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Research Brief

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Preschool Teachers’ Emotional Consistency Works Through Their Relationships With Children To Affect Social Competence And Problem Behaviors

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Abstract

This study examined the consistency of teachers’ emotionally supportive interactions with students and the effect consistency had on the relationships between teachers and children and children’s social competence or problem behaviors. Patterns among male and female children were investigated. Results indicated teachers’ emotional support consistency was associated with teacher-child relationships and children’s long-term social skills. Conflict between child and teacher was a stronger predictor of problem behaviors for boys than girls.

Relationships are the building blocks of children’s development. Children’s relationships with their primary caregiver are the first in a lifetime of interactions. In the early years of school, the relationship between teacher and child shares many similarities with the relationship between the child and caregiver. The relationship between teacher and child can help shape children’s development. Relationships, characterized by their conflict and closeness, are a factor in nearly everything that happens in a classroom. Closeness is characterized by a warm, supportive, and synchronous relationship while conflict is characterized by anger, frustration, and negativity.

This research brief is based on the study:

Brock, L. B., & **Curby, T. W.** (2014). Emotional support consistency and teacher-child relationships forecast social competence and problem behaviors in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. *Early Education and Development.* doi:10.1080/10409289.2014.866020

Teachers promote student learning through effective interactions with children. A key aspect of effective interactions, particularly in pre-k, is the emotional support of a classroom. A teacher’s ability to promote social and emotional functioning in the classroom is described as emotional support. If a teacher offers a high amount of emotional support it is likely that the teacher and child will have a positive relationship. Teachers who react to children’s behaviors, emotions, and actions in predictable ways demonstrate emotional support consistency. Importantly, past research has shown that the consistency of emotional support helps children develop socially and academically.

 Past research shows effective social interactions between teachers and children can promote social competence and reduce problem behaviors. To help explain associations between teachers’ emotional support consistency and children’s problem behaviors and social competence, the teacher-child relationship should be considered. The goal of the present study was to understand whether relations between teachers’ emotional support consistency and children’s behavior is mediated by teacher–child relationships.

**The Study**

 Researchers used data from 2 studies by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) entitled the Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten (MS Study) and the State-Wide Early Education Programs (SWEEP). The MS Study of Pre-Kindergarten included 40 Pre-Kindergarten sites across 6 states in 2001-2002, and the SWEEP Study involved an additional 5 states with 100 sites in 2003-2004. A total of 701 pre-K classrooms were selected and 694 of these classrooms were observed using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008) observation instrument.

 Demographic data were collected. CLASS was used to measure Emotional Support several times throughout a day. During each observation day, the classroom was rated at least 4 separate times by reliable coders. Emotional Support consistency was calculated as the standard deviation of Emotional Support scores. Teacher-child relationships, social competence, and problem behaviors were rated by the teachers.

Acknowledgements

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**Findings**

 Results indicated teachers’ emotional support consistency was associated with teacher-child relationships which were in turn related to children’s long-term social functioning. Teachers who were more emotionally consistent reported closer relationships with children and tended to view those children as more socially competent and displaying fewer problem behaviors. In addition, data from boys and girls were examined separately. Conflict between child and teacher was a stronger predictor of problem behaviors for boys than girls. Boys may have more difficulty with an emotionally inconsistent teacher.

**Implications**

 Findings suggest that by identifying and coaching teachers who have less consistent emotionally supportive interactions with students, teacher child relationships may strengthen with corollary improvements in social competence and reductions in problem behavior. Although teachers cannot control children’s characteristics, they are responsible for their emotional responses to children. Teachers who are able to partition anger, frustration, or ambivalence and engage in positive social interactions with all children are more likely to promote a positive classroom environment. Teacher preparation and professional development programs can incorporate consistency into their discussions about creating positive learning environments.

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|  | Additional Resources |  |

**Curby, T. W.,** Brock, L., & Hamre, B. (2013). Teachers’ emotional support consistency predicts children’s achievement gains and social skills. *Early Education and Development, 24*, 292–309. doi:10.1080/10409289.2012.665760

Zinsser, K.\*, Bailey, C.\*, **Curby, T. W.,** Denham, S., Basset, H., & Morris, C. (2013). Exploring the predictable classroom: Preschool teacher stress, emotional supportiveness, and students’ social-emotional behavior in private and Head Start centers. *NHSA Dialog: A Research to Practice Journal, 16*(2), 90-108*.*