



## Reducing child problem behaviors and improving teacher-child interactions and relationships: A randomized controlled trial of BEST in CLASS



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### ABSTRACT

Research has consistently linked early problem behavior with later adjustment problems, including antisocial behavior, learning problems and risk for the development of emotional/behavioral disorders (EBDs). Researchers have focused upon developing effective intervention programs for young children who arrive in preschool exhibiting chronic problem behaviors; however, Tier-2 interventions that can be delivered by teachers with fidelity in authentic settings are lacking. This study examined the effect of BEST in CLASS, a Tier-2 intervention delivered by teachers, on child problem behavior, teacher-child interactions and teacher-child relationships using a cluster randomized controlled trial design. Participants were 465 children (3–5 year olds) identified at risk for the development of EBDs and their 185 teachers from early childhood programs located in two southeastern states. Significant effects were found across both teacher reported (*ES* ranging from 0.23 to 0.42) and observed child outcomes (*ES* ranging from 0.44–0.46), as well as teacher-child relationships (*ES* ranging from 0.26 to 0.29) and observed teacher-children interactions (*ES* ranging from 0.26 to 0.45), favoring the BEST in CLASS condition. Results suggest the promise of BEST in CLASS as a Tier-2 intervention for use in authentic early childhood classroom contexts and provide implications for future research on transactional models of teacher and child behavior.

### 1. Introduction

Children displaying problem behavior early in life are more likely to face developmental challenges later in school and into adulthood, including antisocial behavior (Campbell, Spieker, Burchinal, & Poe, 2006), learning problems (Hetzner, Johnson, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010), and risk for later identification of emotional/behavioral disorders (EBDs) (Fanti & Henrich, 2010). During the preschool years, EBDs develop progressively, beginning with early exposure to a number of child (e.g., developmental delays, temperament, conduct problems) (APA, 2000; Benson & Aman, 1999), family (e.g., poverty, substance abuse, violence, poor parenting) (Kaiser, Cai, Hancock, & Foster, 2002; Qi & Kaiser, 2003), and school (e.g., teacher-child relationships, classroom climate) risk factors (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Pianta et al., 2005). While no single risk factor causes EBDs, research suggests that exposure to a higher number and combination of risk factors are likely to result in chronic behavior problems, eventually leading to social, emotional, and behavioral disorders (e.g., Conduct Disorder [CD] or Oppositional Defiant Disorder [ODD]) (Qi & Kaiser, 2003; Webster-Stratton, 1997).

These findings are troubling on many levels. First, a national survey found that preschool age children are expelled at three times the rate of K-12 students (Gilliam, 2005), which is likely linked to their display of chronic problem behaviors. Additionally, the early onset of behavior problems in young children predicts problems in school as well as serious problems in adolescence including drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, violence, and school dropout (Beyer, Postert, Muller, & Furniss, 2012; Campbell et al., 2006; McClelland et al., 2007; Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000). Finally, data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) indicates that young children who lack social, emotional, and behavioral competence are at a noticeable disadvantage in classroom settings (Markowitz et al., 2006). When children with significant problem behaviors are not identified or treated at an early age, the severity and intensity of their problems often increase, ultimately requiring more intensive services and resources and increasing the likelihood of poor academic outcomes, peer rejection, adult mental health concerns, and adverse effects on their families (Beyer et al., 2012; Dunlap et al., 2006; Marchant, Young, & West, 2004).

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Over the past several decades researchers have approached interventions designed to address children's behavior using multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS), that offer children the necessary supports needed to prevent problem behaviors from occurring and learn the appropriate behaviors and skills needed to be successful (e.g., see Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010 for a discussion on tiered systems of support). Within the early childhood field, several evidence-based Tier 2 programs have been developed and implemented within early childhood programs to help address young children's chronic problem behaviors and improve their social-emotional learning skills (e.g., Banking Time; Driscoll & Pianta, 2010; Williford, Wolcott, Whittaker, & LoCasale-Crouch, 2015; Chicago School Readiness Project; Raver et al., 2008; Playing-2-gether; VanCraeyveldt et al., 2015). Although EBPs do exist, there continues to be a need for programs that can be implemented by teachers within authentic early childhood programs to ameliorate young children's problem behaviors. This paper presents findings from a study examining the effect of BEST in CLASS, a Tier-2 intervention program designed to decrease young children's chronic problem behaviors.

