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Preschool teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and emotional reactions to young children's peer group behaviors☆

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the present study was to examine preschool teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and emotional reactions in response to vignettes depicting a range of children's peer group behaviors. Participants were $N = 405$ female preschool teachers, aged 20–65 years ($M = 41.54$, $SD = 10.50$), recruited from childcare centers and preschools located primarily in Ontario, Canada. Participants read a series of short scenarios depicting hypothetical children engaging in a range of peer-group behaviors at preschool, including: (1) physical aggression; (2) relational aggression; (3) shyness; (4) unsociability; (5) rough-and-tumble play; and (6) exuberance. Following each vignette, teachers responded to a series of items assessing their attitudes (e.g., intent to intervene, tolerance), beliefs (e.g., implications for children's social and academic functioning), and emotional reactions (e.g., anger, worry) toward each child behavior. Results indicated that preschool teachers expressed more negative views in response to child aggression as compared to social withdrawal. Exuberance and rough-and-tumble play elicited comparatively positive, but also somewhat mixed responses. However, clear differences were also evidenced among sub-types of both aggression and social withdrawal. Findings are discussed in terms of the implications of teachers' distinctions among different types of young children's peer-group behaviors at preschool.

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Introduction

Preschool teachers may be the first important non-family adult with whom children develop a relationship (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009). Preschool teachers function as both a caregiver and educator by providing children with warmth and nurturance, as well as learning experiences that set the stage for children's future social, emotional, and academic success. The early childhood classroom is often children's first formal peer group – and it has been suggested that teachers of young children tend to emphasize the development of social skills as compared to academic skills (Del'Homme, Sinclair, & Kasari, 1994; Von Brock Treuting & Elliott, 1997). Accordingly, preschool teachers are thought to play a particularly critical role in the facilitation of children's social development (Kemple, 2004).

Past research suggested that teachers' beliefs about child development not only influence their responses to children's classroom behaviors (Cunningham & Sugawara, 1988), but can also contribute to their teaching style and classroom decisions (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez, 1991; Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2011; Vartuli, 1999). Moreover, teacher beliefs both directly and indirectly impact child outcomes (Fang, 1996). For example, teachers' beliefs about children's social characteristics have been found to affect their opinions about children's intelligence and academic abilities (Coplan, Hughes, Bosacki, & Rose-Krasnor, 2011; Espinosa & Laffey, 2003; Lerner, Lerner, & Zabski, 1985). This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hauck, Martens, & Wetzel, 1986), whereby teachers' beliefs and responses may come to influence children's self-perceptions and outcomes. Teacher beliefs are also related to the development of teacher–child relationships (McAuliffe, Hubbard, & Romano, 2009; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufmann, 2009; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002), which in turn, concurrently and predictively impact a wide range of child outcomes at school (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Garner & Waajid, 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008). Finally, teacher attitudes and beliefs may help define a child's social reputation (Chang, 2003) and influence classroom norms by which students assess each other's likeability (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001).

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Despite such previous research related to elementary school teachers' attitudes and beliefs, such findings may not be directly generalizable to samples of preschool teachers. For example, elementary school teachers and preschool teachers differ in their educational background and accreditation (Coplan, Wichmann, Lagacé-Séguin, Rachlis, & McVey, 1999; Harwood, Klopper, Osanyin, & Vanderlee, 2013), which may contribute to differences in their classroom strategies (Hadley, Wilcox, & Rice, 1994). There has been very limited previous research about preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions toward specific child social behaviors in early childhood classrooms (Hurd & Gettinger, 2011). Moreover, to date, no previous studies have explored such perceptions across a broad range of children's peer group behaviors.

Understanding the distinctions that preschool teachers may (or may not) make among different types of children's social, asocial, and antisocial behaviors has important implications for the early identification of young children experiencing peer relations difficulties. Accordingly, the goal of the present study was to examine preschool teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and emotional reactions in response to hypothetical vignettes depicting preschool children displaying different forms of aggression (physical, relational), rough-and-tumble play, social withdrawal (shyness, unsociability), and exuberance.

Teachers and young children's peer-group behaviors

Aggression

In the present study, vignettes depicting two forms of aggression were included. *Physical aggression* refers to the intent to hurt or cause bodily harm to another, by using physical force such as hitting and pushing, or using physical intimidation and verbal threats (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). There is consistent empirical evidence to suggest that physically aggressive young children are at heightened risk for a wide range of maladaptive outcomes at school, including academic difficulties, peer rejection, and other externalizing problems (Campbell, Spieker, Burchinal, & Poe, 2006; Crick et al., 2006; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas, & Crick, 2004).

