

# Does teacher-child relationship quality predict observed child engagement of teacher?

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## Abstract

The quality of relationships in early childhood have lasting effects on children’s academic and behavioral success. Teacher report is the most widely used measure to assess the quality of the teacher-child relationship, however teachers are often biased by the child’s behavior. Observed quality of the relationship may illustrate differences in relationship quality and child behavior and have important implications for practice. The aim of this study is to examine if close and conflictual teacher child relationships as measured by teacher report differ observed child engagement and conflict with the teacher, and if this varies by gender. Results indicate that teacher report of conflict is not related to observed conflict nor is teacher report of closeness is not related to observed child positive engagement of teacher. Teachers were more likely report conflict with males.

## Introduction

- Preschool children’s interactions with teachers, peers, and the classroom environment predict later school SUCCESS (Booren, Downer, & Vitiello, 2012)
- Positive relationships with teachers are associated with social and emotional competency in elementary years (Hamre & Pianta, 2001)
- A close teacher-relationship can help moderate negative experiences of children. However, conflictual relationships can worsen negative behavioral outcomes for certain children (Sabol & Pianta, 2012)
- Boys are more likely to have conflictual relationships with the teacher (Hamre & Pianta, 2001)
- However, teacher report of the relationship quality may be colored by the child’s disruptive behavior and may not reflect the child’s actual behavior (Williford, Carter, Whittaker, Vitiello, & Hatfield, 2015)

## Aims

1. Does teacher report of a conflictual relationship predict observed child conflict toward teacher in play?
2. Does teacher report of a close relationship predict observed child engagement of teacher in play?
3. Do these associations vary by gender?

## Methods

- Twenty-two preschool children, in 12 classrooms were recruited child care centers in the Pacific Northwest
- Teachers completed the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta, 1999)
- Teachers rated relationships as close or conflictual (Table 1)
- Child behavior toward the teacher was observed during a frustrating task within a Structured Play Task
- Children were asked to sort wooden construction toys and transportation toys prior to playing
- Child behavior (Table 1) was coded using a modified version of the Early Head Start 3-Bag Scales for child behavior (Brady-Smith et al., 1999)
- Dimensions rated on a 1-5 scale (5 = very high)
- All videos were double coded; consensus scores are used in analyses

Table 1. Definitions of Relationship Quality

<b>Close Relationship (teacher report)</b>	“I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child. This child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me.”
<b>Child Engagement of Teacher (observed)</b>	Measures the degree to which the child shows, initiates, and/or maintains interaction with teacher and communicates positive regard and/or positive affect to the teacher.
<b>Conflictual Relationship (teacher report)</b>	“Dealing with this child drains my energy. This child is sneaky or manipulative with me.”
<b>Child Negativity Toward Teacher (observed)</b>	Measures the degree to which the child shows anger, hostility, or dislike toward teacher.

## Participants

- 40% of the children were female; *M* age = 50 months
- Most children (80%) were identified by their parents as Caucasian, 5% of children were of Asian descent, 5% African American, and 10% identified with another ethnicity
- All teachers were female (*M*<sub>age</sub> = 38 years). Most had a bachelor’s degree and 5-10 years of experience

## Results

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
<b>Close Teacher-Child Relationship</b>	3.76	.48	2.64 – 4.45
<b>Conflictual Teacher-Child Relationship</b>	2.25	.74	1.33 – 3.83
<b>Observed Child Engagement</b>	2.81	.93	2.00 – 5.00
<b>Observed Child Negativity</b>	1.43	.68	1.00 – 3.00

Table 3. Correlations

	1.	2.	3.	4.
<b>1. Close Relationship (teacher report)</b>	--			
<b>2. Child Engagement of Teacher (observed)</b>	.16	--		
<b>3. Conflictual Relationship (teacher report)</b>	.00	.30	--	
<b>4. Child Negativity Toward Teacher (observed)</b>	.17	-.34	-.06	--
<b>5. Male</b>	-.25	-.17	.56*	-.09

\* *p* < .01

- Regression analyses were executed to see if child gender contributed to the association between reported and observed closeness and conflict.
- Gender was not a significant predictor of relationship quality for closeness (*B* = -.28, *t*(19) = -.60, *p* = .55) or conflict (*B* = -.18, *t*(19) = -.45, *p* = .66 )
- In line with the correlations, teacher report of relationship quality did not predict observed relationship quality for closeness (*B* = .24, *t*(19) = .50, *p* = .62) or conflict (*B* = .01, *t*(19) = -.05, *p* = .96)

## Discussion

- Teacher report of a conflictual relationship with a child is not related to observed child conflict toward teacher
- Teachers may perceive a child as “draining their energy” but the child is not displaying conflict in the play task
- Teacher report of a close relationship with a child is not related to observed child positive engagement of teacher
- Teachers may perceive a child as “openly sharing his/her feeling with me” but the child is not positively engaging the teacher in the play task
- Teachers are more likely to report a conflictual relationships with males, but observed conflict was not related to gender (Table 3)
- Gender did not moderate the association between reported and observed relationship quality

## Next Steps

- Why is teacher report of conflict positively related to observed child engagement of teacher, but observed negativity is negatively related to child engagement of teacher? (Table 3)
- Context differences (classroom vs. dyad play task)
- Explore relationship quality earlier in the school year to minimize teacher bias in reporting

## References

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