



Children's perceptions of the relationship with the teacher: Associations with appraisals and internalizing problems in middle childhood



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we aimed to examine the associations between child-perceived teacher–child relationships, children's appraisals of interactions with their teacher, and internalizing problems. Five hundred third- to sixth-graders reported about their experiences of closeness, conflict, and negative expectations in the relationship with their teacher. Furthermore, their appraisals of fictive interactions with their teachers were measured. Internalizing problems were measured by children's self-reported depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints. The negative relation between closeness and internalizing problems in children was fully mediated by children's appraisals. The associations between conflict and negative expectations, respectively, and children's internalizing problems were only partly mediated. Effects for the negative relationship dimensions as well as the negative appraisals in the associations were stronger than effects for positive perceptions about the teacher. It can be concluded that child perceptions about the teacher matter for internalizing children.

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The linkages between children's behavior disturbances in middle childhood and their affective relationships with teachers continue to attract research interest (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). The importance of teacher–child relationship quality is almost exclusively studied in relation to externalizing problems, which obviously call for more immediate attention and response from teachers than internalizing problems (Howes, 2000; Howes, Phillipson, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Ladd & Burgess, 1999). In contrast to externalizing problems, internalizing problems are not necessarily a disturbance for the teacher. Rather, these problems are directed to the self, and characterized by difficulties in coping with negative emotions or stressful situations, as is the case with anxiety, depression, and somatization (Zahn-Waxler, Klimes-Dougan, & Slattery, 2000). Yet, teacher–child relationships seem highly important for children with internalizing problems.

Children's internalizing problems in middle childhood may have negative consequences for school. For example, they increase the amount of school absence (Saps et al., 2009) and negatively affect school achievement (Lundy, Silva, Kaemingk, Goodwin, & Quan, 2010). Negative relationships with others have been shown to be a risk factor (Hymel, Rubin, Rowden, & LeMare, 1990) and can increase problems

in internalizing children (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008). In contrast, positive relationships are considered a protective factor in the development of internalizing problems (Steinhausen & Metzke, 2001). In middle childhood, teacher–child relationships may be especially salient to the development of internalizing problems in children. As children grow older and get confronted with the challenges of middle childhood, teachers are the primary figures children can turn to for guidance and help (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). In this developmental span, children increasingly apply abstract thinking to a range of problems, which not only makes them able to make more complex reasoning about social situations, but also puts more tension on their self-evaluations and increases the pressure on autonomous functioning and living by the social rules (Jacobs, Bleeker, & Constantino, 2003; Kalish & Shiverick, 2004). Having favorable relationships with teachers in school settings may support children's confidence to approach these challenges within the school setting (Murray & Greenberg, 2000). Further, children with positive relationships may be more willing to imitate and adopt teachers' examples of reasoning and behavior. Hence, in this study we focus on the relationship with the teacher to gain insight into the potential role of this relationship with respect to internalizing problems at this age.

A lot of what goes on in the minds of children may go unnoticed by the teacher. In the literature on internalizing problems, children's appraisals of situations are often referred to as a potential mediator of (interpersonal) stressors and the development of internalizing problems (e.g., Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007; Jellesma, Rieffe, Terwogt, &

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Westenberg, 2009). More specifically, when children appraise situations negatively, they also often experience negative affect. Applying this to the teacher–child relationship, we will argue that children with a negative relationship will probably appraise interactions with their teachers more negatively than peers with positive relationships, which, in turn, may lead to more internalizing problems.

An attachment perspective on teacher–child relationships

The present study's theoretical framework stems from the (extended) attachment perspective (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This perspective posits that children draw on relationships with significant others to construct views about themselves and to form mental representations of social situations and interactions. For most children, the relationship with the teacher is not a full attachment bond. By far, this relationship is not as exclusive and durable as the relationship that most children have with their parents, and the teacher's formal job is primarily focused on education and instruction (Verschuere & Koomen, 2012). Caring and providing emotional support are, nevertheless, considered to be important aspects of the teacher's role as well. Similar to the primary attachment bond, a positive teacher–child relationship creates feelings of security that allow children to explore freely (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

A teacher–child relationship is multidimensional: the quality is a total of the positive and negative feelings along these dimensions. A positive relationship that provides feelings of security is characterized as 'close': there is warmth and open communication (Pianta, 1994; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Additionally, it is important that there is little negativity in the relationship, that is: little discord and mutual negativity or anger (referred to as 'conflict') and little possessive or clingy behavior (referred to as 'dependency'; Pianta, 1994; Pianta et al., 1995). The dimensions closeness, conflict, and dependency are often measured from the teachers' perspective, whereas research on the children's perspective more often includes a one dimensional measure of emotional support. Recent research (Koomen & Jellesma, under revision) has revealed that children are also able to separate the amount of closeness from the amount of conflict in the relationship. Whereas it seems difficult in middle childhood to be able to reflect on dependency, in children's reports there is also a second negative dimension besides conflict: 'negative expectations'. Negative expectations refer to uncertain feelings and unfulfilled needs in the relationship and therefore to a lack of confidence in the teacher (Koomen & Jellesma, under revision).

