

# Changes in Peer Relationships Among Young Children in China

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## ABSTRACT

The ecology of human development refers to the scientific study of the mutual adaptation between human beings and the environment in which they live directly, focusing on the relationship between human beings and their developmental ecology. Yuri Bronfenbrenner believed that authentic and natural environments are the main source of influence on the development of children and adolescents. This study uses Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology of human development as a basis for studying peer relationship change in young children, exploring the characteristics of peer relationship development and the causes that influence peer relationship changes in young children.

## INTRODUCTION

"Peers are people with whom young children spend time and who have the same social cognitive skills. Peer relationships are formed when young children of the same or similar age demonstrate a collaborative relationship with each other in interaction [1]. Some scholars have defined peer relationships from a cognitive perspective, and Zhang Wenxin believes that peer relationships mainly refer to interpersonal relationships established and developed in the process of interaction between individuals of the same age [2], who have the same level of psychological development. That is to say, the relationship formed by people with the same or similar social cognitive ability in the process of interaction. Some scholars have proposed from a sociological perspective that peer relationships are free and equal relationships formed between children and their peers who have the same social rights as them [3]. Some scholars have suggested that peer relationships are formed in the process of communication, in which peers or individuals of comparable psychological development use verbal or non-verbal symbols to exchange ideas, convey thoughts and express emotions and needs [4]. Peer relationships are the behavior of young children of the same or similar age interacting with each other in learning, play and life, and the interpersonal relationships that result. This perspective emphasizes the interactive nature of peer relationships [5]. In summary, peer relationships in early childhood are more uniformly defined as interpersonal relationship that is established and developed through mutual cooperation and influence

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when young children engage in common activities with children of similar or the same age in their lives, including not only external behavioral interactions between peers but also mutual psychological, emotional and attitudinal.

Peer relationships are influenced by individual emotions, perceptions and the environment and can change. Emotional factors are related to the attitudes of parents and caregivers toward young children [6]. Cognitive ability refers to the ability to enable individuals to acquire knowledge and solve problems. Cognitive abilities include language, inhibitory control, attention, reasoning, and working memory [7]. Language skills are both a major component of young children's peer interaction skills and an important factor in peer relationships [8]. Good language skills help children to communicate their ideas and better resolve conflicts between peers during peer interactions, and cognitive skills in language and reasoning influence the extent to which peer relationships develop by affecting social behavior. Executive function and information processing speed also have an impact on peer relationships. Executive functioning refers to the range of higher cognitive abilities that allow individuals to be aware of and effectively control their thinking and behavior, including primarily the core competencies of inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility and working memory [9]. Inhibitory control helps children to overcome the distractions of self-perspective and self-experience in order to better understand the perspectives of others and to inhibit inappropriate speech or behavior in interactions; while cognitive flexibility allows children to shift flexibly between self-perspective and others' perspectives in order to better understand the different mental states between themselves and others, and between different peers; children with higher levels of working memory are able to Children with higher levels of working memory can more easily remember conversations and interaction information in order to engage in appropriate feedback behavior. One factor that affects executive functioning and cognitive abilities such as information processing and reasoning is attention. Young children's attention is influenced by their environment. Therefore, this paper explores the influence of the environment on children's attention and other cognitive skills based on changes in the environment in which they grow up, and thus goes further to investigate the impact of changes in the environment and cognitive skills on peer motivation and peer interaction processes. This will lead to a summary of the changes and causes of peer relationships among Chinese children from 1980 to 2022. At the same time, the mechanisms of individual emotional, cognitive and environmental influences on peer relationships will be investigated.

Peer relationships provide ample opportunities for children to learn about experiences, communicate their emotions, vent their feelings, learn social rules, refine their personalities and develop their personalities. It is an important source of meeting children's needs for social development, emotional support and secure support. Children gain satisfaction in close friendship relationships, experience self-worth, belonging and inclusion, and thus increase their self-confidence. Therefore, in recent years, many scholars have studied the influencing factors of peer relationships, developmental characteristics, measurement tools and intervention studies on peer relationships, but this paper finds that many scholars have studied adolescent groups or adult groups, but few scholars have studied early childhood peer relationships, but there are problems with the

development of early childhood peer relationships in China. For example, there are significant differences in social development between urban and rural children, with urban children having higher levels of social cognition, emotional stability and peer relationship development than their rural counterparts [10]. Children in rural areas have greater deficits in social interaction than their urban counterparts. The social development of rural children was significantly lower than that of their urban counterparts. As can be seen, for scholars have mainly conducted comparative studies of young children's peer relationships between different regions, but no scholars have examined what changes have occurred in young children's peer relationships based on the different stages of China's development? What are the characteristics of these relationships? Therefore, this paper introduces the time factor, divides China's development into three stages: 1978-1990, 1990-2002 and 2002-present, explores the characteristics and changes of peer relationships in these three stages, and uses the ecological theory of human development as a basis to explore the reasons for the changes.

