Whereas considerable research has focused on children’s dyadic relationships (Bradford Brown & Dietz, 2011), comparatively little attention has been given to the intra- and intergroup processes involved in children’s experiences in groups, as well as issues relating to the structure and organization of children’s groups (Cairns, Xie, & Leung, 1998). This lack of attention is surprising given the extent of children’s involvement in groups, which commences prior to formal schooling and increases throughout the middle childhood years, reflecting the considerable importance of group membership to them (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Indeed, the evidence suggests that if there is a possibility of being accepted by, and belonging to, a social group, children will seek to be included (Nesdale, 2007). Moreover, their social interactions occur increasingly within their social groups during the elementary school years (Rubin et al., 2006).

Given the limited, albeit rapidly increasing, research attention given to children’s social groups, it is perhaps unsurprising that theory development in this area has also been limited. However, the aim of the present chapter is to provide an outline of one theory, social identity development theory (SIDT; Nesdale, 2004, 2007),
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that has sought to provide an account of children's involvement in social groups. SIDT is a developmental model that describes a number of phases through which children pass as their experience with social groups increases. The theory encompasses children's early awareness of social groups, the basis of their desire for group membership, and the impact of group membership on their attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral responses relating to in-group members, as well as towards others outside their group. Although SIDT was originally formulated to account for the emergence of intergroup prejudice and discrimination (Nesdale, 2004, 2012), it has also been applied to other social behaviors, including children's aggression and bullying (Duffy & Nesdale, 2012), as well as peer group rejection (Nesdale, 2008).

Clarifications and qualifications

There are several points concerning this chapter that are worth noting. First, it relates to children from birth to 12 years of age, recognizing that the foundations of children's social relationships appear shortly after birth and continue their inexorable development from that point onwards. That said, the emphasis of the chapter is primarily on children in middle childhood (from 6 to 12 years) because the emergence and consolidation of many of their intra- and intergroup processes occur during that period.

Second, the term, “group,” is used inclusively in this chapter. Whereas the term is typically used to refer to collections of three or more interacting children who share something (or things) in common (e.g., attributes, interests, behaviors, tasks, etc.), children are assigned by nature to some groups or categories that have been accorded a degree of social significance (e.g., gender, ethnicity), or assigned by adult authority to other groups (classroom teams, religion), but they may also elect to join others (groups of playmates, special interest groups). In the present discussion, the critical issue is whether the child identifies with, commits to, or sees him/herself as a member of, a particular group. This is typically indexed by children's greater liking for their in-group compared with other groups (see also Bradford Brown & Dietz, 2011; Kinderman & Gest, 2011). Thus, whereas a group of playmates/friends would generally meet this identification criterion, membership of a school class or an ethnic minority might meet the requirements for some children, but not others.

Third, as several writers have noted, there are significant difficulties involved in seeking to measure group membership, as well as the intra-group dynamics of a membership group, and the dynamics of their relationships with other groups (e.g., Cairns et al., 1998). This is especially true of friendship and interaction groups which can have a short life span and, moreover, it is difficult to disentangle changes due to member turnover from those due to member convergence; that is,
the drawing together of members' attitudes, cognitions, and behavior due to familiarity (Kinderman & Gest, 2011). Researchers have responded creatively to these challenges with a range of research methods and procedures, most of which in recent years have entailed some type of experimental design (see Nesdale, Spears Brown, & Rutland, this volume). These include field studies carried out in naturalistic environments (e.g., Bigler, 1995), studies of children in novel, short-lived groups, in which prior knowledge about the backgrounds, status, and goals of group members is manipulated (e.g., Nesdale, 2007), as well as studies on minimal groups which contain no information concerning competition, status, or interaction with ingroups or out-groups (e.g., Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011), cyber-based studies involving interactions between child participants and computer-generated stimulus characters and groups (e.g., Dunham, Chen, & Banaji, 2013), in addition to studies involving peer nomination and judgment of children’s groups and their intra- and intergroup dynamics (e.g., Duffy & Nesdale, 2009). This chapter will draw on all of this literature and will also briefly consider its strengths and limitations.

