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Skill-Building Efficacy Retraining

As I approached the group, I noticed that participants were scattered throughout the room; no one sat with anyone else. I was working with a group that had labeled itself “The Outcasts.” Others had repeatedly tried to work with this group. The group was defiant, self-serving, and accusatory. The members were convinced that someone else, not themselves, had caused their misery. I suggested that we form a drama club and write our own play. We practiced skits that demonstrated interpersonal conflicts to help create ideas, and we studied the format for writing a play. The group dove into writing a play with hostility and vengeance as their primary motives. We were able to meet for only an hour once a week, but the students soon started bringing in scenes that they had written at home. The writing process encouraged them to think reflectively, but the editing process, compiling all that they had written and selecting the material to use, was the most productive. Sometimes we acted out scenes and then discussed how the audience would receive them. This perspective taking, seeing their thoughts and actions through someone else’s eyes, was very constructive. Rehearsals often spent more time talking about why someone would speak or think in a certain way than on performance techniques. On the afternoon of the performance, the students wanted to cancel it, claiming technical difficulties. They were afraid that their peers would not understand what they had written. The play was very much about their group and how they felt.

Their fears were unfounded. The play opened doors of understanding.

Many educational programs stress self-esteem, but children need more than high self-esteem to do well in the classroom. Children may believe that they are total failures without disliking themselves. Self-esteem is a judgment of self-worth, that is, whether you like or dislike yourself. Self-efficacy, however, is a judgment of personal capability, that is, whether or not one feels able to accomplish a particular task or perform a certain action.

There is no relationship between self-efficacy and self-esteem (Bandura, 1977). Efficacy, not self-esteem, accounts for academic success (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). Efficacy fosters engagement (Schunk, 1991). Efficacy influences the effectiveness and consistency with which children apply what they know, and high self-efficacy affects the quality of children’s thinking by increasing their persistence (Bandura, 1997). Efficacy is a key factor in preventing addictive and risky behaviors

(Petraitis, Flay, & Miller, 1995). Perceived self-efficacy is a controlling variable with behavioral intentions and behavior change (Schwarzer & Fuchs, 1995). Efficacy also affects moral and social development; therefore, efficacy should concern the classroom teacher, school counselor, psychologist, and, indeed, all practitioners who work with children.

Self-efficacy is the first essential component of any successful preventative group intervention program. A group intervention must strengthen self-efficacy to address the problem of academic failure successfully.

Rebuilding Self-Efficacy

Children's belief that they can work a math problem is a self-efficacy judgment. Self-efficacy is not a measurement of skills or abilities; instead, self-efficacy is your belief of what you can do with your skills and abilities. The self-assurance with which children approach a task influences whether they make good or poor use of their abilities. Success builds self-efficacy. Failure undermines children's self-efficacy, especially when failure occurs before they have time to establish a strong belief in their ability to succeed (Bandura, 1997). Children with a high degree of efficacy visualize themselves as being successful. Children who doubt their ability to accomplish a task (efficacy) visualize themselves as failures and dwell on what will go wrong instead of what they might accomplish. Children with low self-efficacy shy away from difficult tasks, put forth a weak commitment to accomplish goals, dwell on obstacles or problems, give up quickly, and perceive any setback or failure as a total failure (Bandura, 1995).

Play and Learning

Theorists have suggested since 1955 that children can be best educated through structured play activities, and that children can best learn to cope with developmental life tasks through an atmosphere of play (Axline, 1955; Frank, 1955; Lebo, 1955). Play therapy, for example, grew out of the need to help children express their feelings and problems. Children express their feelings and problems more comfortably through play because play is part of a child's natural developmental learning process. Group-centered interventions are not, however, just another play-based therapeutic technique for use with children and youth. Group-centered interventions have grown out of a need to help young people erase the stigmatizing effects of failure, rebuild self-efficacy, and rekindle developmental well-being so they can resume their place as positive, fully engaged participants in the classroom.

Both play-therapy and play-activity group counseling (Gazda, 1989) are frequently used in school-based settings. Although traditional group counseling and play-therapy groups have succeeded with various school-based problems, neither counseling

nor play therapy has proven to be all that successful in dealing with academic classroom failure (Hellendoorn, Van der Kooij, & Sutton-Smith, 1994; Pumfrey & Elliot, 1970). Neither have they been completely successful for efficacy retraining (Fall, 1999; Ray, Bratton, Rhine, & Jones, 2001).

