



## Shyness and engagement: Contributions of peer rejection and teacher sensitivity



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### ABSTRACT

This study tested a longitudinal model of mediated moderation for the role of temperament and shyness in the development of young children's ( $n=960$ , aged 54 mos. to 1st grade [ $SD=1.08$  at 54 mos.]) peer relationships at school and linkages to subsequent academic engagement. Teacher sensitivity was examined as a parallel predictor of peer relationship effects and subsequent engagement, and we examined whether or not adverse effects of shyness on peer relationships and adjustment were stronger in classrooms where teachers displayed lower sensitivity. Findings indicated that peer rejection mediated the association between children's shyness at preschool age and engagement in first grade and that teacher sensitivity, although not directly related to peer rejection, was positively related to engagement. Finally, teacher sensitivity moderated the association between shyness, peer rejection, and classroom engagement. Results suggested that teacher sensitivity plays a role in linkages between shyness and peer rejection. Teacher sensitivity may moderate effects on engagement and function as an important aspect of supportive contexts for shy children.

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The classroom context is a central developmental setting for most children in industrialized countries. As children navigate transitions from the smaller peer groups typically experienced in home and early childhood settings, aspects of children's temperament affect a new set of more complex social interactions and subsequent adjustment patterns as they attempt to adapt to new developmental challenges. Researchers have described *child by environment* models (or, alternatively, child and environment/context models: Coie et al., 1993; Ladd, 2003) that help explain these complex interactions. These models describe sets of interactions between characteristics of the child (e.g., shy, withdrawn behavior) and those of the social environment or context (e.g., school peer relations) and may also include a focus on the origin of these factors as within the child, within the context, or both. Research on children's adjustment in the school context has been a particularly appropriate area for the application of these models, but few studies have included examinations of interactions between children's

temperament and the social context of the classroom, and links to subsequent school adjustment.

In this study, we present a model that examines potential contributions for both child and contextual factors to classroom adjustment. We present a mediation model where temperamental shyness, typically viewed as a factor located within the child, plays a potential causal role in the development of peer relationships at school. Within this model, the contextual effects of these peer interactions are, in turn, likely to impact (i.e., mediate the effects of shyness on) children's academic engagement (Fig. 1). We also tested the idea that teacher sensitivity is an additional, parallel contextual factor where peer relationship effects likely also mediate linkages between sensitivity and subsequent adjustment. Finally, we hypothesized that the potentially adverse effects of temperament on peer relationships and adjustment will be stronger within classrooms where teachers display lower levels of teacher sensitivity—a finding that would be consistent with a moderating role for teacher effects on this set of linkages.

### Temperament, peers and adjustment

Temperament, or the pattern of reactivity displayed by children in response to environmental stimuli (Kagan & Fox, 2006), is one aspect of children's behavioral tendencies that has been linked to early school and academic adjustment. Shyness or social

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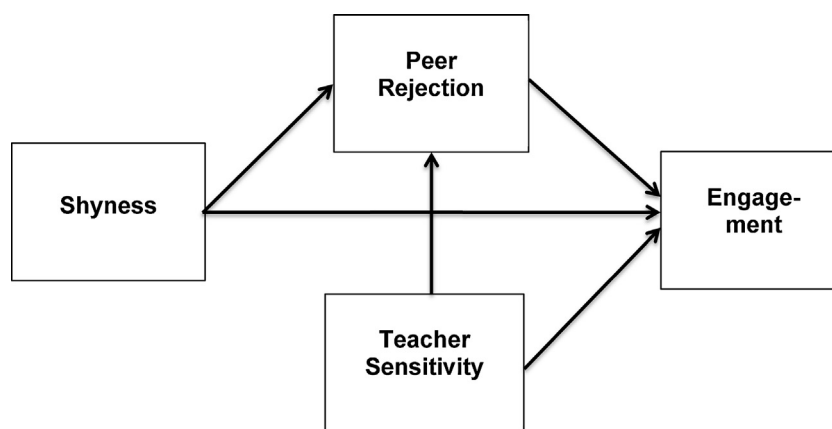


Fig. 1. Conceptual/structural model.

withdrawal, in particular, is one behavioral pattern linked to temperamental reactivity (Kagan, 1992) that has received specific attention as a potential causal factor in the development of children's peer relationships and subsequent adjustment at school entry. Shy children display a greater tendency to withdraw from unfamiliar adults and peers and show social reticence. This tendency to withdraw from social interactions has been associated with fewer peer interactions and, consequently, poorer social competence (Rudasill & Konold, 2008; Wichmann, Coplan, & Daniels, 2004) and peer relations (Cillessen, van Ijzendoorn, Van Lieshout, & Hartup, 1992b; Gazelle et al., 2005; Rubin, Chen, & Hymel, 1993) in the classroom. The literature suggests that shyness often limits children's interactions with peers in the classroom, hindering their social skills practice, and suppressing their engagement in classroom discourse (Hughes & Coplan, 2010).