## **ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

The ecology of human development was introduced by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 [11]. The ecology of human development refers to the scientific study of the mutual adaptation between human beings and the environment in which they live directly, focusing on the relationship between human beings and their developmental ecology [12]. He considers the real and natural environment as the main source of influence on the development of children and adolescents. The environment in which children develop consists of microsystems, mesosystems, ecosystems, and macrosystems mosaicked together in an interlocking system. The microsystem is the part of the environment that humans interact with directly and is the part that is most closely related to humans, and in the case of infants, the microsystem refers to the family. As the infant grows, the microsystem extends to the nursery, school and peer relationships. Mesosystems refer to the interconnections and interactions between two or more microsystem environments, forming a wider range of environments than the microsystem. For example, the relationship between home and school, school and community, and family and peer relationships are all mesosystems. In other words, a mesosystem is a system made up of a microsystem environment. Extra systems are environments that do not have a direct relationship with people but have an indirect influence on them, such as the work environment of parents. Although the ecosystem does not directly affect the child, the ecosystem influences the individual's development by affecting the environment to which the individual is directly exposed. The macrosystem refers to the cultures, subcultures and social environments that exist within these three systems. The macrosystem is in fact a broad ideology. It is more like a foundation for other systems or a climate that people are born into, such as the cultures of different countries, ways of interacting, etc. The interaction between different systems is the primary principle of Eco psychological research. Different systems present mutual

inclusion and interaction, and interaction between people and their environment, which enlightens researchers that research on young children should not only consider the influence of microsystems but should place young children in the context of the complete environmental system that affects their development. This view fully demonstrates the complexity and interactivity of the relationship between the individual child and the environment and is well illustrated by this view.

White argues that when studying human development, we must include the social practices that surround people as an essential part of the overall study. Zhu Jiaxiong points out that understanding the context in which young children live can predict their behavior more accurately than understanding their individual characteristics [13]. Jiang Junfeng and Wang Peiguang suggested that young children's choice of social interactions, the quality of peer relationships and psychological well-being can be influenced by the context in which they live, such as family environment, neighborhood environment and cultural practices [14]. It is evident that people's social practices and the environment in which young children grow up have an impact on their development. Therefore, based on the ecological theory of human development, this study divides the ecological environment of young children into different systems and dynamically conducts research on young children's peer relationships according to time changes, focusing on the various events related to the development of young children's peer relationships, as well as the comprehensive impact of different living environments and different people on them. The study of young children's peer relationships is conducted in real-life contexts, using the systems of young children's lives as a backdrop and emphasizing the interactivity between young children and their surroundings.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHANGES IN PEER RELATIONS PRESENTED**

This paper explores the changes in peer relations since the reform and opening up in the context of events that have taken place since then. Firstly, it shows the characteristics of group interaction-individual development-group development. At the beginning of the reform and opening up, China transitioned from a planned economy to a socialist market economy. China's economy was in transition, the pace of economic development was slow, the gap between urban and rural areas was small and many cities were village-based communities. Parents were busy with work and most children went to and from school together in groups. After school, everyone gathers to play together. Parents are also more familiar with each other and are more comfortable with children interacting with each other. As a result, parents did not restrict children's activities. As can be seen, children spent most of their time in group activities in the early years of the reform and opening up, relying more on group activities and forming peer relationships based on group play and a relatively high degree of intimacy between peers. Along with the modernization of China, and changes in the planning of cities and villages, a large number of villages began to be developed and high-rise buildings went up. The fields where children played were developed into highways and children were deprived of the

space and opportunity to play with a group of peers in an idyllic natural environment. Children were confined to a small house from the moment they were born, while their parents were busy with work and all they had to spend their childhood with were blocks, puzzles, dolls, cars, mobile phones, and cartoons. It is evident that peer relationships have shifted to an individual-based approach. With the rapid development of China's economy, social pressures have intensified, and parents' perceptions of child-rearing have changed, creating the ideology that marks are important to children's development and that learning can change their destiny. The academic pressure on children has become so heavy that many parents are enrolling children in tutorial classes and children's time after school is being squeezed, with children attending hobby classes or tuition classes after school. As a result, school and interest classes and tutorials became a space for peer interaction, and peer relations became group based. However, unlike the typical group relations based on group games at the beginning of the reform and opening-up period, this stage was a group relationship based on group learning, where parents compared their children's academic performance with each other, comparing scores and family backgrounds, and peer relations were less intimate.