Group-centered interventions, however, are specifically designed to alleviate academic failure and rebuild self-efficacy. The advantage to using group interventions over traditional counseling is that group-centered interventions combine skill-building and intrinsic motivation to rebuild self-efficacy. Counseling groups in schools often stress developmental growth and focus on methods of prevention (Kulic, Dagley, & Horne, 2001), but do not teach academic skills. Group-centered interventions stress developmental growth, prevention, academic skills, and self-efficacy.

Developing a School-Based Efficacy-Retraining Program

Efficacy beliefs can be transformed from negative to positive through efficacy-retraining or structured programs where children experience success, but in order to do so, the programs must follow the basic principles of efficacy development. Albert Bandura (1995) lists four ways to develop a high degree of efficacy:

1. *Mastery experiences*: The efficacy retraining program must help the child develop the ability to overcome problems and obstacles. The program must offer more than just skills training, but, without skills, there can be no efficacy.
2. *Vicarious experiences*: Modeling and observing the success and perseverance of others who are viewed to be similar to oneself is extremely important in rebuilding self-efficacy. The task must be neither beyond the child's ability nor competitive; otherwise, self-efficacy will be lowered. In such a case, children will doubt their ability to repeat a difficult, even successful, action (Bandura, 1995). Therefore, ability and effort must be balanced and intertwined.
3. *Social persuasion*: The need to stress improving oneself instead of comparing oneself to others.
4. *Physiological and emotional states*: In an efficacy-retraining program, situational stressors, the child's mood, and previous experiences and perceptions must all play a role.

One way to apply Bandura's profile for a successful efficacy-retraining program is to look at an example of a group-centered intervention in relationship to efficacy retraining. A case study analysis helps illustrate how each of Bandura's steps can be applied to an actual program. Research about at-risk children has identified a strong relationship between efficacy and student achievement (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). Academic failure, particularly low reading scores, has also been shown to predict violence and health risk behaviors in adolescence (Fleming et al., 2004; Hawkins et al., 1998). Since reading is one of the first, and often one of the most stigmatizing, aspects of classroom failure, our example will be a group-centered efficacy-retraining program for at-risk readers.

The Camp Sharigan Program: A Case Study

It is not enough for schools just to teach children how to read; schools must also develop programs that build self-efficacy. I spent four years developing the Camp Sharigan program during my work with inner-city children. My team and I traveled to Tampa, Chicago, Dallas, and the Bronx. Camp Sharigan follows Bandura's four principles. The first task was to create skill-building experiences that would help children master reading problems encountered in the classroom.

Mastery Experiences

An efficacy-retraining program must include skill-building activities that teach skills that the students have not learned in the classroom, but it must include more than that. As Bandura (1995) indicates, a successful self-efficacy program must also help the child learn ways to overcome problems and obstacles encountered in the classroom. Since research indicates that at-risk students are often not able to work well or achieve their full potential in a traditional classroom structure (Morris, Shaw, & Perney, 1990), it becomes essential to develop group-centered interventions to meet their needs.

Children learn through experience. The mere imparting of information is not enough; a child must experience the change. It is not enough to tell children that they are improving; children must see and experience that improvement. Encouraging a child who is not showing signs of improvement can actually harm the child's self-efficacy (Flammer, 1995).

Hands-on activities help children experience improvement. Camp Sharigan uses ten hands-on activities to increase intrinsic motivation: pop-up books, puppet plays, word games, storytelling, story writing, craft projects, funny stories, an unrestricted supply of books to choose from and read, story starters, and phonics games.

In developing Camp Sharigan, my goal was to create a fun, hands-on learning environment using group-centered structured play techniques, but I wanted these hands-on activities to go a step beyond just being fun, creative ways to learn; therefore, I designed hands-on structured play interventions that stressed more than just learning new classroom skills.

An example of a structured play intervention with therapeutic intent is capturing tricky words. Instead of working from the usual spelling list, where the teacher counts how many words the student spells incorrectly, a word that a child cannot pronounce, read, or spell becomes not a word missed but a new tricky word to capture and learn. The safe environment of play makes it okay not to be able to read or spell a word. Learning words becomes a game rather than a penalty. Without fear of embarrassment, children are more willing to be adventurous and try to learn.

Each time the children capture a tricky word, they follow a four-step method to learn the tricky word. With the help of the camp guide (a tutor stationed at each learning center) the children (1) sound out the word and use the word in a sentence, (2) tell the meaning of the word, (3) spell the word out loud, and (4) write the words they captured (missed) on a "poison-ivy" leaf and place their leaf on the poison-ivy

vine around the room. The four-step learning process is essential to the tricky word concept. The group intervention would not work without the four-step method. When the two concepts are combined, this simple game helps children increase spelling, reading, and sight word proficiency (Clanton Harpine, 2005).