Children's perspectives on the quality of the teacher–child relationship are important, as the teacher–child agreement on the teacher–child relationship appears to be only low to modest (Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010). This implies that the reports made by children provide additional information to that of the teachers. Guided by Bowlby's (1969) theoretical notions on parent–child relationships (see also Pianta et al., 2003), the attachment perspective states that the teacher and the child each form their own 'internal working model' of the relationship, based on their personal relationship history: a mental representation of the self, the other, and the bond with the other. Thus, both the teacher and the child each have their own appreciation and perception of the relationship because they process information differently and have different needs and emotions. This explains why child perceptions of the relationship provide important information that goes above and beyond information provided by the teacher. This point is also essential with respect to the appraisals we focus on in the current study, but first we will discuss the empirical information with respect to associations between teacher–child relationships and internalizing problems.

The teacher–child relationship and internalizing problems

Central to the attachment perspective on teacher–child relationships is the notion that children derive feelings of safety and

well-being from this relationship. Previous research (Baker et al., 2008; Murray & Murray, 2004) indeed shows that when teachers view the teacher–child relationship as more problematic, children have more internalizing problems. Baker et al. (2008) for example, found that higher levels of conflict and lower levels of closeness in the relationship with the teacher in kindergarten to fifth-grade children were associated with more internalizing problems. In middle childhood, Murray and Murray (2004) found that closeness was negatively associated with internalizing problems, including somatic, anxious and withdrawn symptoms, and that conflict and dependency were positively associated with internalizing problems.

These previous studies primarily studied the link between teacher–child relationship quality and children's internalizing problems from the perspective of the teacher. With some exceptions, children's perspective on this association seems to be lacking. It was recently found that emotional problems are associated with children's negative expectations (Koomen & Jellesma, under revision). In a diary study in primary school, Little and Kobak (2003) demonstrated that children's self-esteem was affected less by negative peer events when children experienced a more positive relationship with their teacher. In a later study, Martin and Marsh (2008) found that among high school students, positive reports of the teacher–child relationship also predicted more positive experiences of 'buoyancy' (i.e., resilience to everyday challenges, such as receiving a bad mark) with respect to mathematics. Although none of these studies addressed the full domain of internalizing problems and negative relationship dimensions were only addressed in the study of Koomen and Jellesma, they are in support of the assumption that when the teacher is perceived by the child as a source of warmth and support, children will experience fewer internalizing problems (Downer, Sabol, & Hamre, 2010).

Children's appraisals and internalizing problems

Important for the current study is that children's general tendency to make negative appraisals is associated with internalizing problems, which might (partly) explain why negative teacher–child relationships are associated with internalizing problems (Seligman et al., 1984). In studies addressing inter-individual differences in appraisal, fictive scenarios are often used (Seligman et al., 1984). Recollection of real events is not used, as children's appraisals might affect their perceptions and, in turn, their memory as well. For instance, whereas some children might perceive a situation as a negative event, others might have completely forgotten this situation because it was positively appraised. Ciarrochi et al. (2007) showed that children who tend to make more depressive appraisals for events reported more fear and sadness one year later. Moreover, Jellesma et al. (2009) showed that children with many somatic complaints described more and stronger negative emotions in response to various scenarios than children with few complaints. Robinson, Garber, and Hilsman (1995) demonstrated that negative appraisals are positively associated with depressive symptoms. Furthermore, Bell, McCallum, and Doucette (2004) found that school-related negative appraisals (appraisals with respect to academic and social situations) were even stronger predictors of depression than a more general measurement of children's appraisal that included all kinds of settings.

The latter finding suggests that there are intra-individual differences with respect to appraisal styles in relation to different events and people. For example, imagine a child having a positive perception of his relationship with the teacher. When he appraises a situation in which the teacher does not answer his question, this child might think something like: 'She probably did not hear me'. If this same child is bullied by his classmates, his appraisal of the same situation with a peer might be completely different, for example: 'He does not want to answer my question because I am not a cool

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