Social Identity Development Theory (SIDT)

Basis of SIDT

Nesdale (2004, 2007) proposed social identity development theory (SIDT) as an explicitly group-based account of the development of children's intra- and intergroup attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors. Although the early versions of the theory, in particular, were influenced by the social identity theory (SIT) proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), and its subsequent elaboration, self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), SIDT differed from SIT (and SCT) in several significant ways.

First, SIT (and SCT) contends that identifying with (or categorizing oneself into) particular social groups (i.e., adopting the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the social group as one's own) contributes to an individual's social self-esteem (i.e., as distinct from their personal self-esteem). Given that individuals might normally wish to maintain, if not enhance, their social self-esteem, it follows that they would be motivated to identify with social groups that are positive and distinctive. According to SIT, the need for a positive and distinctive group identity has the potential to contribute to the development of negative attitudes or prejudice towards members of other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In contrast, SIDT proposes that, as far as children's social interactions are concerned, including their involvement in social groups, what is of prime or, at
least, initial importance to them is that they are accepted by others such that they are able to be part of friendships and groups. In short, it is acceptance and belonging that motivates them to pursue social contacts, friendships, and social group memberships from an early age (Milner, 1996; Nesdale, 2004). Indeed, according to some writers, such behavior may reflect an inborn, fundamental need to belong and to be accepted (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

At the same time, SIDT recognizes that, as children move into and through middle childhood, they learn to recognize the differing statuses of groups and will become aware of the benefits that high-status groups provide to members (e.g., popularity, influence, control of resources), should they happen to be a member of such a group. Moreover, there will also be children who acquire the confidence and self-esteem to seek membership in the most positively distinctive groups, as argued by SIT, in order to be with those perceived to be similar to themselves and to enhance their self-esteem. However, according to SIDT, first and foremost for most children is the need to be accepted by a group and to feel that they belong to their group.

Second, although SIT provided a social motivational framework that, in principle, can be applied to the case of children, it focused on explaining prejudice and discrimination in adults. In particular, SIT has nothing to say about the central and most significant feature of children—the fact that from birth onwards, they are continuously changing and developing in terms of their perceptual, cognitive, and linguistic skills, as well as their individual personalities, and their social knowledge, perceptiveness, and competencies. Accordingly, SIDT sought to propose a theory that would account for children’s involvement in groups by taking into consideration the array of factors that emerge and change as children grow and mature and have an ever-widening range of social experiences.

Third, whereas SIT sought to explain how one group comes to display prejudice and discrimination towards another group, SCT (Turner et al., 1987) was framed as a new theory that would extend SIT by providing an account of intra-group processes, including an outline of the basis upon which individuals join groups. In contrast, SIDT sought to explain both intra- and intergroup processes and relations within the same theory, the assumption being that intra-group processes would likely impact upon the nature of relations between groups.

Outline of SIDT

SIDT proposes that, during the period from birth to 12 years of age, children may pass through up to four sequential development phases (foundations of social group relations, social group awareness, social group preference, and out-group
negativity). The phases differ in terms of the behaviors that characterize them, and the events that precipitate changes from one phase to the next.

For up to 2 years following birth, most children are in the *foundations of social group relations* phase in which the possibility of social groups, as well as the common markers of, and basis for associating with, social groups (e.g., similarities in age, skin color, gender, body shape, religion, behavior, activities, interests) have little meaning to them. At the same time, however, they are ever-increasingly engaged in social observation and social interactions, as well as activities such as play and problem-solving, and they display responses to others, that reveal their burgeoning interest in social contact with other children.

The *social group awareness* phase commences when children start differentiating others on the basis of such markers as those above, typically beginning with gender. According to SIDT, such differentiation prompts children to begin to identify or categorize themselves on the basis of their similarity/difference to others (*I am a boy, she is a girl*). Importantly, young children do not appear to construct social categories on an idiosyncratic basis. Children typically enter a social environment in which the key social categories are already specified and the nature of relations between the members of such categories is established. Accordingly, the social categories which children emphasize are not those that are strange and unfamiliar, they are those that already have social significance in the community (Katz, 1976) and children’s awareness of them will be sharpened by evaluations communicated by adults and others (Milner, 1996).

