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THE EFFECTS OF REINFORCED COOPERATIVE EXPERIENCE ON THE
FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

by

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to experimentally manipulate cooperative behavior during middle childhood has been firmly established (Azrin and Lindsley, 1956; Mithaug and Burgess, 1968). The common strategy in this research has been to reinforce cooperation (i.e. matched responding) during Azrin and Lindsley's stylus-hole game. Attempts to use this experimental procedure, and modifications of it, to shape cooperative behavior in preschool children have been less successful (Brotsky and Thomas, 1967; Vogler, Masters, and Morrill, 1970). In each of these studies cooperative responses were obtained by less than 50% of the preschool subjects.

Sherif and Sherif (1964) stimulated a more naturalistic approach to the study of cooperation in their research of intergroup conflict and cooperation using fifth grade boys. Their study found specifically that the introduction of cooperation between groups served to reduce intergroup tensions and increase cross-group friendship preferences. The "common goals" approach used by Sherif and Sherif to stimulate cooperation has served as a basis for later naturalistic methods of producing cooperative response between individuals (Gottheil, 1955; Ballard, Gottlieb, Corman and Kaufman, 1977; Oden and Asher, 1977). The "common goals" approach of eliciting cooperative behavior has not been applied to preschool populations.

Gottheil (1955) found increased social status rankings in adolescents after group work on essay assignments. Low-status children were paired with more preferred peers and given joint essay assignments.

Results showed that cooperative work on the essay increased the intra-group status of the low preference children. Haskett (1971) provided limited support of these findings in observing the individual peer preference differences before and after cooperation training in sixth graders. Haskett prompted cooperative play between both same-sex and opposite-sex pairs of children who had neutral preferences for playing with one another. The only significant difference for pre and post sociometric rankings was an increase in preference for the opposite-sex pairs. Cooperation in the study was elicited merely by a suggestion that the members of the pairs play jointly with a specific toy. Blau and Rafferty (1970) elicited cooperation in preschoolers and found sociometric ranking increases following the cooperation. It must be noted, however, that the sociometric posttesting occurred immediately following the reinforced cooperative experience. Research on social isolates (Oden and Asher, 1977; Ballard, Gottlieb, Corman and Kaufman, 1977) found that the acceptance of isolates can be improved through coaching the skills necessary to engage or participate in group activities. Social isolates were enhanced in their friendship patterns by being exposed to methods of offering information about themselves, as well as drawing information from others in social situations.

The above findings suggest that offering mere proximity opportunities between children who do not choose each other sociometrically is not adequate for stimulating increased social preference between those children. The present study assumes that exposure to "common goals" (Sherif and Sherif, 1954), wherein each child must contribute near equal amounts of effort, will enhance the possibility