



# Informing context and change in young children's sociobehavioral development – The national Adjustment Scales for Early Transition in Schooling (ASETS)<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This article recounts the design and validity evidence for contextually-specific measures of early childhood social and behavioral adjustment within school using the Adjustment Scales for Early Transition in Schooling (ASETS). Through primary analyses of data from the Head Start Impact Study, a representative nationwide sample ( $N = 3077$ ) of randomly selected children from low-income families was used to inform developmental-transitional stability and change in adjustment across numerous school contexts. Longitudinal exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses yielded reliable and temporally continuous behavioral dimensions assessing the pervasiveness of Peer, Learning, and Teacher Context Problems. Each context dimension was equated vertically through IRT, with Bayesian scoring across two years spanning prekindergarten through 1st grade. Multilevel modeling provided support for the concurrent validity of ASETS contextual scales and their ability to assess future risk of academic and behavioral problems. ASETS scales are also shown to reveal differential, contextually-based, change trajectories across four years of early school transition.

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## 1. Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a phenomenal increase in policy initiatives and research centering on the socio-emotional needs of young children (Campbell, 2001; Egger & Angold, 2006; President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003; Rescorla et al., 2007, 2011). Motivation stems largely from the observation that prevalence rates for preschool emotional and behavioral problems approach 20% (Egger & Angold, 2006), with early and untreated problems undermining critical developmental processes and portending more serious and sometimes intractable disorders at later

ages (Campbell & James, 2007; Feeney-Kettler, Kratochwill, & Kettler, 2011; Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002). One understandable response has been a variety of assessment devices to identify and differentiate manifestations of preschool socio-emotional distress (Campbell & James, 2007; Feeney-Kettler et al., 2011; Rescorla et al., 2011), the intention being to clarify the distinct nature of problems in such a way that might lead to preventative or restorative intervention.

Most contemporary instruments for assessment of early emotional and behavioral problems embrace a common formulation. Since young children, given their social, conceptual, and linguistic immaturity, and limited perspectives, are unable to report accurately the relevant symptomatology and incidence of their own distress (Fulmer & Frijters, 2009; Moll & Tomasello, 2012; Norwood, 2007; von Baeyer, Forsyth, Stanford, Watson, & Chambers, 2009), informed adult observers (teachers, parents) are typically asked to respond to rating scales or questionnaires that survey the child's reactions at home or school. The best examples include the Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales (Merrell, 2003), the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (LeBuffe & Naglieri, 1999), the Behavior Assessment System for Children (Reynolds &

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Kamphaus, 2004), and the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). Thus, teachers in the classroom or parents in the home portray a child's adjustment by indicating the presence or frequency of numerous specific symptoms, where the symptoms are manifest either through observable child behaviors or perceived child emotions. In turn, researchers apply factor-analytic procedures to the resultant teacher or parent responses and thereby discover that different symptoms tend to group together and reveal common surface syndromes or dimensions that more or less resemble traditional clinical psychiatric disorders. In this way, a given child can be assessed by a teacher at school and the child's current socio-emotional adjustment may be quantified for a variety of different types of problems (aggression, withdrawal, etc.).

Although such instrumentation has been immensely useful for advancing understanding of early childhood socio-emotional manifestations, and arguably for informing pertinent intervention, it has been our view that most contemporary instruments do not rest on firm theoretical grounds and do not take advantage of the technical capacities available for design and application of survey instruments. Specifically, it is our position that popular rating scales and questionnaires are designed with little or no attention to the distinct contextual frameworks within the school (or home) or to the signature transitional nature of emotional and behavioral problems as children develop. In the introductory section of this article, we discuss the theoretical import of context and transition for studying early socio-emotional adjustment. We then demonstrate through development and application of a new national measure, how context and transition play a central role in advancing understanding of early childhood adjustment.