Given the overwhelming emphasis placed on gender in society, the act of self-categorization into a gender effectively ushers in the *in-group preference* phase and, certainly by school-age, most children display in-group preferences based on gender and, in some cases, particularly in multiethnic communities, on ethnicity. In addition, children’s play and interaction experiences with other children expand their growing knowledge about dyadic relationships, friendships, and interacting with groups of children. Consequently, within gender, children form friendships and interact with particular others in social groups based on shared interests and activities.

SIDT argues that the central features of the in-group preference phase are three-fold. First, social categorization prompts children to associate with other children on the basis of similarity (i.e., gender, as well as age, activities, interests), to perceive the children they associate with as different from other children, and to behave differently in the company of in-group friends versus other children. Second, children who are not part of the child’s friendship group are perceived as being increasingly similar to each other, as well as different from the child’s friendship group (the out-group homogeneity effect; Linville, 1998). Third, and most importantly, the in-group preference phase involves a focus on, and accompanying preference for,
the in-group. Significantly, SIDT argues that in-group preference does not instigate an automatic focus on out-groups with accompanying out-group negativity. Instead, children in the in-group preference phase are focused on, and prefer, their own group before others.

Several implications follow from this conceptualization of the in-group preference phase. First, children who identify with a particular group are likely to be motivated to maintain, if not enhance, the status of their group. Second, although children in the in-group preference phase are primarily oriented towards the in-group, they will nevertheless compare the standing of their group with other groups because it underpins whatever positive distinctiveness is enjoyed by their group. Third, whereas children in this phase will always prefer their group to other groups, this does not mean that they dislike such groups. Typically, other groups will simply be liked less than the in-group. Fourth, given the considerable importance of the in-group to them, it follows that children will be motivated to think, feel, and behave in ways that are consistent with the expectations of the group members; that is, they will be motivated to conform to the group's norms or expectations. Fifth, group members who are most identified with/committed to the group (i.e., central members) will show more conformity to the group's norms than will more peripheral members, and the former will demand in-group conformity from the latter. Sixth, given the group members' identification with the group, it follows that rejection by the group, or even the threat of rejection, will have the potential to exert a considerable negative impact on children, especially on their emotional reactions (e.g., anxiety, self-esteem), but also on their subsequent behaviors (e.g., antisocial behaviors).

In sum, SIDT argues that the in-group preference phase is characterized by children's focus on, and concern for, their continuing membership of their in-group. Further, SIDT claims that there are conditions under which children (even adults) will effectively remain in the in-group preference phase for years to come (although not necessarily with the same group!). These include contexts in which children identify strongly with a group (or groups) that does not endorse negativity towards any out-groups, as well as social contexts in which inter-group relations (e.g., between gender groups or between different ethnic groups) are harmonious.

However, SIDT argues that some children will, at least occasionally, undergo a transition from in-group preference to the out-group negativity phase. This involves a new focus on an out-group, in addition to the child's on-going concern for the in-group. Instead of merely liking an out-group member less than an in-group member, as occurs in the in-group preference phase, the transition to out-group negativity means that members of particular out-groups are disliked or hated and may be subjected to verbal derogation, as well as some type of attack or assault. According to SIDT, such a state would normally be unlikely to occur in children.
younger than 6–7 years because their social motives and social knowledge would not have reached the requisite level of development to support a feeling of out-group dislike or hatred and/or they do not live in a social environment that supports such behavior.

However, SIDT proposes that whether out-group negativity actually emerges and crystallizes in children depends upon several factors. These factors include (1) the extent to which children identify with their social group, and/or (2) whether out-group negativity is a norm or expectation held by the members of the child’s social group, and/or (3) whether the in-group members believe that the standing or power of their group in relation to other groups can be enhanced by a display of out-group negativity, and/or (4) whether particular in-group members believe that their standing within the in-group would be enhanced by out-group negativity, and/or (5) whether there is a belief among the in-group members that their group is threatened in some way by members of the out-group.

