

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Consistently Emotionally Supportive Preschool Teachers and Children's Social-emotional Learning in the Classroom: Implications for Center Directors and Teachers

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In the following article, we summarize research investigating the benefits of teachers providing emotionally supportive interactions for preschoolers' social-emotional development and how teachers' perceptions and experiences of stress may influence these interactions. Using data collected in both private and Head Start preschool classrooms, we examined relations between average levels and consistency of emotional support, teachers' stress, and children's social and emotional behaviors in the classroom. Overall, Head Start teachers showed less stress and had higher levels of emotional support than private center teachers. Furthermore, children in Head Start classrooms were less emotionally negative and aggressive. Private center children showed more negative emotion and aggression in classrooms with teachers who were inconsistent in their emotional supportiveness even when those teachers were, on average, very supportive. Private center teachers' perception of stress also related to their emotional support and variability of emotional support and uniquely associated with children's social-emotional behaviors. Implications for center directors are discussed, as well as practical and targeted suggestions for teachers like avoiding stress and using classroom organization, reappraisal, and response modification to effectively manage stress.

Any preschool teacher, from publically funded Head Start centers to for-profit private centers, knows that supporting 15 - 20 children's developing skills is challenging, stressful, and emotionally exhausting. Preschool teachers are expected to walk into classrooms and successfully navigate the emotional lives of students, coworkers, and administrators, all while maintaining an emotionally 'even keel', managing the tasks of teaching, and providing a supportive and consistent emotional environment (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Nias, 1996). These expectations constitute the emotional rules of teaching and in part govern teachers' management of emotions in the classroom (Hargreaves, 2001). Teachers' management of emotions according to these rules requires emotional work, sometimes referred to as *emotional labor* (Hargreaves, 1998), contributing to teachers experiences of stress (Curbow, Spratt, Ungaretti, McDonnell, & Breckler, 2000; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Unfortunately, without effective management of stress, teachers are at risk for burnout (Blase, 1982; Wood, & McCarthy, 2002). Stress may also deplete the available cognitive and emotional resources that are pivotal in providing a consistent, emotionally supportive classroom climate conducive to children's developing social-emotional competence. In the current article we will a) summarize relevant research on emotional support, children's developing social-emotional competence, and teacher stress; b) present major research findings from our study exploring these associations, and c) translate these findings into research-supported implications and recommendations for early childhood center directors and teachers.

Consistent, Emotionally Supportive Interactions are Important for Children's Social-emotional Learning

The social-emotional interactions among teachers and students are the backbone of many preschool classrooms. These interactions set the stage for successful learning experiences in kindergarten and beyond (Pianta, 1999; Zins, Elias, & Greenberg, 2007). Thus, preschool classrooms are laboratories for children to develop social-emotional skills, such as effectively communicating feelings, managing emotional experiences, and prosocially responding in frustrating situations. These skills lay the foundation for academic success and school-adjustment (Denham et al., 2012; Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012; Zins et al., 2007). Teachers can contribute to children's social-emotional learning by fostering classroom climates that promote positive learning experiences (Pianta, 1999; Zins et al., 2007). In particular, when teachers provide emotionally supportive classrooms, they are more positive, more aware of their students' needs, and respond appropriately to these needs (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Additionally, preschool teachers socialize children's emotional competence by modeling and teaching effective emotional communication, reactivity, and management (Denham et al., 2012). Children have been found to benefit socially and emotionally, as well as cognitively, when they are in emotionally supportive preschool classrooms (Bierman et al., 2008; Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Van Damme, & Maes, 2008; Howes et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008).

Recent research has found that, beyond average levels of emotional support, the consistency in providing emotional support is also important for children's development (Curby, Brock, Hamre, 2013; Curby et al., 2011; Curby, Grimm, & Pianta, 2010; Brock & Curby 2012). Given a typical day, some teachers have been found to maintain steady levels of emotional support, whereas others have been found to vary substantially. For example, an inconsistent emotionally supportive teacher may be warm and supporting of student autonomy at 9:00, cold and unresponsive at 9:30, and exuberant and attentive by 10:00. Conversely, a more consistent teacher may display different forms of emotional support (e.g., attentiveness, positivity), but the overall emotional support for students across a morning are quite stable. Although children in inconsistent classrooms experience spikes of emotional support, they tend to experience this support in the context of lower levels of emotional support.

In the parenting literature, the predictability of experiences with parents have been shown to be important in forming stable and positive relationships (see Ainsworth, 1969; Baumrind, 1966; Bowlby, 1969), and the consequences for consistent caregiving in the classroom is no less important. Preschoolers in consistent, emotionally supportive classrooms show greater gains in academic and social outcomes in kindergarten compared to children in less consistent classrooms (Curby et al., 2011). It may be that the lack of predictability places greater demands on

children's attentional networks, causing them to exert more effort to monitor their teacher's emotional state and have less attention available for attending to academic, social, and emotional learning tasks. In order to better help children's social-emotional learning, the current study explored how emotional support, and the consistency of that support, relates to children's social-emotional learning.

Does Ineffective Stress Management Deplete the Available Resources Needed for Consistent Emotional Support?

Teachers in early childhood education are exposed to many sources of stress, including but not limited to, feelings of pressures from children's families, lack of sufficient resources, feeling under-appreciated, and long work hours (Curbow et al., 2000). Stress may make it difficult for teachers to effectively manage their own emotional lives, let alone the emotional lives of 20 preschoolers (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Nias, 1996). In turn, emotionally exhausted teachers may not have resources left to be consistent in their construction of emotionally supportive classroom environments that children need for positive social-emotional learning. Our study explores how external demands and pressures on teachers may combine with teachers' emotional support consistency to predict children's social-emotional learning.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODS

Teachers were part of a larger study focused on developing a direct assessment battery for measuring the social and emotional aspects of school readiness. Of the teachers in our sample, nine were from Head Start centers, 32 were from private centers, and all were female. Children included 3- and 4-year-old boys and girls (51.0%), with 98 of the total sample from Head Start classrooms and 179 from private classrooms.

