

Self-Awareness and Communication Skill Training in Foster Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Since fosters adolescents are deprived of family environment and probably the friendly relationships, some of them may develop problems in achieving self-awareness and communication skills and adjusting to the environmental conditions. Thus, this study was conducted to assess the effect of self-awareness and communication skills training on increasing the level of adjustment in foster adolescents.

Methods: In a quasi-experimental study, 30 adolescent girls with the age range of 12 to 17 were selected through accessible sampling from several Mashhad orphanages. Thirty subjects were randomly assigned to one of the experimental and control group. Then, communication and self-awareness skills in the experimental group were implemented. In addition, Shinha and Singh adjustment inventory for senior students were performed to measure the changes of adjustment levels in both groups.

Results: Self-awareness and communication skill training increased the level of adjustment significantly ($P < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Life skill training affects the level of adjustment in foster adolescents. Thus, it is suggested that self-awareness and communication skills can be added to the current approaches in managing interpersonal problems of foster adolescents.

1. Introduction

The period of adolescence is accompanied by deep psychological, biological and sociological changes (Kaplan & Sadock, 1994). Today most people, especially teenagers, are faced with significant problems during their lives. Some changes, such as physical growth and hormonal changes are parts of normal developments. Other issues such as academic problems, residency change of family, changing school environment, separation of parents and children living in fosters institutions are more personal and adolescents deal with these problem differently. Some adolescents do not have sufficient skills and adjustment to encounter with such problems.

Factors that lead to adolescents' adaptation in different situations include the development of personal and social skills such as self-awareness and establishing effective communi-

cative skills, which are generated in the family and developed in the school. If teenagers are developed in an environment where they are encouraged to express their attitudes, thoughts and feelings and parents are actively listening to them, self-awareness skill will be formed (Asgharinejad, 1997).

Studies have shown that foster adolescents who have been separated from their parents and have never been talking and discussing thoughts and feelings with their parents, may have problems in the growth of self-awareness skills. Moreover, the presence of the parents play an important role in the formation of the self-awareness skills and consequently, this awareness has led to the teen's feelings and adaptive behavior. Some of the researches in this area have shown that adolescents who live with their parents rather than foster adolescents have more self-awareness, self-respect and more confidence in their abilities to compatibility and coping with

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different social, educational and other situations (Lipscombe et al., 2003).

Adjustment is defined as a kind of harmony with oneself and environment, which is necessary for everyone. Adjustment is the effective behavior of human beings in adaptation with physical and psychological environment. Not only the individuals adapt with environmental changes, but also they can themselves have some influences on the environment and change it appropriately (Fisher et al., 2005).

Because of the problems that foster adolescents create for teachers and students in educational environments, considering their adjustment level has been always a significant issue for education authorities. Adjustment has been analyzed from different aspects: the biological perspective, psychoanalysis, behaviorist, and cognitive views, as well as reality therapy, humanism, and social learning theory. In this study, adolescents were instructed to apply the active skills that have been developed by the WHO (World Health Organization) to promote the person's adaptability. The basic concepts used in this program have been derived from social learning theory of Bandura. This program aims mental health promotion and prevention of social pathology, as the main objective of cultural policy makers. This program teaches the adolescents and adults the necessary skills required for developing self-awareness and effective communication skills with others and behaving adaptively in various circumstances.

Teaching life skills such as self-awareness and effective communication skills with others play an important role in enhancing adaptation and improving adolescent's behavioral patterns whose effectiveness has been proven by numerous studies (Leslie et al., 2003; Asgharinejad, 1997; Hamidifar, 2004).

In a study to evaluate the effectiveness of life skills training on females in economically poor regions, Hamidifar (2004) indicates that self-awareness, effective communication skills, and problem solving skills have significant effects on improving adolescent's adjustment and behavior. It seems that self-awareness and communicating skills can be effective in promoting the nursery adolescents adjustment. This study examines the effectiveness of self-awareness and effective communication skills trainings on developing the adjustment level of foster adolescences.

2. Methods

Based on a quasi-experimental design (due to non-random selecting) the current study included a pre-test and a post-test along with a control group. The study sample consisted of 12 to 17-year-old foster girls that were selected accord-

ing to sampling from the several fosters available in the city of Mashhad after receiving informed consent. The sample size included 30 subjects (15 subjects in each experimental and control group).

After random allocation, the adjustment inventory (for high school students) was given among experimental and control groups. Then, the Life Skills Training (self-awareness and effective communication skills with others) were instructed to the experimental group. Training sessions were delivered to the experimental group by a female therapist (with MA in General Psychology). The number of sessions were 12 (one session per week); each session lasted 90 to 120 minutes and was held in the nursery. After welcoming the participants and the initial greetings, the purposes of life skills program (self-awareness and communication) were described. The Contents of sessions have been described at A and B:

A. Self-awareness skill training

During the first session, members of the group were welcomed and they were introduced to group. Then, the group regulations were reviewed. The regulations included confidentiality principle, not despising others, paying attention to others' speeches, and so on. Henceforward, the goal of Life Skills Training Program, which is a unique opportunity for learning, and overall purposes of self-awareness training were illustrated (awareness of the positive sides of oneself, realizing the flexible characteristics in one's personality, and figuring out one's abilities and potential skills). The group members were asked to discuss their views at the end.