That said, SIDT also anticipates that children’s tendencies to display negative attitudes and behaviors towards out-groups would not automatically and unthinkingly follow the explicit and implicit dictates of the group, or the individual’s own desire for advancement in the group. Rather, as children increase in age, their responses are also increasingly influenced by their accumulating social acumen; that is, their ever-expanding knowledge of how the social system works, their strategic awareness of how to use this information to their advantage, and their skill in making it happen (Nesdale, 2013). Thus, with increasing age, children learn that their social world is comprised of an array of significant individuals and groups (e.g., parents, teachers, older siblings, their classmates, other peers), including the in-group, each with particular demands and expectations relating to the child. Further, they come to understand that they need to make judgments and decisions about the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to be displayed in particular social contexts involving these significant others. On this basis, SIDT argues that, reflecting their social acumen, children develop an increasing tendency to regulate the expression of their attitudes and behavior in accordance with their beliefs about what is acceptable to particular others (e.g., teachers, parents, group members) in a particular situation, at a particular time (Nesdale, 2013).

**Research support for SIDT**

*Foundations of social group relations.* Although children do not become involved in social groups until several years after birth, their interest in peer relations emerges early and develops inexorably. Indeed, it has been claimed that the beginnings of
peer interaction are revealed in the first few days of life when infants cry in response to the cries of other infants (Sagi & Hoffman, 1976). From then on, infants show an increasing interest in peers, including looking at and touching them, as well as sharing the use of toys (Hay, Nash, & Pedersen, 1983). By the time of the first birthday, there are early signs of cooperative games including shared engagement in common activities, and with some evidence of shared understanding revealed in repetition of distinctive actions and alternating turns (Ross, 1982).

By 2 years, there is evidence of cooperative problem-solving (Brownell, Ramani, & Zerwas, 2006) and they begin to develop preferences for particular companions who display similarity to themselves (Howes & Phillipsen, 1992). Importantly, by this age children have actually learnt a lot about gender. For example, as early as 7 months children can distinguish between male and female faces (Fagan & Singer, 1979; Otsuka, 2014) and voices (Miller, 1983). Within another twelve months or so, many children are able to label others according to gender and, based largely on their similarity to other category members, are able to place themselves into, and label themselves as, one of the gender categories (Fagot & Leinbach, 1993). This process is intensified by the pervasiveness of gender distinctions in their environment (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Rheingold & Cook, 1975), and the evaluative reactions of others following their displays of gender-appropriate and -inappropriate behaviors and activities (Caldera, Huston, & O’Brien, 1989).

Importantly, the effect of such self-labeling is that it instigates gender segregation such that, by 30 to 36 months of age, children display a marked preference for same-sex peers (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). This preference increases throughout early childhood, particularly with their increasing exposure to peers via their attendance at day-care centres and preschools (Fabes, Martin, & Hanish, 2003), becoming more marked in elementary school (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987).

However, one qualification concerns the fact that while preschool children come to engage with same-gender peers, it does not imply that selection is random within gender. Rather, interaction preferences within gender are based on behavioral homophily—children tend to choose peers whose behavioral tendencies are like their own (e.g., Farver, 1996; Hanish, Martin, Fabes, Leonard, & Herzog, 2005).

A second qualification concerns the fact that, with the exception of gender, most of the social categories that are typically considered to be important by adults (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, religion) do not impact upon most preschool children’s peer preferences (Vaughan & Santos, 2011). That said, although race/ethnicity does not segregate preschool children, research indicates that children, and especially those living in multiethnic communities, can differentiate among people from different ethnic or racial groups based on physical cues (e.g., skin color) by 3 to 4 years, and that, by 6 to 7 years, most children from the ethnically dominant group can differentiate their own ethnic group and identify
with it (see Nesdale, 2001). However, racial cleavage or segregation typically does not appear until children are well into middle childhood, around 9 or 10 years of age (Katz, 1976; Milner, 1996). Until this time, gender typically exerts a significantly greater effect on peer preferences than ethnicity because of the emphasis placed on it by adults (Bigler & Liben, 2007).