### 1.1. Efforts to prevent and reduce problem behavior

A recent large-scale study (Head Start CARES; Morris et al., 2014) evaluated the effects of enhancements to Head Start for children with social-emotional learning needs, comparing the effects of Preschool PATHS (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007), Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001), Tools of the Mind (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007) and Head Start (as usual) on a variety of child outcomes, including problem behavior. Although initial positive effects on child social-emotional learning outcomes were found when enhancements to Head Start were included ( $ES$  range = 0.04–0.29), significant effects on children's problem behavior assessed in the spring of the school year were not found ( $ES$  range =  $-0.06$ – $0.02$ ). Another recent study (Schindler et al., 2015) used meta-analytic techniques to examine the effects of three levels of programming on child problem behavior. These researchers reported effect sizes across typical early childhood education programs, broadly focused social-emotional programming (e.g., High Scope curriculum; High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2014), and intensive focused programming on social-emotional learning (e.g., Preschool PATHS; Incredible Years). Increasing effect sizes on child problem behavior were found across increasing levels of intensity of programming, with intensive focused programming (i.e., Preschool PATHS; Incredible Years) having the greatest effect ( $ES = -0.26$ ). In addition, data suggested that intensive child focused programming, such as Preschool PATHS, had a greater impact on reducing child problem behavior ( $ES = -0.46$ ) than programs that focused solely on changing caregiver (i.e., teacher and/or parents) behavior.

Findings from these two studies highlight the importance of providing targeted interventions for young children who face adversities as well as the need for interventions that can be delivered in classrooms by teachers that effectively reduce young children's problem behaviors. Universal programs such as Preschool PATHS, Incredible Years and Tools of the Mind have demonstrated positive effects on children's social-emotional learning outcomes that may help prepare them for Kindergarten and beyond. However, this level of programming may not provide enough supports to impact the children who continue to exhibit chronic problem behavior despite universal (i.e., Tier 1) supports (Qi & Kaiser, 2004). Tier 2 supports (e.g., Banking Time; Driscoll & Pianta, 2010) that systematically identify children with problem behavior may be necessary to provide the intensity of support needed by these children. In addition to increasing supports to children, many teachers lack the knowledge and skills to ameliorate chronic problem behaviors (Hemmeter, Fox, & Snyder, 2009) and require additional knowledge, skills, and supports to address the needs of these children in their classrooms. As highlighted by Schindler et al. (2015)

this aspect of intervention presents additional challenges related to changing adult behavior to the degree necessary to effectively address and ameliorate young children's severe problem behaviors.

### 1.2. Teacher-child interactions and problem behavior

Unfortunately, the combination of chronic problem behavior and teachers lack of skills to effectively work with these young children may result in negative, and often coercive, teacher-child interactions which contribute to poor teacher-child relationships. The salience of teacher-child interactions is highlighted by research that suggests that the proximal nature of these interactions predicts greater growth in children's academic achievement than other more distal processes such as the education and training of teachers (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, Van Damme, & Leuven, 2009; Early et al., 2006; Graves & Howes, 2011; Hamre, 2014). Researchers have found that early childhood teachers often react negatively (e.g., increased restrictions, punitive care) to children who demonstrate problem behaviors (Barnett & Boocock, 1998; Scott-Little & Holloway, 1992). As a result, teachers' interactions with children with problem behavior tend to be less positive than their interactions with children who do not demonstrate problematic behavior, leading to fewer learning opportunities for these children, less time engaged in classroom activities, and missed opportunities for learning critical school readiness skills (Howes & Smith, 1995; Raver & Knitzer, 2002).

The application of transactional theory (Sameroff, 1983) to teacher-child interactions may be useful in helping explain how a child's behavior impacts the teacher and how the teacher's expectations and behavior, in turn, affect the behavior of the child. Sameroff and Mackenzie (2003), discussing the transactional process in relation to parenting, pose the question: "Is inept caregiving an expression of parent inadequacy or a reaction to prior experiences with the child?" (p. 634). This question could be rephrased for teachers of children who display significant problem behavior: Is a lack of effective instructional practices for young children with problem behavior an expression of teacher inadequacy or a reaction to prior experiences with the child? For children with a history of problem behavior, pre-existing negative and coercive patterns of interaction with caregivers may be carried over into the classroom setting (Patterson, Reid, & Eddy, 2002; Wahler & Dumas, 1986), and teacher characteristics such as insufficient classroom management skills, developmentally inappropriate expectations, or a lack of experience handling problem behaviors may contribute to the development or maintenance of coercive interaction patterns (Stormont, Beckner, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005). Over time, children experiencing such patterns of interactions tend to receive fewer instructional opportunities and positive social interactions than their peers, which may contribute to the documented long-term adverse effects for children who exhibit chronic problem behavior at early ages (Doumen et al., 2008).

### 1.3. Teacher-child relationships and problem behavior

Teacher-child relationships are typically characterized by "closeness", and children and teachers with established trusting relationships may be more likely to put forth more effort in classroom situations (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). Henricsson and Rydell (2004) report that poor teacher-child relationships tend to be stable over time, as well as have a negative effect on school adjustment. This is particularly relevant for children at-risk for EBDs, as research suggests children who exhibit aggressive and disruptive behavior are more likely to develop negative relationships with their teachers (Ladd & Burgess, 1999). Developing negative relationships with teachers early in school can be particularly harmful as problematic relationships between teachers and students with behavior problems in Kindergarten are associated with academic and behavioral problems through eighth grade

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