During the second session, general properties of life skills and self-awareness skills were raised specifically for the group members. These features included (1) adolescents' active role in selecting subjects and experimental activities, providing information about their features, and taking part in discussions (2) adolescents' arguments about feelings, values, attitudes and their tendencies (3) applying useful skills by adolescents to succeed and make progress during adulthood. Afterwards, the concept of life skills, the reasons behind implementing the program and expectations from the program implementation were described. Next, the advantages of this program were elaborated for the audience. Personal values, adults' decision-making process and their actual information about a problem were also discussed.

Finally, group members were asked to propose rules in the guide cards so that the rights of other members were considered. Some points were presented to identify and reinforce the turning points in adolescents.

During the third session, adolescents were asked to perform a physical-motional activity through introducing themselves so that, they could overcome discomfort or embarrassment and do activities among others. Group members were divided into 5 subgroups with 3 participants. Then, they were asked to express their opinions toward teens' current problems and pressures (based on the proposed rules). There was a director, a recorder, and a reporter in each group. The goal of the session was that each group would take part appropriately and cooperate with other ones.

In session 4, group members were asked to perform activities and draw images in order to illustrate their strengths and skills so that personal positive sides among adults could be indicated. At the end of session, some points including the following were discussed (1) expressing one's emotions when thinking about one's positive and significant characteristics and discussing about them with others (2) what one finds out about oneself while doing the activity, and (3) what they find out about others.

During the fifth session, the participants were realizing their interests, the ignored issues and characteristics, and future goals through performing some activities. Life skills were taught to prepare adolescents for the future.

During the sixth session, groups' members began to realize their positive characteristics and that of others. At this session, group members realized the features that have been accepted by others, and those positive characteristics that other people may be aware of, while they did not have any information about them. Some points including the following were addressed to promote members' level of awareness (1) promoting knowledge and information level about one's physiology (2) having the members informed of the media influence on one's self-image and behavior (3) realizing one's occupational skills that are developed personally (4) making inferences about effective future factors on an intended job according to individual skills.

B. Communication skill training

During the first session, the participants were welcomed and introduced to each other so that they could find out more about group members. Furthermore, group's regulations were reviewed. Then, the goals of communication skills training program were described.

During the second session, communication concepts were fully explained and group members tried to realize them. These concepts included (1) understanding the definition of communication and what leads to an effective interaction (2) elaborating on insufficient communication and its effects

on relationships with others (3) identifying the message and the deep meaning within that message (the concept that is intended by the sender and the one which the receiver gets from the message).

During the third session, positive and negative aspects of communication were identified and a list of communicative methods was provided for effective communication with group members.

During the fourth session, the following skills were practiced: (1) establishing a kind of balance between communicative channels and obstacles (2) practicing how to express thoughts and feelings through using the pronoun "I" in sentences (3) realizing the importance of sending accurate and clear messages (4) identifying body language and non-verbal communication and how to apply them (5) indicating non-verbal communication in regard to feelings and behaviors (6) practicing assertive behavior (by individuals assessment of assertiveness).

During the fifth session, guidelines regarding the factors strengthening a relationship and those weakening it were discussed. Moreover, qualifications that lead to friendship and defining its framework were identified. Also further inquiry about the relationships within the community and the identification of relationships used as resources were discussed. In the sixth session, qualities needed for a well-organized relationship were established, and those evaluation principles regarding group members were discussed. Some of such principles included respect, responsibility, mutual understanding, effort, and care. Then, various topics (including characteristics of a good friend, awareness of different types of friendships, knowing how to identify people and make friendship, delimitation of relationships with friends, identifying adults whom adolescents refer to for solicitation and help) were discussed with group members.

Having held 12 treatment sessions and applied the above concepts within experimental group, the adjustment questionnaire (for high school students) was used again as a post-test evaluation.

Measure

Adjustments questionnaire regarding adolescents

This questionnaire was designed by Shinha and Singh (1993) to measure students' adjustment level and recognizes weak adjustment in three areas (emotional, social and educational). This questionnaire has 60 items, and each 20 items belongs to one area.

The raw scores obtained from the subjects in the questionnaire can be classified into five adjustment groups: (a) very strong adjustment (b) strong adjustment (c) medium adjustment (d) weak adjustment (e) very weak adjustment.

Scores in each area show that 1 and lower stand for very strong adjustment, 3-5 (strong adjustment), 6-7 (medium adjustment), 10-8 (weak adjustment), and 11 and above (very weak adjustment). High scores indicate instability and low scores imply stability within the emotional domain. In the social area, high score stands for responsibility, but low score indicates aggression and education area. High scores indicate weak academic achievement and performance, while low scores belong to those who are interested in studying and school. The test total score is an indication of general or total adjustment.