In sum, from 2 years, preschool children “engage in increasingly frequent social interactions with peers, and their interactions become richer, more nuanced and sophisticated, and increasingly complex with age” (Coplan & Arbeau, 2011, p. 147). Importantly, in terms of the present chapter, children during this period become mainly aware of two social categories, gender, and race/ethnicity, both of which may be used as a basis for self-categorization. However, only gender typically influences the ongoing segregation of children and it is within this segregation that children’s earliest informal social groups tend to be formed (Vaughan & Santos, 2011). Later, nearly all children during middle childhood report being a member of a group and their involvement in social groups increases through the period until most of their peer interactions take place within a social group (Rubin et al, 2006).

**Belongingness and group membership.** Whereas the impact of similarity between children on their preference for particular social groups is fairly widely accepted (Hay, Caplan, & Nash, 2011; Vaughan & Santos, 2011), the fact of similarity does not solely determine group preference. As noted above, according to SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals would normally seek membership in a high status or positively distinctive group because such a membership would have the most positive impact on their social self-esteem. Similarly, SCT (Turner et al, 1987) argues that an individual’s preference for a group is enhanced by factors that amplify perceived similarity to the in-group and difference to the out-group. In contrast, SIDT argues that children’s social group preference is influenced more by the extent to which they are accepted by a group, and by their sense of belonging to that group.

Although the research with children is limited, consistent with SIT, some research has shown that, like adults, young children spontaneously compare the standing of their group with other groups (Chafel, 1986; Yee & Brown, 1992) and that they prefer to be members of higher rather than lower status groups (Nesdale & Flessner, 2001). However, contrary to SIT, but consistent with SIDT, research also shows that children always reveal greater liking for their in-group over an out-group, and even indicate greater liking for a lower status in-group than for a higher status out-group (Nesdale & Flessner, 2001; Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, & Griffiths, 2004).

In another study, Nesdale, Griffiths, Durkin, and Maass (2007) tested the views of SCT and SIDT by examining 7- and 10-year-old children’s similarity and
positivity responses towards their in-group and an out-group in a situation in which three variables designed to enhance in-group versus out-group categorizations were manipulated (i.e., in-group versus out-group competitiveness, ethnic similarity versus dissimilarity, meeting the in-group before versus after out-group). Results indicated that, whereas ethnic similarity influenced perceived in-group versus out-group similarity, as SCT would predict, none of the variables influenced in-group versus out-group positivity, contrary to SCT. Instead, the in-group was rated more positively than the out-group, regardless of the manipulated conditions. The results suggested that “the processes underpinning children’s group membership may be considerably simpler, more affect-driven and less cognitively complex than is the case with adults...what was important to the children was simply that they were a member of a group, their group” (Nesdale et al, 2007, p. 369). Similar conclusions have been drawn from other studies with children (e.g., Barrett, Wilson, & Lyons, 2003).

Finally, Nesdale and Hong (2011) randomly assigned children to a group with high versus low status, and they were either unambiguously accepted, or ambiguously accepted, by a group, or acceptance was not mentioned. Results indicated that when the children were unambiguously accepted, or no mention was made of acceptance, group status had no effect on their liking for the in-group. In contrast, when the children were only ambiguously accepted, they liked the in-group significantly more when it had high rather than low status.

The preceding research suggests that children’s group preferences may be influenced by their similarity to other group members, as well as their sense of being accepted by, and belonging to, the in-group. Although the issue requires further research, it is plausible that, for young children, belonging and acceptance comprise the immediate goal, with membership in a high- rather than low-status group being a secondary or subsequent goal, especially following the acquisition of more skills, experience, and confidence in negotiating and retaining group membership.