A paper poison ivy vine is used because poison ivy is often hard to identify in the woods; it is tricky, just as words are tricky. At Camp Sharigan, children are taught that they must be careful when identifying, spelling, or capturing tricky words so that they capture words correctly. The use of the words “poison-ivy vine” reminds children to be careful as they move from workstation to workstation. The concept of the poison-ivy vine is used as a fun way of tackling the cognitive process of learning new words.

Children enjoy capturing tricky words and adding them to the camp poison-ivy vine. At the end of the week, when the poison-ivy vine is measured to see how long it has grown, the children cheer when they see how many words they have captured. This structured play technique enables children who once feared spelling tests to shout in victory over the dreaded task. This is more than teaching a skill. This group-centered intervention reduces the sense of failure and anxiety often associated with spelling. It rebuilds self-efficacy by improving the children’s belief that they can spell.

Vicarious Experience

Group-centered interventions must also allow children to observe their success and perseverance as they work with others in a group setting. When I began developing Camp Sharigan, the question was to determine how best to provide this modeling and observing experience with group process. Each task had to be both noncompetitive and appropriate for the child’s skill level. To test various group approaches, my team and I went to struggling inner-city locations.

At the first site, the school used traditional reading groups of seven or eight students. The students were divided by age, but the reading circles did not work. The children could not read well enough to follow along in the book while someone else read.

We implemented story writing; having the children write their own stories was very effective. One student was threatening and belligerent when we arrived. When we left at the end of the week, he hugged us and promised that he would publish his own book some day.

Learning centers provide excellent vicarious experiences, but I also wanted to include the therapeutic power of group cohesion. I was worried that using learning centers would disrupt the therapeutic benefits of working together in a group. At our next location, twenty-four children came in the evening after school for a three-hour session. Four learning centers were scattered around one large room. The children rotated from table to table at designated intervals. At each learning center, the children worked on a specified reading assignment. They read and followed step-by-step directions for a different project at each station. The idea was to teach the children to read and follow simple craft directions to improve their comprehension.

We had the children make a pop-up book, and each evening ended with a puppet play, presented by the children. Motivation levels were high; two children even

gave up their weekly bike-riding time to come to the reading clinic every night. The pop-up book project, completed in stages over an entire week, proved to be such an excellent motivator that children begged their parents each evening to let them return the next day so that they could complete another page in their book.

By the time we reached our third site, the program had expanded into a five-day, two-hour-a-day format, featuring ten learning centers. Helpers worked at each learning center. Treasure hunt maps directed everyone individually through the learning centers. Twenty-eight children, a mixture of first through third graders, came directly after school. The children usually worked in small groups that rotated between homework-based activities. The older children in particular enjoyed working at their own pace with the treasure hunt maps instead of being confined to just one group. The treasure hunt maps also distributed the group so that children did not move in clumps or clusters. There were never more than four or five children at a center at a time.

On the last day at our third site, the after-school group sponsoring the reading clinic held a parent program. The children worked all week to prepare a special puppet play for their parents. The play was about pollution. Children in the audience watched as child after child on stage tackled difficult pollution terms, learning to sound out confusing sounds instead of giving up. As one child in the group said, "I didn't think he could say that word. That's really good." He then picked up his puppet skit off the floor where he had thrown it, turned the page, and started practicing his own part in the play.

Camp Sharigan had become a vicarious experience where children could observe success and perseverance in others. This improves self-efficacy by letting the children see other children who are similar to themselves experience success.

At our next site, we instituted pre- and posttesting to ensure that children were actually improving in mastery of skills. The children showed improvement in spelling, reading, and sight words during the week-long reading clinic. They still sustained improvement one year later (Clanton Harpine & Reid, submitted 2008a).

Camp Sharigan combines silent and oral reading, puppets that teach phonics, and pop-up story books that encourage children to write their own stories. In addition to teaching new words, improving comprehension, and working with phonics, it employs group cohesion and interpersonal skill building to develop a complete efficacy-retaining program.

At Camp Sharigan, the students make their own pop-up books; this encourages them to write stories. Puppets, storytelling, and reading and following directions to complete the pop-up book provide an excellent modeling experience. Children who had no interest in reading were motivated to read the directions in order to work on the project.

Social Persuasion

The goal of Camp Sharigan is to maximize the therapeutic effects of group process and group cohesion. The program is challenging but not too hard; it is neither competitive nor comparative. Efficacy retraining and play are built into the program. It is a one week, ten-hour group intervention; therefore, the group process must be highly

structured from the minute the children arrive until the minute they leave. Children must be able to see their self-improvement throughout the week in order for social persuasion to be successful.