Unsurprisingly, teachers tend to have quite negative views of young children's physical aggression, citing its adverse classroom effects and disruptive interference with teachers' instructional and socialization tasks (Cunningham & Sugawara, 1988; Kedar-Voivodas, 1983). In response to a series of hypothetical vignettes depicting different classroom social behaviors, Arbeau and Coplan (2007) found that kindergarten teachers reported the least tolerance for physical aggression, and anticipated substantively negative social and academic implications for the hypothetical aggressive child. Consistent with this finding, elementary school teachers have also previously reported a high tendency to directly intervene in response to physical aggression in their classroom (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

Teachers' emotional responses often affect the way they react to challenging situations (Hastings & Brown, 2002; Lucas, Collins, & Langdon, 2008). We were not able to locate any previous studies of teachers' emotional reactions to physical aggression. However, mothers of preschool-aged children report feeling angry in response to hypothetical instances of young children's physical aggression (Mills & Rubin, 1990; Werner, Senich, & Przepyszny, 2006). Much of the previous research on teachers' emotional responses involves children with disabilities, but findings show that teachers tend to report more anger toward child behaviors they feel are controllable (Lucas et al., 2008). Since teachers rate aggression as much more controllable than shyness (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007), it was expected that aggressive behavior will result in more self-reported anger from teachers than shyness.

Relational aggression is conceptualized as a non-physical form of aggression that harms others directly (e.g., threatening to end a friendship unless the friend complies with a request) and/or indirectly (e.g., persuades others to dislike a peer by spreading lies) through damage and manipulation of their social relationships (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2006). This form of aggression has been more often studied among older children, but it has been suggested that relational aggression tends to take a more direct form among preschoolers (Ostrov & Keating, 2004; Ostrov et al., 2004). There is also some evidence to suggest that relational aggression in preschool has negative social implications (e.g., peer rejection) and is associated with other behavior problems (Crick et al., 2006; Juliano, Werner, & Cassidy, 2006; Ostrov & Crick, 2007; Ostrov, Ries, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008). Findings regarding academic performance are less consistent, with some researchers reporting negative links between relational aggression and indices of academic performance (Estrem, 2005) and others reporting positive associations (Bonica, Arnold, Fisher, Zeljo, & Yershova, 2003; Woods & Wolke, 2004).

Again, less is known about teachers' attitudes toward relational aggression, particularly in early childhood. There is some evidence to suggest that pre-service and in-service elementary school teachers might have less negative views towards relational aggression as compared to physical aggression (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). As well, Yoon and Kerber (2003) reported that elementary school teachers were less likely to intervene in response to relational aggression as compared to more overt forms of aggression. However, our review of the literature revealed only one previous study to date where researchers examined preschool teachers' beliefs and responses to different types of aggression. Hurd and Gettinger (2011) provided 48 preschool teachers with hypothetical depictions of young children's physical versus relational aggression. Among the results, preschool teachers reported that they would be more likely to intervene and would do so with greater immediacy in response to physical as compared to relational aggression. Physical aggression was also perceived as being more hurtful and as having more negative consequences than relational aggression.

Social withdrawal

Socially withdrawn children remove themselves from opportunities for peer interaction in the classroom (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Previous research has suggested that elementary school teachers are generally more tolerant of social immaturity (including social withdrawal) than they are of social defiance (including aggression) (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, Christenson, & Thurlow, 1983; Cunningham & Sugawara, 1988; Safran & Safran, 1984). Similarly, teachers tend to rate internalizing behaviors as less serious as compared to externalizing behaviors (Chang & Sue, 2003). However, similar to aggression, social withdrawal is no longer considered as a unidimensional construct (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004). Accordingly, in the present study, we included vignettes depicting two different types of social withdrawal: shyness and unsociability.

Shyness refers to wariness and self-consciousness in novel, social situations and instances of perceived social evaluation (Rubin et al., 2009). The school setting may be particularly stressful for shy children. For example, the presence of a large peer group and academic demands for verbal participation may serve to exacerbate shy children's feelings of social fear and self-consciousness (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008). At school, shy young children refrain from talking and often watch others' social interactions without participating (Coplan, Arbeau, & Armer, 2008; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). From early childhood on, shyness at school is concurrently and predictively associated with internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, loneliness), peer relation difficulties (e.g., rejection, victimization), and academic under-performance (Coplan, Closson, &