**Impact of in-group identification on intra- and intergroup processes.** A considerable number of studies, using an array of methodologies, have assessed the impact of children’s in-group identification on their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards the in-group, as well as to non-group and out-group members. For example, Bigler and colleagues (e.g., Bigler, 1995; Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997) randomly assigned 6- to 11-year-old children to color groups in field studies in summer schools, with the teachers emphasizing the color labels, but not competition between groups. Consistent with SIDT, the group assignments prompted in-group favoritism, regardless of age and gender—children did not want to change groups, rated their own group as most likely to win a series of contests, and chose more members of the in-group to participate in a field trip. When social comparisons
and competitiveness between groups are emphasized, children’s in-group bias increases (Yee & Brown, 1992).

In a similar vein, Nesdale and colleagues used a novel group simulation paradigm in which children were randomly assigned to a group of (purported) excellent or average drawers who shared the same age, gender, and ethnicity, in order to compete on a drawing task with a group of similar children. Consistent with SIDT, children always saw themselves as similar to the in-group, liked their in-group, and liked it more than the comparison out-group, although the out-group was never disliked (Nesdale, Durkin et al., 2004, 2005; Nesdale & Flesser, 2001; Nesdale, Griffiths, Durkin, & Maass, 2007; Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005).

In addition, there is also evidence that children reveal a strong bias towards their in-group when they are required to make choices, indicate preferences, or allocate rewards between the in-group and an out-group, and that they display in-group positivity versus out-group negativity in their trait attributions (see Nesdale, 2001). Further, research has shown that in-group members rated the aggressive behavior of an in-group member towards a non-member more positively than did an independent observer (Nesdale, Killen, & Duffy, 2013).

In yet another study (Nesdale, Maass, Griffiths, & Durkin, 2003), Anglo-Australian children were assigned to an in-group that contained same ethnicity (Anglo-Australian) or different ethnicity members (Pacific Islanders), with the out-group being comprised of members who were of the same or different ethnicity as the in-group. Consistent with SIDT, (1) the children always liked the in-group more than the out-group, (2) but the out-group was not disliked, (3) in-group liking was unaffected by the ethnicity of the out-group, (4) but out-group liking was influenced by the ethnicity of the in-group. When the in-group was comprised of same-ethnicity members, the participants liked the same-ethnicity out-group more than the different-ethnicity out-group. Apparently, the different-ethnicity out-group sharpened and emphasized its difference to the same-ethnicity in-group which resulted in reduced liking (but not dislike) for the former. However, when the in-group was comprised of different-ethnicity members, the participants liked the different-ethnicity out-group more than the same-ethnicity out-group. Rather than seeing different-ethnicity out-group members as markedly different, they were actually perceived as less different than a same-ethnicity out-group (see also Durkin, Nesdale, Dempsey, & McLean, 2012). As SIDT proposes, these findings emphasize that, in the absence of threat and conflict, children appear to focus on their in-group and their preference for it—they do not display ethnic prejudice as a matter of course.

Subsequent research by Dunham, Baron, and Carey (2011) explored the impact on in-group attitudes of the mere assignment of participants to a “minimal” group; that is, all information concerning competition, status, or interaction with in-groups or
out-groups was excluded. Participants were randomly assigned to one color group
and saw the members of their own group, as well as the other color group, via
photos on a computer. Results of two studies indicated that children as young as
5 years showed in-group bias in explicit and implicit attitudes. Similar findings
have also been reported by Nesdale, Griffiths, and colleagues (2007). Consistent
with the earlier findings reported by Bigler and colleagues (e.g., Bigler, 1995; Bigler
et al., 1997), these findings support the view that mere categorization into, or
belonging to, a group can be sufficient to induce robust in-group preferences.
Indeed, research shows that the mere assignment to a group even results in the
encoding of more positive information about in-group than out-group members
(Dunham et al., 2011).

Given the importance of group acceptance and belonging to children, it is not
surprising that research has shown that children will seek to enhance, maintain, or
defend the status of the group, as SIDT predicts. For example, research indicates
that group members seek to include new group members who are similar to the
existing members and want to support the group (Ojala & Nesdale, 2012), and
that, with increasing age, children show less and less liking for in-group members
who do not conform to group norms and will seek to have them excluded (Abrams
& Rutland, 2008; Nesdale, 1999; Nesdale & Brown, 2004). Indeed, Jewell and
Brown (2014) have reported that children who do not conform to their gender
group (i.e., are low in gender typicality) were more likely to be teased and rejected
by peers than were children who do conform to gender group norms. Children
who are most conforming to group norms are rated by peers as most popular.