Physiological and Emotional States

When children enter the classroom, they bring with them their personalities, self-concepts, efficacy beliefs, perceptions, and previous experiences, good and bad alike. The school, the teacher, the family, the community, and the classroom of peers all add to how children perceive their actions in the classroom.

Group-centered interventions provide a motivational environment in which children can learn basic skills and work at mastering a task at their own pace. The group serves as a medium to practice social skills, teamwork, and group participation.

Learning and change occur through group-centered interventions by structuring the child's behaviors. Action-oriented, hands-on learning centers and one-on-one remedial assistance, such as those used at Camp Sharigan, help children grow developmentally and learn more successfully. Challenging activities push the child to work slightly above their present level of development, thus learning new skills and solving old problems.

An atmosphere of play helps children learn by promoting growth and well-being, by helping children accomplish school objectives, and by enabling children to make adjustments in how they learn (Carmichael, 1991; Landreth, 2002). With group-centered interventions, children develop new pathways for learning material that they were unsuccessful in learning in the classroom.

A child's efficacy beliefs affect academic performance, cognitive skills, classroom coursework, and standardized testing (Schunk, 1989). Efficacy beliefs can differ from one subject to another, such as from math to reading. Cooperative classrooms can raise self-efficacy, while competitive classrooms lower self-efficacy. Children with high self-efficacy are more eager to participate in class, work harder on a task, and continue to work hard even when they encounter difficulties (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 1995). When self-efficacious children encounter a word that they do not know, they will sound out the word, decipher the meaning faster, and persist at the task longer. They will also choose more challenging projects. Therefore, it is important to develop group interventions to help all children attain a high degree of self-efficacy.

Real-World Applications

Observational Extensions

Watch children as they read. Go to the library and watch children selecting books. How do they select a book? Are they careful not to disarrange the shelf or get the books out of order? Do they immediately open the cover of the book and begin to

read? Or do they place their selected book on the table, talk to a neighbor, or look around the room?

Place a stack of books in a disarranged pile on the floor, dumped in a heap. Give children permission to look at the books. What happens? Do the children seem more enthusiastic sifting through a pile of disarranged books than searching for a book on a neatly organized library shelf? Why? What does this tell us about motivation? Do rules stifle motivation? How can we maintain order and discipline in the classroom or library, and yet encourage motivation at the same time?

A Ready-to-Use Group-Centered Intervention: “The Adventure”

Poor reading skills and poor comprehension often lead to classroom disruptive behavior. This group-centered intervention helps children increase their comprehension skills by applying and organizing details in a story.

This intervention was tested in a research study conducted in 2005 with at-risk readers. After the intervention, the at-risk readers outscored nonparticipants on a comprehension quiz (Clanton Harpine, 2005). The teachers also reported that participants returned to the classroom and worked more effectively after the intervention.

Objective: To increase comprehension skills through hands-on activities.

Time Needed: 1 hour

1. Read the story (see below) to the children.
2. Have the children complete the story by writing their own ending.
3. Have the children draw a map, which illustrates the path that Mr. Bear and his friends took on their adventure.
4. Have the children discuss their story endings and maps.

The Story: “The Adventure”

Mr. Bear was bored. He was tired of getting up every morning and not having anything to do. “I need an adventure,” said Mr. Bear. “I want to go and do something exciting,” he said to himself. “But what can I do?”

Mr. Bear thought and thought. “Maybe I can build a new house,” he said. “No, it takes too long to build a house and besides building a house is very hard work. I want to go on an exciting adventure. Maybe I can go shopping and buy something new. No, I don’t want to go shopping. I’m tired of shopping,” said Mr. Bear to himself. “I want to go and do something I have never done before. I want ... I want ... I want to cross the lake.”

Mr. Bear lived on the north side of a large lake. He could not see across the lake because the lake was too wide. Mr. Bear could not see the ends of the lake because the lake was too long. The lake stretched as far as anyone could see.

Mr. Bear had always been curious about what lay beyond the lake, but he had never been to the other side. "That's it," he said. "I'll be an explorer and travel south across the lake and see what is on the other side. I'll have a grand adventure," said Mr. Bear.

Mr. Bear went into his cave house and began to pack for his trip across the lake. He packed a toothbrush, comb, change of clothes, and a compass. "I don't want to get lost," said Mr. Bear to himself.

"I'll need a friend. I need someone to share my adventure with," said Mr. Bear.