### 1.1. Context theory

In the assessment domain, context theory is probably best represented by the work of Mischel (2004). Mischel points to a key factor guiding the construction of traditional measures of personality and adjustment—the assumption that a given score level on a particular trait dimension (e.g., withdrawal) translates to a given disposition for that type of emotion or behavior. But as research and experience dictate, people sharing the same score level on a trait or dimension will, in reality, display a substantial range of dispositions for the anticipated emotions or behaviors. In practice, this makes traditional assessments less accurate and consequently less useful. Alternatively, Mischel, Shoda, and Mendoza-Denton (2002) illustrate how the actual disposition for a given emotion or behavior depends not only on the trait or dimensional score level but on the contextual circumstances wherein the emotions or behaviors are embedded. Thus, children with a high level of a withdrawal trait will not react uniformly in different contexts, such as when approached by a teacher versus when involved in group play versus when confronted by challenging learning tasks. Indeed, knowledge of the situations that give rise to problem behaviors is fundamental to understanding the motivations behind problems and the accurate prediction of future incidence (Zayas, Whitsett, Lee, Wilson, & Shoda, 2008). Traditional instruments tend to ignore contextual frameworks by regarding situational variation as some sort of “noise” or error (Mischel et al., 2002). Such instruments may feature items that either inquire about trait behavior without any reference to specific situations under which it may or may not emerge, or otherwise average scores across all sorts of situations to produce a general composite on trait behavior.

The contextual view is entirely consistent with the developmental-ecological perspective advocated by Sabol and Pianta (2012) for studying contexts that differentially influence teacher-child relationships; by Zayas et al. (2008) and Kagan

(2003) who show the role of context for explaining intra-individual variations in behavioral dispositions; by Mian, Wainwright, Briggs-Gowan, and Carter (2011) and Thorsen, Goldberg, Osann, and Spence (2008) who focus on specific situations that invite good versus bad reactions; and by Sameroff (2010) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), who offer more unified theories to bind natural individual child propensities and contextual frameworks in the broader story of human development. The idea that contextual specificity makes a difference is also supported by emergent empirical literature demonstrating that: (a) young children's withdrawal and emotional regulation vary as a function of classroom context (Buss, 2011; Goldsmith & Davidson, 2004); (b) peer-group contexts affect the aggressiveness of children with special needs (Visser, Kunnen, & van Geert, 2010) and preschool language acquisition (Justice, Petscher, Schatschneider, & Mashburn, 2011); (c) manipulation of classroom structural aspects and learning locations can abate problem behavior (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008); (d) alternation of individual and group activities and the amount of teacher involvement affects child classroom engagement (Powell, Burchinal, File, & Kontos, 2008); and (e) planned free-time and classroom transitions affect behavior (Joosten, Bundy, & Einfeld, 2012).

### 1.2. Transition theory

Early childhood transition theory emerges from the work of Entwisle and Alexander (1993) and Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson, (2005), with seminal connections to Piagetian and Eriksonian concepts of stage theory. Transition theory essentially argues that children's developmental status is multifaceted and constantly changing in response to ontogenetic and environmental influences. It holds that children's more or less successful adaptations to those influences set the template for future capacities to adapt and that, as pertains to long-term acquisition of coping mechanisms and cognitive achievements, the most critical developmental periods are those proximate to major transitions. As researchers point out, such transition periods in early childhood education include movement into and through preschool and progression into regular kindergarten and finally first grade (Benner & Crosnoe, 2011; Buss, 2011; Goldsmith & Davidson, 2004; Hemmeter & Ostrosky, 2006; Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007; von Suchodoletz, Trommsdorff, Heikamp, Wieber, & Gollwitzer, 2009).

Thus, whereas prekindergarten entry will often provide a child's first exposure to part- or full day schedules organized around group meals and naps and individual or companion play, kindergarten and first-grade activities begin to supplant discovery learning with more deliberate and structured activities emphasizing group-centered common curricula that encourage self-reliance and competition. Eventually, desks replace play circles, vocalicity becomes imperative, literacy becomes fundamental to what is transpiring in the classroom, and academic failure or retention become real prospects. Consequently, the causal centrality of early school transition to long-term child development has essentially risen to a meta-theoretical level that regards early transitions in schooling as a major developmental milestone (Eivers, Brendgen, & Borge, 2010).

### 1.3. Innovative instrumentation

The instrumentation and methods for assessing the contextual nature of children's school socio-behavioral adjustment was first suggested by Stott (1966) and implemented fully in the development and national standardization of the Adjustment Scales for Children and Adolescents (ASCA; McDermott, 1993; McDermott, Steinberg, & Angelo, 2006). In contrast to the traditional format

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