In the early days of reform and opening up, most families in China had more than one child. In this large family system, older siblings took care of younger siblings, and it was common practice for parents to "criticize older children for mistakes made by younger children and to give good food to younger children first". As a result, children developed the habit of sharing with each other in a humble manner. However, as a result of national family planning in September 1982, a large number of families could only have one child, and children became the center of the family. For the grandparents in the family, in particular, the birth of grandchildren has led to the grandparents continuing their care for their children in children and transferring their full enthusiasm for them to the children. The indulgence of the grandparents has made the children very dependent on their grandparents and they have become lazy, willful and less able to take care of themselves in life. The results of a study on the effects of intergenerational education on children's behavior showed that of the 186 children who participated in the survey, only 28% said they were willing to actively interact with others, 43.5% chose to passively wait for others to interact and 21.5% refused to interact with others [15]. This indicates that children in intergenerational education are not good at interpersonal interaction and are less able to adapt to their environment. At the same time, according to the author's research, only children often show anger towards sharing their toys with their peers. As a result, irritation among peers can occur due to enjoying them alone. Although the above situations, too, were very common in peer relationships in the early years of the Reformation, parents were busy and familiar with each other, so parents rarely dealt with the conflicts that arose between children, and thus parental involvement in peer relationships was shallow during that period. In only-child families, however, parents and grandparents are more involved in their children's peer relationships because they are concerned about whether their children are being wronged or even 'bullied' in their peer relationships. This paper argues that parental involvement in peer relationships has increased. The development of peer relationships evolves from a sharing, other-focused concept to an individualized, self-focused development.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE REASONS FOR CHANGES IN PEER RELATIONSHIPS**

According to Yuri Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology of human development, parents, and families influence the development of children's peer relationships and microsystems. This paper therefore firstly discusses the reasons for the changes in peer relationships in terms of changes in parents' perceptions of education and in the material life of the family. Secondly, the kindergarten and the teacher are the mesosystems that influence the development of peer relationships, so this paper discusses them in terms of the philosophy of kindergarten education and the quality of teachers. Changes in the social environment, economy and culture are the macrosystem, and changes in the macrosystem lead to changes in the mesosystem and microsystem, which affect the development of children's peer relationships.

### **The Impact of Changes in Family Parenting Styles on Peer Relationships**

Family parenting is divided into authoritative, arbitrary, coddling and neglectful. Firstly, the authoritative type is one that controls the child's thoughts and ideas under reasonable conditions, allowing the child to think and act in a positive direction and lead the child. The authoritarian type is more arbitrary, violent, has a strong desire to control the child, overly prevents the child from thinking and acting in a way that makes the child more aggressive, or makes the child more fearful, less sociable, depressed, etc. Coddling occurs mainly in intergenerational relationships, where the child's needs are met and the child's behavior and thoughts are harbored. This results in the child being very self-centered, self-centered in group activities and having poor relationships with peers in the group. Neglectful parents tend not to react to what their children do, or even ignore their children's needs and help, resulting in a very weak emotional relationship between parents and children, which prevents children from properly establishing relevant behaviors and thoughts, weak self-control and a lack of skills to interact with peers. The results of experiments conducted by experts show a positive change in family parenting styles in general from the 1960s to the 1990s, with parenting styles becoming more accepting, democratic, tolerant and motivating [16]. Changes in family parenting styles have led to changes in peer relationships.

### **Influence of Kindergarten Teachers on Peer Relationships**

Kindergarten teachers are an important part of the micro-system of children's development and direct influence on their behavior and thinking. Children are transferred from their families to the kindergarten and receive behavior and ideas from their teachers. At that stage, the children imitate the behavior of the kindergarten teacher and indirectly influence the children's peer relationships with each other. This is why the qualifications of the kindergarten teachers, their attitude to children, and their professionalism have an impact on the children's peer relationships.

## **The Impact of Electronic Devices on Peer Relationships**

"Children nowadays always like to play with their mobile phones" has been a common comment about young children. In the past, young children's ability to understand society was extremely limited and their age determined their knowledge base. However, children in today's society can use their mobile phones to learn more and to enhance peer interaction, although there are benefits and drawbacks to using mobile phones for young children who do not have the ability to discriminate. If parents help their children choose the information that is beneficial to their development, then receiving a wealth of information from the outside world can, to some extent, expand the topics and patterns of peer interaction, learn behavioral norms and communication skills in interpersonal communication, and thus facilitate relationships with their peers in real life; uncontrolled and unfiltered access to mobile phones will inevitably lead to children becoming more and more withdrawn, and when social information from all age groups is presented to young children without reservation, it can accelerate maturation to a certain extent, leading to the phenomenon that Neil Bozeman (1985) lamented as 'the disappearance of childhood'.

## **CONCLUSION**

Using the ecological theory of human development, this paper has examined the peer relationships of Chinese adolescents, showing group interaction-individual development-group development, a deepening of parental involvement in peer relationships, and the development of peer relationships from an understanding of sharing and another-oriented concept to an individualized, self-centered development. The reasons for this change are analyzed in terms of family parenting styles, kindergarten teachers, and electronic equipment. Future research will focus on how to promote healthy peer relationships among adolescents in the context of public health and safety emergencies.

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