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Early Forms of Caring in Constructivist Classrooms
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6. Abstract:
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Early Forms of Caring in Constructivist Classrooms

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In developmentally appropriate curriculum and guidance, the educational context provides opportunities for young children to construct moral understandings from their everyday personal experiences. Early childhood constructivist classrooms, with their respect for children's autonomy and their de-emphasis on adult authority, are expressly designed to promote self-regulation in young children. Although self-regulation is a fundamental goal, it is not the only important capacity that young children develop. In this project, we consider another aspect of moral development: the development of prosocial behavior, i.e., behavior that benefits other people. We attempt to provide a comprehensive description of the caring behaviors that emerge in very young children in constructivist classrooms. To date very few studies have examined prosocial behavior in the first years of life, and the majority of these studies looked at only one or a few such behaviors and were conducted in laboratory settings.

Thirty-seven children aged 3-40 months from three classrooms (infant, toddler, and "transitioner") were videotaped in four activities (mealtime, structured play, clean-up, and free play) for randomly-selected three-minute intervals over a three week period, for an average of 91 minutes per child. The setting was a child development center of exceptional quality that provided state of the art constructivist curriculum. Using a

combination of event and time sampling, four trained observers coded each interval using an observation system consisting of 19 exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories. We focus here on the ten categories of prosocial behavior: sharing, “share my experience” behaviors (consisting of pointing and showing), responsiveness to distress (consisting of attention to the distress of others, distress to their distress, i.e. empathy, and comforting others in distress), affection, performing the work of adults, helping, and caregiving to dolls, animals, or peers in symbolic play. Where appropriate, the target of the behavior, i.e., whether the behavior was directed toward a peer or an adult, was also noted. To assess reliability, a second coder coded approximately 21% of the intervals, with reliability intervals balanced across observers, days of observation, and individual children. The kappa reliability estimate on the full set of codes was .72.

Despite the fact that prosocial behavior is not the agenda in constructivist classrooms, and may even be downplayed, we expect to find that it flourishes in our three classrooms. Behavior frequencies, rates per minute, and percentages of the total behavior will be calculated for each child for each day. Age and gender differences will be examined. The degree to which behaviors are highly intercorrelated within children, and thus a manifestation of the same underlying prosocial tendency, will be explored. Specifically, we will examine the extent to which the most frequently occurring prosocial behaviors in natural interactions with adults and other children form consistent indicators of behavior tendencies at this young age. In our discussion, we will attempt to account for the emergence of these early forms of caring by focusing on child and teacher characteristics, as well as processes within constructivist classrooms.