Research also indicates that children fear rejection from their in-group (Ojala &
Nesdale, 2012), and that those who feel some vulnerability about their position in
a group typically display increased in-group bias and out-group negativity in order
to contribute to the in-group's status, as well as to strengthen their own acceptabil-
ity to the group members (Nesdale, Durkin et al., 2011; Nesdale, Maass et al.,
2007, 2009). In addition, children react to actual rejection from their group with
heightened negative affect, lowered self-esteem, and risky and maladaptive social
behaviors, such as taking other children's things, being aggressive, and disrupting
classes (Nesdale, 2008).

Whereas the preceding findings emphasize the importance of social group mem-
bership to the child during the middle childhood period, there are also findings
that reveal the resulting extent of the influence exerted by in-group membership on
individual members' attitudes and behaviors towards others. Consistent with SIDT,
research has shown that children will express explicit dislike or prejudice towards
out-group members when they are highly identified with their in-group and/or
when the status of their in-group is threatened by an out-group (Nesdale, Durkin
et al., 2005; Nesdale, Maass et al., 2005).
In addition, according to SIDT, individuals who identify with a particular group are expected and motivated to conform to the group’s expectations or norms concerning the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors considered appropriate for group members, because they wish to continue to be accepted by, and belong to, that group. Consistent with this, research indicates that classroom norms can influence the positivity of group members’ attitudes towards out-group members (e.g., Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005).

Beyond this, however, research has also shown that classroom bully groups (who were nominated by classroom peers) had norms that endorsed bullying (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009) and that negative classroom norms significantly influenced children’s aggression and bullying (e.g., Henry, 2001; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). As well, group norms favoring exclusion in a novel group simulation significantly influenced children’s intergroup prejudice (Monteiro, De Franca, & Rodrigues, 2009; Nesdale, Maass et al., 2005) and their bullying and aggressive intentions (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009; Nesdale, Maass, Kiesner, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2008; Nipedal, Nesdale, & Killen, 2010; Ojala & Nesdale, 2004). In addition, when group norms supported aggression, central or prototypical group members reported greater aggressive intentions than peripheral members (Charters, Duffy, & Nesdale, 2013). Moreover, children will express negative attitudes towards out-group members consistent with their in-group’s norms, even when it conflicts with their own attitudes and values (Nesdale, Griffiths et al., 2005).

However, while the preceding findings indicate that the peer group has the potential to exert a considerable influence on group members’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards in-group members, as well as out-group members, SIDT also recognizes that the effects of social group identification and, especially, the impact of social group norms on children’s intra- and intergroup attitudes and behaviors are neither automatic nor unthinking, particularly as children increase in age. Rather, SIDT proposes that these attitudes and behaviors are increasingly likely to be influenced by children’s developing social acumen, that is, their understanding or knowledge of how the social system works, as well as their strategic awareness of how to use this information to advantage (Nesdale, 2013).

Consistent with this, of course, is the preceding research indicating the influence exerted by in-group norms on the members’ attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors, presumably because of the members’ concerns about being excluded from the group (Abrams & Rutland, 2008). At the same time, however, as children increase in age, they also become increasingly aware that negative intergroup attitudes and behavior are considered to be unacceptable and inappropriate by adults (Rutland et al., 2005), and hence their explicit out-group attitudes and behavior intentions become less negative (Nesdale, Maass et al., 2005; 2008), especially when under the surveillance of adults (Rutland et al., 2005). However, in an interesting illustration
of social acumen at work, Nesdale and Lawson (2011) examined whether a school norm of inclusion would moderate, if not extinguish, a group norm of exclusion. Results indicated that the children endorsed both the school and group norms and, as they increased in age, they liked their in-group less. Apparently, the children recognized that it would be wise to respond positively to both sources of influence so as not to run afoul of either, even though the in-group was liked less (see also Nesdale & Dalton, 2011; Nipedal et al., 2010). Further, McGuire, Rutland, and Nesdale (2015) reported that an inclusive school norm was less effective when the peer group had an exclusive norm and children were held accountable to their peers or their teachers. Interestingly, this did not differ as a function of the participants’ age. The inclusive school norm was most potent when the peer group had an inclusive norm and children were answerable to their teachers.