Emotional support average levels and consistency were obtained by observing classrooms with trained and reliable research assistants using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). The emotional support domain is an average of four dimensions: positive climate, negative climate (reversed), teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives. Following standard CLASS protocol, four contiguous cycles (20 minutes of observing and 10 minutes of rating) of observation were conducted for each teacher. The emotional support average was determined by averaging across these cycles of observation. Emotional support variability was computed by calculating the standard deviation across the four observations. Higher values indicated greater variability and thus, greater inconsistency, in standard deviation units, of observed emotional support over the four observation cycles.

Teachers were asked to complete the Job Demands scale of the Child Care Worker Job Stress Inventory (CCWJSI; Curbow et al., 2000). The Job Demands scale consisted of 17 questions that asked for the frequency of experiencing various stressful events or feelings related to the classroom.

Children's observed social-emotion functioning was quantified using the Minnesota Preschool Affect Checklist-Revised/Shortened, (MPAC-R/S; Denham et al., 2012). Using the MPAC-R/S, trained research assistants observed and captured children's behavior during free

play or small group activities on four separate school days, in 5-minute intervals on six scales. The six scales were aggregated into three global components of social-emotional functioning: emotionally negative/aggressive, emotionally regulated/productive, and emotionally positive/prosocial.

MAJOR FINDINGS

We found significant differences between Head Start and private childcare centers:

- When compared to private childcare teachers, Head Start teachers tended to be less stressed and showed higher levels of emotional support in the classroom.
- Children in Head Start classrooms tended to be less emotionally negative and aggressive.

We explored these associations further in private classrooms. In sum, we found that:

- More stressed teachers were, on average, less emotionally supportive and more inconsistent.
- Teachers' *average* emotional support was *not* associated with students' social-emotional behavior.
- Teachers' consistency of emotional support was associated with students' emotionally regulated and productive behaviors.
- Children with very supportive teachers showed more negative emotion and aggression if their teacher was *inconsistent* in providing emotional support.
- Teacher-reported stress was also uniquely associated with children's social-emotional behaviors. Teachers who reported feeling more stressed had students who displayed fewer emotion regulation and productive behaviors, and emotionally positive and prosocial behaviors, than less stressed teachers.

RESEARCH-SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EARLY CHILD EDUCATION FIELD

Two significant implications for program directors emerged from this study:

1. Our results indicate that reliance on average ratings of teachers' emotional support may not fully paint the picture of children's classroom experiences. Instead, it is important to additionally consider the consistency of teachers' emotional support. Further, center directors may want to:
 - Consider ways to help teachers be more emotionally supportive. Not only is emotional support good for children's development, but teachers who have higher levels of emotional support also tend to be more consistent in their emotional support.
 - Help reduce teachers' stress. Reducing stress may not only help reduce burnout, but may also help teachers be more consistent.
2. The differential findings for Head Start and private programs indicate that there may be programmatic differences contributing to teachers' experiences of stress in the classroom.

- Head Start policies and practices, such as the use of reflective supervision, may promote teachers' awareness of their own experiences of emotions in the classroom, facilitate regular and open communication between staff, and encourage greater consistency and higher emotional support through effective stress management.

In addition to these program-wide implications, teachers may also want to consider what they can do to promote their own emotional well-being and to reduce their experiences of stress, thereby being better able to engage in consistent, high-quality interactions with their students. Based on effective stress management research, teachers may want to consider:

1. Proactively avoid situations that lead to stress (Borg & Falzon, 1990; Deery-Schmitt & Todd, 1995; Kyriacou, 2001).
 - For example, meeting the demands of parents by strengthening the teacher-parent relationship, increasing communication and involvement of assistant teachers, or using a weekly newsletter may help avoid a common stressor for preschool teachers.
2. Improve classroom organization to reduce the situations that cause stress (Li-Grining et al., 2010).
 - For instance, classroom chaos happens during long, idle transitions. Using a signal for transitions and establishing a routine can reduce transition time.
3. Reappraise stressful situations and be mindful of one's response (Deery-Schmitt & Todd, 1995; Zhai, Raver, & Li-Grining, 2011).
 - For example, parent-teacher conferences may be stressful but can be an opportunity to discuss with parents strategies that their child can use at home to help their child be successful in the classroom.
 - Additionally, reflect on how one is feeling, but stay focused on the task at hand.
4. Modify reactions to stressful situations for adaptive problem solving and stress reduction (Deery-Schmitt & Todd, 1995; Wood et al., 2002).
 - For example, in a disagreement with a coworker, one could remove oneself from the situation to regain composure, or one could channel negative emotional responses into positive and prosocial behavioral choices like writing down and later discussing with a coworker after time passes and intense emotions subside.

CONCLUSION

We found that the consistency of teachers' emotional support related to children's social-emotional functioning in the classroom. Our results reinforce the notion that understanding the impact of teachers' consistency of emotional support is an important but overlooked aspect of classroom processes. Based on the findings of our study, we would like to encourage early childhood education programs to look beyond teachers' average ratings of emotional support when trying to create positive environments for children. Furthermore, reducing stress and improving private caregiver well-being individually and globally, has the opportunity to influence not only the consistency of classroom practices, but also children's social-emotional learning.

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