Regarding the normal distribution of population, distance scales, and t-tests were used to test the hypothesis of this study. In order to survey the major differences between mean scores of subjects' adjustment at pre-test and post-test of the experimental and control groups, independent t-test was used.

3. Results

The subjects in the experimental group ranged from 12 to 17 year-old. Foster and control group were selected from the females of the same age range at Golestan Ali Foster and Forogh Marefat Institutes. 15 subjects participated in each group. The results of experimental and control group's pre-test and post-test data analysis on general adjustment (emotional, social and educational) are shown in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, the scores of the two groups in adjustment components are higher than the control group, indicating positive effects of self-awareness and effective communication on the growth of adjustment.

Leven test (for homogeneity of variances) and t-test (for independent groups) were used respectively to compare

the means belonging to the pre-test of both groups. The results are presented in the following tables.

Table 2 indicates that the F value in Leven test at $P < 0.05$ is not significant. It means that the difference among pre-test score variances of the two groups is not significant.

In order to test the research hypothesis regarding "the effects of self-awareness and communication skills training on the adjustment levels of female foster adolescents", two groups were compared to find the difference in mean scores between experimental and control groups. The summary of the results is presented in Table 3. As shown in Table 3, the mean scores difference of adjustment are 10.13 in experimental group and 0.06 in control group respectively. The estimated T-value at the level of $P < 0.05$ is significant. It can be concluded that the difference between mean scores of both experimental and control groups is confirmed. In other words, the self-awareness and effective communication training in experimental group could increase the social adjustment of participants.

In addition, the same results can be achieved in regard to significant difference between mean scores available on the subscales of the adjustment questionnaire. In the subscale of "emotional adjustment", the differences between the two groups were also significant (2.86 versus 0.47). Meanwhile the differences between experimental and control groups in subscale of "emotional and social adjustment" were not significant.

In general, it seems that the training program related to self-awareness and communication skills plays an important role in increasing the level of adjustment in foster adolescents.

4. Discussion

The results show that participants who received self-awareness and communication skills in a considerable way have more adjustment in comparison with those who had not been included within the therapy program.

Table 1. Mean of standard deviation and differential scores of adjustment between control and treatment groups (N=15).

Test stages Index variable	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Emotional adjustment	2.86	3.27	0.46	6.02
Social adjustment	1.60	3.11	1.86	4.27
Educational adjustment	1.86	5.48	1.33	5.009
Adjustment	10.13	9.15	6.6	8.31

Table 2. Summary of independent T and Leven test for evaluating homogeneity of variances and difference of two groups.

Index variable	Group	Mean	Standard deviation	N	T-test			Leven test	
					T-value	Degree of freedom	Significance level	F-value	Significance level
Adjustment	Exp	23.53	8.39	15	1.43	28	0.16	0.04	0.83
	Con	19.53	6.80	15					

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This finding is consistent with Hamidifar's study (2004), which proved that teaching life skills (self-awareness, communication and problem solving) is influential in increasing adjustment level and improving behaviors among adolescent girls.

Durlak (1984) conducted a program consisting of social skills and self-awareness trainings. He compared social skills training or counseling according to the development of communication and self-awareness skills among adolescents. At the end of the program, teachers evaluated adolescents and discovered that adolescents who belonged to experimental groups showed more adjustment.

In Asgharinejad's study (1997), life skills training at the University of Science and Technology including awareness skills, anger management, and coping with stress provided improvement within participants' mental health and promoted their adjustment in various domains of adaptation. Ramesht and Farshad (2003) also showed that improvement of life skills training among students has led to improved self-confident, self-esteem, and the individuals' empowerment in coping with peripheral pressures and adaptive behaviors.

As already discussed, life skills program is beneficial for improving individual adjustment. One of the most important features of this program is that it can be practiced without the presence of therapists after being learned by the participants. Components and concepts which used in promoting adolescents' self-awareness and communication skills can helped them determine future plans and programs. Those concepts also guided them to realize their turning and weak aspects in future educational and occupational goals and improve outcomes. These trainings seem to increase self-esteem and improve the ability to cope with environment. Another reason for applying this program was that foster adolescents in educational settings might cause troubles for other students. On the other hand, weak self-awareness that underlies the formation of effective interpersonal relationship among the adolescents who live in the foster is highly significant. This is an important factor in the occurrence of conflicts or less-adjustment (Ramesht & Farshad, 2003). Therefore, not only foster adolescents but also other adolescents who want to establish an effective communication with others and encounter the environment adaptively are probably required to learn these types of trainings.

Table 3. The results of independent t-test comparing mean differences in scores of experimental and control groups in adjustment scale (and its components).

Index variable	Groups	Mean	T-Value			
			T-Value	Degree of freedom	Significant level	
Emotional adjustment	Experimental	2.86	1.88	28	0.07	
	Control	0.46				
Social adjustment	Experimental	1.60	2.45	28	0.017	
	Control	1.86				
Educational adjustment	Experimental	1.86	0.27	28	0.78	
	Control	1.33				
Total adjustment	Experimental	10.13	3.15	28	0.008	
	Control	0.06				

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