Conclusions and Future Research

Whereas children’s involvement in social groups has not been of focal interest to researchers in the past, the last decade has seen a sharp increase in research on this issue. Much has been learnt about when children begin to display an interest in social groups, on what basis they join groups, how groups impact on the intra- and intergroup behaviors of members, and how children react to social group exclusion. Accumulating evidence has also been obtained concerning aspects of intra-group dynamics, including the impact of group identification, group positions, and group norms, as well as children’s developing social acumen or knowledge and its influence on their intra- and intergroup behavior.

Together, these findings indicate that, during the middle childhood period, children become increasingly experienced and sophisticated in interacting with others in their own, and other, social groups—perhaps not surprisingly, given that their social interactions occur increasingly within their social groups during the elementary school years (Rubin et al., 2006). Indeed, by the end of middle childhood, children appear to display many of the same intra- and intergroup attitudes, strategies and behaviors evidenced by adults (see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999).

In addition, new theories relating to children’s involvement in groups are emerging (e.g., Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Bigler & Liben, 2006). Social identity development theory (SIDT; Nesdale, 2004, 2011) is one such theory that has been proposed as an account of group-related phenomena, emphasizing the critical significance of social identity processes in the development of children's intra- and intergroup attitudes and behavior. To date, research findings obtained in a range of
paradigms have yielded consistent support for the theory, especially as applied to prejudice and discrimination (Brown, 2010).

However, a number of important issues remain to be addressed before a comprehensive understanding of children’s involvement in social groups, including their intra- and intergroup attitudes and behavior, can be realized. One issue concerns the identification of the processes that promote similarity in the attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors of group members (Kinderman & Gest, 2011). This issue encompasses the emergence of similarity in stable groups, as well as the impact wrought by the addition of new members, and the departure of existing members, on intra-group similarity and is related to the emergence of social group norms.

A second issue warranting attention concerns the basis upon which status, roles, and positions are determined, and exert their impact, within children’s groups. Some research has revealed the significant influence of group positions (e.g., central versus peripheral) on group members’ aggressive intentions (Charters et al, 2013), but more research needs to focus on the emergence of status and roles, especially in interaction with group norms.

Although some research is now addressing the basis upon which children join groups, a third issue concerns the factors that contribute to the breakup of a group and the emergence of new groups. Of particular interest here is the basis upon which racial/ethnic minority groups appear following preschool and early school years in which race/ethnicity is typically not a significant influence on group make-up. Also needing research attention is the particular culture that emerges in racial/ethnic minority groups, especially in comparison with groups comprised of majority group members.

A fourth issue concerns the need to develop reliable techniques for identifying social groups in natural settings and for capturing their effects on group members, as well as non-members. The utilization of peer nominations to identify groups, followed by self- or other-ratings has been valuable (e.g., Duffy & Nesdale, 2009), but research has been limited to correlational designs to date. Other research using novel groups, minimal groups, and cyber-based groups (e.g., Dunham et al, 2011; Dunham et al, 2013; Nesdale, 2011) has added greatly to our understanding of children’s groups. However, these paradigms involve simulated rather than natural groups, and the findings are based on a slice in time. That said, the great advantage of such groups lies in their incorporation of experimental techniques, thus allowing for the manipulation of variables and the assignment of causality. Clearly, new techniques and paradigms that allow for experimentation, yet utilize natural groups, over time, would represent a considerable advance for the field (see chapter by Nesdale, Brown, & Rutland, this volume, for an extended discussion of these issues).
While research efforts concerning children and social groups have substantially increased, and in a comparatively short period of time, many issues remain to be investigated. Given the importance of children's groups to their broader social development, these efforts will undoubtedly be amply rewarded.

References


