



# ResearchLink

## Teacher-Child Relationship Quality and Classroom Adjustment: Does Gender Matter?

*A new study shows that the quality of teacher-child relationships influences preschool girls' and boys' adjustment to the classroom differently. When children experience high conflict with teachers, boys but not girls tend to behave more aggressively. When children have a close relationship with teachers, girls but not boys develop more social competence; that is, girls display what teachers consider traits of the "ideal" student.*

### Background

Whether or not children thrive in the classroom when they are young has consequences for their long-term academic success. An important factor in children's ability to adjust to preschool is the kind of relationship they have with their teacher. The quality of that relationship affects children's ability to fit in socially and learn expected classroom behaviors. In turn, the ability to adapt is an important factor in determining whether they succeed or fail in school.

The idea that teacher-child relationship quality is important for chil-



dren's adjustment to school grows out of attachment theory. This theory stresses the important role that children's emotional bond with their caregiver plays in their development. Children can form bonds with many caregivers, including teachers. Teachers can provide children with emotional and physical support. They may also serve as a secure base from which children can explore and benefit from all that the school has to offer.

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To assess the quality of the teacher-child relationship, researchers typically measure three dimensions:

## 1. Closeness

(warmth, open communication, and support that allows the child to feel safe to explore)

## 2. Conflict

(tension and anger between the teacher and child)

## 3. Dependency

(clinginess and needing too much help from the teacher)

In general, when teachers and children are close, children are less likely to act out in aggressive and antisocial ways. Children are more likely to get along with peers and to have a positive attitude toward school. When a lot of conflict or dependency exists, children tend to be more hostile, focus less on their studies, and view school negatively.

## About the Study

University of Arizona researchers studied whether different aspects of the teacher-child relationship affected boys' and girls' school adjustment differently. The study included 301 children (158 boys, 143 girls) from Head Start classrooms. Most were of Mexican origin (41.2%) and non-Hispanic White (29.6%). All teachers were female; 50% identified as Hispanic and 42.3% identified as non-Hispanic White. All teachers were fluent in English, and 60% were also fluent in Spanish.

Teachers were asked to rate their relationship with each student on closeness, conflict, and dependency. They rated the students on two types of adjustment: school competence (e.g., pays attention, is considerate of others, completes work on their own) and behavior problems (e.g., hostile-aggressive, anxious-fearful).



The researchers made the following predictions going into the study:

## Prediction 1

*A close relationship with the teacher is more strongly linked to girls' positive adjustment to school than boys'.*

According to gender role socialization theory, children experience a better gender fit when they conform to traditional expectations of how boys and girls behave in relationships. Since girls are taught to be caring and helpful in relationships, they may benefit more from close bonds with their teachers. On the other hand, boys typically are trained to be more independent and less focused on building supportive relationships. As a result, they may not benefit as much as girls from being close to their teachers.

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## **Prediction** 2

*Teacher-child conflict and dependency are more likely to lead to behavioral adjustment problems for boys than for girls.*

According to the academic risk perspective, early school and behavioral problems are consistent predictors of later academic failure. Children at greater risk for these problems have more to lose or gain by their ability to adjust to the classroom. Specifically, preschool boys are more likely to have early school and behavioral problems. So they are more at risk for classroom adjustment problems than girls. Thus, teacher-child conflict and dependency may hurt boys more than girls.

## **Findings from the Study**

The effect of teacher-child relationship quality on children's ability to adjust to school differed for boys and girls.

### **Finding 1**

A close teacher-child relationship led to greater school competence in girls than boys. As previous research suggests, girls may be more responsive to their teachers. For that reason, they may be in a better position to benefit from teachers' guidance and instruction.

### **Finding 2**

Teachers rated boys as having more behavior problems and lower levels of school competence than girls. Teacher-child conflict also led to boys having more trouble adjusting than girls. These findings lend

support to the idea that young boys are at increased risk for behavior problems in the classroom. Boys also pay a higher price for problems in their teacher-child relationships. Even when these relationships are going well, it appears that boys benefit less than girls. No gender differences in the amount of dependency on the teacher were found.

*"It's important to understand gender differences in children's early school experiences in order to better meet the unique needs of boys and girls," says Dr. Angela Taylor, associate professor of Family Studies and Human Development at The University of Arizona and a coauthor of the study.*

## **Implications**

- Teacher education programs should focus on helping teachers understand the importance of teacher-child relationship quality. Especially with boys, it is important for teachers to get off to a good start in terms of their relationship. Patterns tend to get set in place early on, continue over time, and can affect boys' long-term academic success. Training programs should provide teachers with skills to promote positive relationships and improve negative ones.

- Future studies need to explore the reasons for gender differences in teacher-child relationship quality. Why do girls benefit more than boys from having a close relationship with their teacher? Researchers also need to explore whether these patterns continue beyond preschool into elementary school and later grades.

This ResearchLink summarizes the following report:

Ewing, A.R., & Taylor, A.R. (in press). The role of child gender and ethnicity in teacher-child relationship quality and children's behavioral adjustment in preschool. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

Suggested citation for this ResearchLink:

Van Campen, K.S., Ewing, A.R., & Taylor, A.R. (2009). Teacher-Child Relationship Quality and Classroom Adjustment: Does Gender Matter? (Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families ResearchLink, Vol. 1, No. 5). Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona.

This research was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ResearchLink is published through the generous support of the Frances McClelland Institute endowment.



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