Shyness and social withdrawal have been directly linked to differences in academic adjustment, including lower classroom engagement (Hughes & Coplan, 2010) and achievement (Hughes & Coplan, 2010; Lerner, Lerner, & Zabski, 1985). The specific processes by which shyness/withdrawal might be linked to such outcomes in these contexts have also received research attention. Findings from these studies indicate that children displaying higher levels of shyness and social withdrawal in elementary school tend to experience greater peer rejection and victimization (Cillessen, Terry, Coie, & Lochman, 1992a; Cillessen et al., 1992b; Gazelle et al., 2005; Rubin et al., 1993). Additional findings suggest that this may occur because, as children reach elementary school age, shy and withdrawn patterns of social interaction appear increasingly atypical to peers and thus shy children tend to become less preferred as playmates (i.e., rejected) within classroom groups (Younger, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, 1985). Peer rejection and associated victimization levels have subsequently been linked to a range of academic difficulties, including lower classroom engagement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006); less accepted, less engaged children are also less likely to have access to social and instrumental support from peers in the classroom (Wentzel, 1996) and are thus less likely to experience adaptive adjustment (DeRosier, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 1994; DeRosier & Mercer, 2009). Taken together, these processes associated with social withdrawal/shyness and peer relationship difficulties at school indicate that negative peer relations are likely an important, additive, causal aspect of poorer school adjustment. Peer relationships are, however, not the only important social relationship or context in classrooms likely to contribute to social and academic adjustment for withdrawn children—teacher–child relationships have also figured prominently in models of young children's school adjustment.

Potential contributions of teacher–child relationships and processes to shy children's classroom adjustment and social behavior

may be viewed as parallel to the role of that support from parent–child contexts may play (Hastings, Nuselovici, Rubin, & Cheah, 2010). Shy and withdrawn children also tend to have fewer interactions and less close relationships with teachers (Rimm-Kaufman & Kagan, 2005; Rudasill, 2011; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Rydell, Bohlin, & Thorell, 2005). If these interaction patterns are typical for children who are more withdrawn, then it appears likely that they would also receive less support from many teachers and may thus be less likely to show adaptive school adjustment patterns. Not all shy children, however, display such patterns, and research findings examining teacher–child relationships indicate that shy children, in addition to interacting less overall, also tend to engage in less conflict with teachers (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Further empirical evidence suggests that teachers who show more sensitive teaching styles and behaviors and/or create more sensitive classrooms may provide a supportive context for withdrawn children that can ameliorate the link between shyness and poorer school adjustment (Avant, Gazelle, & Faldowski, 2011; Gazelle, 2006; Pianta, 1999). Teachers who are consistently warm, positive, and respond appropriately to children's cues may also help children develop better self-regulation and autonomous classroom behaviors—skills that are likely to benefit shy children in particular (Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002).

Constructs that are accurate indicators of the overall social and relational context of the classroom that teachers create and model may thus be important indicators of resources shy/withdrawn children may access as they attempt to adapt to challenging social contexts at school (Farmer, 2000; Farmer, MacAuliffe, & Hamm, 2011; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008a). If teachers are more sensitive in their interactions with children and create a more supportive classroom in general, then evidence suggests that this context may reduce both the impact of peer relationship problems and the likelihood of disengagement for shy/withdrawn children. Given the current research literature, it seems likely that there are links between children's shy/withdrawn behavior and school adjustment. There have been few studies to date, however, of the potential links between shyness, peer relationships, and school adjustment within models that also consider teacher sensitivity as a predictor of school adjustment and a potential moderator of the association between shyness, peer relationships, and adjustment.

While previous work (Avant et al., 2011) examined related longitudinal models of peer and classroom effects with anxious-solitary children, the current study examined potential linkages between shy children (a set of behaviors related to, but distinct from, anxious-solitude) in a younger age-range that encompassed school entry—a timespan likely to contain a range of challenges

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