



No. 14 September 1999

Child Care Social Climate

Following are excerpts from “Social-emotional classroom climate in child care, child-teacher relationships and children’s second-grade peer relations” by Carollee Howes, UCLA. Data for this paper was gathered in the Cost Quality and Outcomes Study, a five-year on-going longitudinal study examining the effects of child care in 4 states

Child-teacher relationship in child care predicts later social relations

The quality of children’s early relationships with their teachers in child care is emerging as an important predictor of children’s social relations with peers as older children. In this study, we explore the relative contributions of early classroom social/emotional climate and individual relationships and behaviors to social competence with peers five years later.

Predictive factors

Children’s second-grade social competence with peers ratings could be predicted by

- preschool classroom social-emotional climate,
- 4-year-old behavior problems and child-teacher relationship quality and
- contemporary child-teacher relationship quality.

Aggression ratings were best predicted by

- a preschool classroom high in behavior problems and low in child-teacher closeness,
- by the child’s poor child-teacher closeness as a 4-year-old and
- by contemporary child-teacher relationship conflict.

Disruption ratings could best be predicted by

- being a boy,
- preschool classroom climates high in behavior problems and low in child-teacher closeness as a 4-year-old and
- by high levels of child-teacher conflict as a second grader.

Prosocial ratings could best be predicted by

- being a girl,
- preschool classroom climates high in time spent interacting with peers,
- the child’s low levels of behavior problems as a 4-year-old and
- high levels of child-teacher closeness and low levels of child-teacher conflict as a second grader.

Ratings of social withdrawal could best be predicted by

- a classroom climate high on behavior problems,
- low levels of individual behavior problems as a 4-year-old and
- low levels of child-teacher closeness as a second grader.

Results

- Children rated high in peer aggression, disruption, and social withdrawal were rated high in child-teacher relationship conflict and low in child-teacher relationship closeness.
 - Children rated high in prosocial behavior with peers also were rated high in child-teacher relationship closeness and low in child-teacher relationship conflict.
- Classrooms with higher levels of behavior problems had lower levels of child-teacher closeness.

Underpinning our thinking

Our perspective on teacher-child relationships is drawn from attachment theory, which assumes that children use their relationships with significant adults to organize their experiences.

If children feel emotionally secure with the teacher they can use her as a secure base and a resource for exploring the learning opportunities of the classroom.

Each child-teacher relationship is built independently of the child's prior adult-child relationships (including child-mother) and of the other child-teacher relationships in the classroom.

Current research suggests that children with close child-teacher relationships are also socially competent with peers. Children perceived by teachers as difficult 4-year-olds tend to build child-teacher relationships high in conflict. These persist so that by kindergarten, children who were problematic 4-year-olds tend to be less able than children with other relationship histories to use the child-teacher relationships to master the academic content of school.

Our outcome measure, second-grade social competence with peers, is significant because by mid-elementary school, individual differences in children's social competence with peers appears to stabilize and predict future adaptive or non-adaptive behavior in adolescence.

Aggression and social withdrawal are maladaptive behaviors, indicating the absence of social competence.

Discussion

These findings suggest that considerable individual variation in children's social competence with peers as second graders can be understood by examining both their individual experiences as 4-year-olds in child care and the social emotional climate of their child care classroom.

These findings support the premise that individual relationships are constructed within particular contexts and that both the contributions of the individual children and their teachers and of the climate of the context are important predictors.

The particular pathway in which preschool social and emotional climates and individual behavior interact are consistent with theoretical predictions and with growing literature that suggests that contemporary and earlier positive child-teacher relationships are linked to social competence with peers. Aggression and disruption as a second-grader was best predicted by being a 4-year-old boy whose teacher both perceived to have behavior problems and to have constructed a conflictual child-teacher relationship and who was enrolled in a classroom characterized by conflictual social interactions and relationship. This description is similar to descriptions of coercive, unpleasant family climates in which the provocative behaviors of all members of the group tend to escalate conflict.

In contrast, children who as second-graders appear to have withdrawn from peers are best predicted by being a child with low levels of behavior problems as a 4-year-old who was enrolled in a preschool with a conflictual social emotion climate. This description is similar to children who are observed to avoid social contact with peers and adults in child care.

While problem behavior and teacher-child relationship preschool climate measures predicted second-grade aggression, disruptions, and social withdrawal, the peer social/emotional climate predicted prosocial behavior. These findings are consistent with other studies which suggest that social competence with peers (as opposed to maladaptive behaviors with peers) appears to be best predicted by early opportunities to engage with peers.

Implications

These findings suggest that both child care teachers and elementary teachers may benefit from an increased awareness of the importance of the social and emotional climate of the classroom.

We suggest that teacher preparation programs may need to focus on this aspect of curriculum for young children as well as more traditional material.

If you want to know more

Howes, C. & Phillipsen, L.C. (1998). Continuity in children's relations with peers. *Social Development*, 7, 340-369.

Kellum, S.G., Ling, X., Merisca, R., Brown, C.H. & Jalongo, N. (1998). The effect of the level of aggression in the first grade on the course and malleability of aggressive behavior into middle school. *Development and Psychopathology*, 10, 165-185.

Pianta, R.C., Steinberg, M. & Rollins, K. (1997). The first two years of school: Teacher-child relationships and deflections in children's school adjustment. *Development and Psychopathology*.

The Cost Quality & Outcomes Study Team. (1999). *The CQO Children Go To School*. Chapel Hill: Frank Porter Graham Center, UNC-CH.

NCEDL is administratively housed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to UNC-CH partners in NCEDL are the University of Virginia and the University of California at Los Angeles. This project is supported under the Education Research and Development Centers Program, PR/award number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education (www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/), the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the U.S. Department of Education, or any other sponsoring organization. Permission is granted to reprint this *Spotlight*; we ask that you acknowledge the author of the paper on which this *Spotlight* is based and the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

For more information, contact Loyd Little at (919) 966-0867 or email loyd_little@unc.edu
Visit our website at www.ncedl.org