Mr. Bear went down to the edge of the lake where the beavers had made a small pond on the side near the trees. Mr. Bear waded out to the beaver dam and knocked politely.

Benjamin Beaver poked his head up out of the lookout hole. "Good morning, Mr. Bear," said Benjamin Beaver pleased to see his friend on such a bright and sunny morning. "What brings you over to my humble abode?" asked Benjamin Beaver.

"I'm going on a grand and glorious adventure," said Mr. Bear. "I'm going to cross the lake. Would you like to come along?"

"Cross the lake! No, never," said Benjamin Beaver. "Why would I be foolish enough to try and cross the lake? That's nonsense. If we were meant to cross the lake we would have been born on the other side. We are meant to live on this side of the lake. I have absolutely no plan to ever cross the lake. There's no telling what's out there. There could be monsters living in that lake. No, no, I most definitely don't want to cross the lake, and you shouldn't cross it either."

"I'm bored," said Mr. Bear. "I want to see what is on the other side. I need an adventure."

"Better to be bored than lost" said Benjamin Beaver.

"I won't get lost," said Mr. Bear. "I'm bringing my compass."

"I won't go with you," said Benjamin Beaver shaking his head. "I have trees to gnaw down. I need to expand the lodge. I don't have time for such foolishness as crossing the lake. If you intend to waste your time, you must go alone."

Mr. Bear waded back to shore as Benjamin Beaver dove back down underneath the water. Mr. Bear crawled out of the pond dripping wet and walked on his hind legs over to the old hollow oak tree. Mr. Bear knocked politely again.

Blue Jay stuck his head out and said, "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to disturb you," said Mr. Bear. "I'm going on a great and wonderful adventure, and I just wanted to know if you would like to go along?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to cross the lake," said Mr. Bear.

"Cross the lake! Why on earth would you want to cross the lake? Do you have any idea what is out there?"

"No, that's why I want to go. I want to know what lies on the other side of the lake. Will you go with me?"

"I have been to the other side," said Blue Jay.

"You have? What's it like? Did you like it? When did you go?"

"It wasn't worth the trip, and I don't want to go again," said Blue Jay.

"Oh please," said Mr. Bear. "It would be wonderful to have a friend and a guide on the trip. And since you have been before, you'd know the best route to take. We'd have a wonderful time."

"Well, it might be fun, but it's dangerous. Are you sure you want to cross the lake?"

"Yes, I'm certain," said Mr. Bear.

"Very well then," said Blue Jay. "I'll go with you and be your guide."

"Fantastic!"

"What's fantastic?" said little Sister Bear, who came bouncing over the hill in pursuit of a butterfly that easily escaped her grasp.

"Blue Jay and I are going on an adventure together. We're going to cross the lake," said Mr. Bear.

"Oh goody," said little Sister Bear. "I want to go, too."

"No, it'll be much too dangerous for you. We must go alone," said Mr. Bear.

Little Sister Bear began to cry.

"Very well, don't cry. You can go," said Mr. Bear.

"Goody, goody, goody," said Sister Bear. "I must go and pack."

"Pack? Pack what? Who's packing?" said Tuffy Turtle, poking his head out of his shell to see what the excitement was about.

"I am," said Sister Bear. "We're going on an adventure. You should come too."

"Never!" said Blue Jay. "Do you have any idea how long it takes to cross the lake and how slow Tuffy is? We'll never get across the lake if we have to wait on him."

"Well, that's just too bad," said Sister Bear. "You're never supposed to leave anyone out. If one gets to go, then we should all get a chance to go. Otherwise, we all have to stay home. That's the rule."

Everyone was silent for a minute. Then Mr. Bear said, "It'll be great to have you along, Tuffy. Hurry, go pack!"

As the four set out on their adventure, Blue Jay rode on top of Mr. Bear's head so that he could be the lookout. Tuffy clamped onto Sister Bear's fur so that she could pull him along as she swam. Mr. Bear and Sister Bear sank down into the lake and began to swim.

Little Sister Bear was a strong swimmer for her age, but she soon began to get tired. Everywhere you looked there was water, with no place to rest.

Blue Jay seemed to sense Mr. Bear's concern as Sister Bear began to drop further and further behind. "Will we reach the other side soon?" asked Mr. Bear.

"No, not for awhile; it'll be a long swim. We've barely begun," said Blue Jay. "But there is a small island just ahead. We can't stop for long, but maybe just a minute to rest. It's not safe; so we need to be extra quiet and only rest for a few minutes."

Discussion with the Children

"You're the authors. Will the four stop to rest at the island? What will happen while they are on the island? Who will they meet? What happens next?"



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