mind and social skills of the sample. A questionnaire and a checklist were used to assess child's social skills and a story task was given to assess child's false belief. As these tests are internationally constructed instruments, necessary modifications were made for Indian children.

• Social skills measures

These measures were developed by S.H.Spence. The two measures were: Social Situation checklist and Social Skill questionnaire. These were then translated in Hindi, and certain modifications were made in the items according to Indian context. The adapted versions of Social Skill Questionnaire and Social Situation Checklist are called *Samajik Kaushal Prashnawali* and *Samajik Paristhti Suchi* respectively.

• Theory of Mind task

The task consisted of a false belief story i.e. *chocolate box story*. The story was narrated to the children with the help of pictures. After the narration of the story children were asked different questions assessing their false belief understanding (First-order, Second-order).

Procedure

The present project was carried out in three phases.

Phase 1:

The first phase was an assessment phase. The assessment of 150 children was done from three groups- Grade 3, Grade 5 and Grade 7 on their social skills and ToM abilities.

Phase 2:

In the second phase, a Theory of Mind based Intervention Programme was constructed and carried out with 66 students identified as having social skill deficits.

Phase 3:

In the third phase of the study 16 students were selected for Individual Intervention. These were the students who showed lessened benefits in some domains but overall showed improvement in social skills after second phase.

Result and Discussion:

Phase 1:

On the basis of the obtained scores, students were categorised as those having good social skills, average and poor social skills. The criteria for classification are as follows:

Good social skills: Above 75 per cent, i.e. those obtaining scores above 45.

Average social skills: Between 50 per cent and 75 per cent, i.e. those obtaining a score between 30 and 45.

Poor social skills: Below 50 per cent, i.e. those obtaining below 30.

Apart from being investigated on social skills, students were also given a theory of mind test. The student's responses were classified as: mental state (elaborate), mental state (non-elaborate), and non-mental state. A one-way ANOVA was applied to see if there was any significant difference in the (Theory of Mind) ToM scores across children having different levels (good, average and poor) of social skills. A significant difference was found to occur, **$F_{(2, 146)} = 12.29$, $P < 0.01$.**

Phase 2:

The second phase of the study involved implementing the Intervention programme. The students who obtained a total score of Average and Poor were selected. For each student, the deficit

domain was identified based on the 6 domains in the questionnaire: Social Anxiety, Assertiveness, Control, Conflict Situation, Dealing with Authority Figure and Making Friends.

Post-intervention the children were again assessed on *Samajik Paristhiti Suchi.* A 't' test was applied to assess if there was any significant difference in the students' social skills post-intervention. No significant difference was found between the pre-test and post -test total scores of the children found to have deficit in Phase 1. Further, t-test was also applied to see if there was any significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores in every domain. It was found that the domain of 'Making Friends'had a significant increase between pre and post-intervention. In other words, students reported an increase in their ability to make friends and maintain friendships. Further, the mean scores of students were also analysed domain wise. Doing this, it was found that along with an improvement in score in the domain of 'making friends', there was an improvement in the domain of 'social anxiety'. Thus, it can be suggested that children's anxiety or discomfort in social situations reduced and they had an improvement in making friends and maintaining friendships.

Interpretation

The intervention programme has shown mixed results. While students have shown improvement in some domains, they have also shown no improvement in other domains, as seen in their profiles. There was a significant difference between pre-test and post-test for one domain i.e. Making Friends. In other words, students reported greater number of friends, improved ability to start new friendships, resolving conflicts with friends, approaching a group of friends to start playing and maintaining friendships. At the same time, many students also showed improvement in social anxiety, i.e. they have reduced discomfort in dealing with strangers and in social situations. A significant positive correlation was found between the total post-test scores of Social Anxiety and Making Friends (r=0.47, $p \leq 0.05$). In other words, as students' Social Anxiety reduces their friendships also improve (higher scores on social anxiety in assessment questionnaire indicate reduced social anxiety).

A difference between the three grades (Grade 3, 5 and 7) is observed. It is seen that Grade 5 has shown maximum improvement. The mean score of students in Grade 5 has improved in 5 out of 6 domains: Social Anxiety, Assertiveness, Conflict situations, Problem

with Authority Figure and Making friends. This may have occurred because Grade 5 students were most receptive to the Intervention amongst all three grades as per their developmental level, they were more settled/less impulsive and had a higher self awareness than younger students (Grade 3), and more open/receptive than older students (Grade 7 who were preadolescents). The preadolescent stage is generally associated with changes in physical, emotional self and is seen to be marked by social identity crisis; this may be the reason for the Grade 7 students to be a little resistant in accepting the training.

Limitations of the study

One of the major limitations of the present study was that the context of the child's development including his parents and teachers were not included in intervention. It is critical that the child's home and school environment provides models of prosocial behaviour and reinforces prosocial behaviour in children. This could not be addressed in the present study.

There was also a limitation in the assessment carried out in the study. The students were identified for intervention on the basis of social skill questionnaire. Observation, both pretest and post-test, should have been included in assessment. Situational tasks should have also been used in assessment to provide a more complete profile for each student's social skills.

Furthermore, the entire classroom should have been included in the intervention. Instead, students with deficit were removed from the classroom to participate in a formal social skills training programme. Research suggests that rather than removing aggressive and noncompliant students from the classroom for individual or small-group training, interventions should be integrated into the regular classroom, not only to teach prosocial behaviours in the setting in which they will be used, but also to prevent socially competent students from rejecting their socially inept classmates and driving them further into deviant peer groups (Webster-Stratton, 1993).

Suggestions for future research

Social skills training should follow a longitudinal approach. This will allow constant monitoring and supervision of the child's progress and allow the researcher to design developmentally appropriate

activities. It will also enable the child to gradually become self-aware and practice the skills in everyday life.

Furthermore, the social skill training should be integrated into the regular classroom activities. Rather than removing the child with social deficits from the classroom, socially competent children in the classroom should also be involved in the training programme. This will enable prosocial behaviours to be learnt in the setting in which they will be used, and also prevent socially competent students from rejecting their socially inept classmates and driving them further into deviant peer groups.

Parents and teachers are a critical source of socially skilled adults who can be modeled by children and who can reinforce their prosocial behaviour. Thus, it is critical to provide parent and teacher training and to integrate them in the social skill training programme. The intervention programme should have an ecological approach i.e. where student problems are seen as arising not only from child characteristics but also from mismatches between student variables and environmental variables, including classroom management and instructional practices (Barnett, 2002; Truscott et al., 2005).

The assessment of the child should include parent and teacher reports, children's self reports, classroom and home observation, as well as situational tasks. This will allow the researcher to obtain a complete profile of the child and target the areas where intervention is required.

Conclusion

In spite of the shortcomings of the research, it can be concluded that a Theory of Mind based training programme, which focuses on perspective taking and empathy would be effective in enhancing the social skills of school children.