

More Than ABCs

Success in school also depends on key relationships

By Susan McGinley

Head Start programs, begun in the 1960s, have helped poor and disadvantaged children from three to five years old make smooth transitions into elementary school. The intent has been to acclimate children to the routines, expectations and early subject matter of school. And yet, before the children are exposed to standardized tests, advanced curriculum or sophisticated technology, research recently completed at the UA School of Family and Consumer Sciences (SFCS) shows that it's the fundamental relationship between and teacher and child that makes the difference in the child's early success in school. Early intervention has the greatest effect when the teacher builds a close, but not dependent relationship with the child.

In 1992, Angela Taylor, chair of the Division of Family Studies and Human Development in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, began to study the elements in early intervention programs such as Head Start that helped children succeed in handling schoolwork and adjust to classroom settings. In particular, she wondered how much influence the child's relationships with teachers, parents and peers had on the child's ability to do well. Thus began the Head Start Child Resilience Project.

"We assumed at the beginning that family background, parents' education level, and the extent to which the child was exposed to other life stressors such as divorce and job loss, plus death and health problems, would all have an effect on the child's school performance as well," Taylor says. "We were interested in whether classroom relationships would make a difference over and above these child and family background factors."

Through a university Head Start partnership grant, Taylor was able to begin her research in 1992 at Child-Parent Centers, Inc., an agency that provides Head Start preschool services to children in the Tucson metropolitan area. Taylor and her team of graduate and undergraduate students periodically interviewed and observed 300 children and their families — one target child per family — through one year each of Head Start. The children ranged from three to five years in age; about 75% were Hispanic. The researchers continued to

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observe subsequent groups every year through 1996.

Through a comprehensive set of interviews and reviews of records provided by the school, the research team was able to collect extensive data on each child's family background, individual temperament, parental involvement in the program, cognitive/verbal ability, self-confidence or perceived competence, and developmental learning progress. The researchers, many of whom were bilingual, interviewed primary caregivers in their homes using structured questionnaires in English and Spanish. They interviewed the children individually, talked with other children in the classroom to get information on their peer relationships, and observed the target children's social behavior during free play. Teachers provided ratings of the children's behavioral adjustment and reported on the parents' level of involvement in the program.

"We did the same assessments in the early fall and again in the spring to examine developmental trends in the child and family over the school year," Taylor says.

Taylor and her team collected this rich assortment of data to answer three basic questions: 1) What role do classroom relationship factors (parent-teacher, teacher-child and peer relationships) play in low-income children's preschool success or performance? 2) Do a child's social relationships make a unique contribution to early adjustment and progress in preschool? 3) Can teacher-child or peer relationships actually buffer children and make up for stressful family situations, poor cognitive ability or problematic temperament?

The study's findings suggest that parents who did report having a better relationship with their child's teacher were more involved in their child's educational program. They communicated regularly with the teacher, implemented teacher-suggested learning activities at home, went to parent meetings, and helped out in the classroom. In turn, the parents who were more involved had children who showed more improvement through the school year, as shown through developmental learning assessments and teacher ratings of social behavior.

"We found fairly strong evidence for the positive effects of the teacher-child relationship," Taylor says. "Having a close relationship with the teacher was beneficial, enhancing the child's social skills and self-concept, over and above the child's entry factors (home background, etc.)." The researchers found evidence that this close but not dependent relationship with the teacher buffered against the negative impact of problem temperament.

"Although children with problem temperament styles generally had poorer outcomes in school, that varied depending on the relationship with the teacher," Taylor notes. "Put another way, for children who had a close relationship with their teacher, their temperament made no difference. On the other hand, for those who had a more distant bond with their teachers, their temperament actually predicted poorer outcomes." Understandably, teacher-child conflict predicted poorer outcomes overall. As for peer relationships, their role was not quite as clear as that of the teacher, and was harder to assess.

In general, the findings of this study support other studies on parent involvement factors in school. They reinforce programmatic efforts that facilitate and encourage parent involvement. The study also highlights the importance of the role of the teacher in nurturing both parental involvement and the child's adjustment in the classroom. Teachers do make a difference. ☺

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