

# Do children's adjustment problems contribute to teacher–child relationship quality? Support for a child-driven model<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined three models testing directional associations between children's adjustment problems (internalizing and externalizing problems) and teacher–child relationship quality (closeness, conflict, and dependency) over one school term. The relationship-driven model tested the hypothesis that teacher–child relationship quality contributes to prospective levels of adjustment problems. The child-driven model tested the hypothesis that children's adjustment problems contribute to prospective relationship quality. The transactional model tested the hypothesis that adjustment problems and relationship quality are reciprocally related over time. These models were tested with a sample of low-income, ethnically diverse children in kindergarten to grade 3 who were assessed at three time points over one school term (winter, early spring, and late spring). Overall, the child-driven model best explained the directional associations between adjustment problems and conflictual and dependent teacher–child relationships. When children showed higher levels of externalizing problems, they subsequently experienced more conflict in their relationships with their teachers. When children showed more internalizing problems they experienced more prospective dependency in their relationships with their teachers. Adjustment problems and teacher–child closeness were modestly related within time but not across time.

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## Introduction

Teachers are a key source of support for young children in the school system (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1999). Many children share a high-quality, comforting relationship with their teacher that can enhance their experiences within the school setting. Close relationships with teachers are characterized by warmth and open communication where children can use their teacher as a secure-base to explore the classroom environment (Birch & Ladd, 1997). However, some children develop negative relationships with their teachers that can undermine their experiences in school (Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Negative teacher–child relationships can be characterized by conflict where there is tension and anger in the relationship and can also be reflected by dependency where children demonstrate a clinginess and overreliance on the teacher (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Unfortunately, children who are

vulnerable to adjustment problems, such as internalizing problems (symptoms of depression and anxiety) and externalizing problems (symptoms of aggressive, disruptive and hyperactive behavior) tend to share more conflictual and dependent relationships with their teachers (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Henricsson & Rydell, 2004; Murray & Murray, 2004; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

Most studies of the associations between child adjustment problems and teacher–child relationship quality have presumed that teacher–child relationship quality contributes to prospective levels of children's adjustment problems (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). However, it could be that when children experience heightened levels of adjustment problems it interferes with the quality of their relationship with teachers (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Murray & Murray, 2004). It may also be that levels of children's adjustment problems and their relationship quality with teachers mutually influence one another over time (Doumen et al., 2008; Zhang & Sun, 2011). The direction of associations between children's adjustment problems and teacher–child relationship quality may also differ by domain of adjustment problems (internalizing or externalizing problems) or by dimension of relationship quality (closeness, conflict or dependency). However, there has been limited investigation of how young children's

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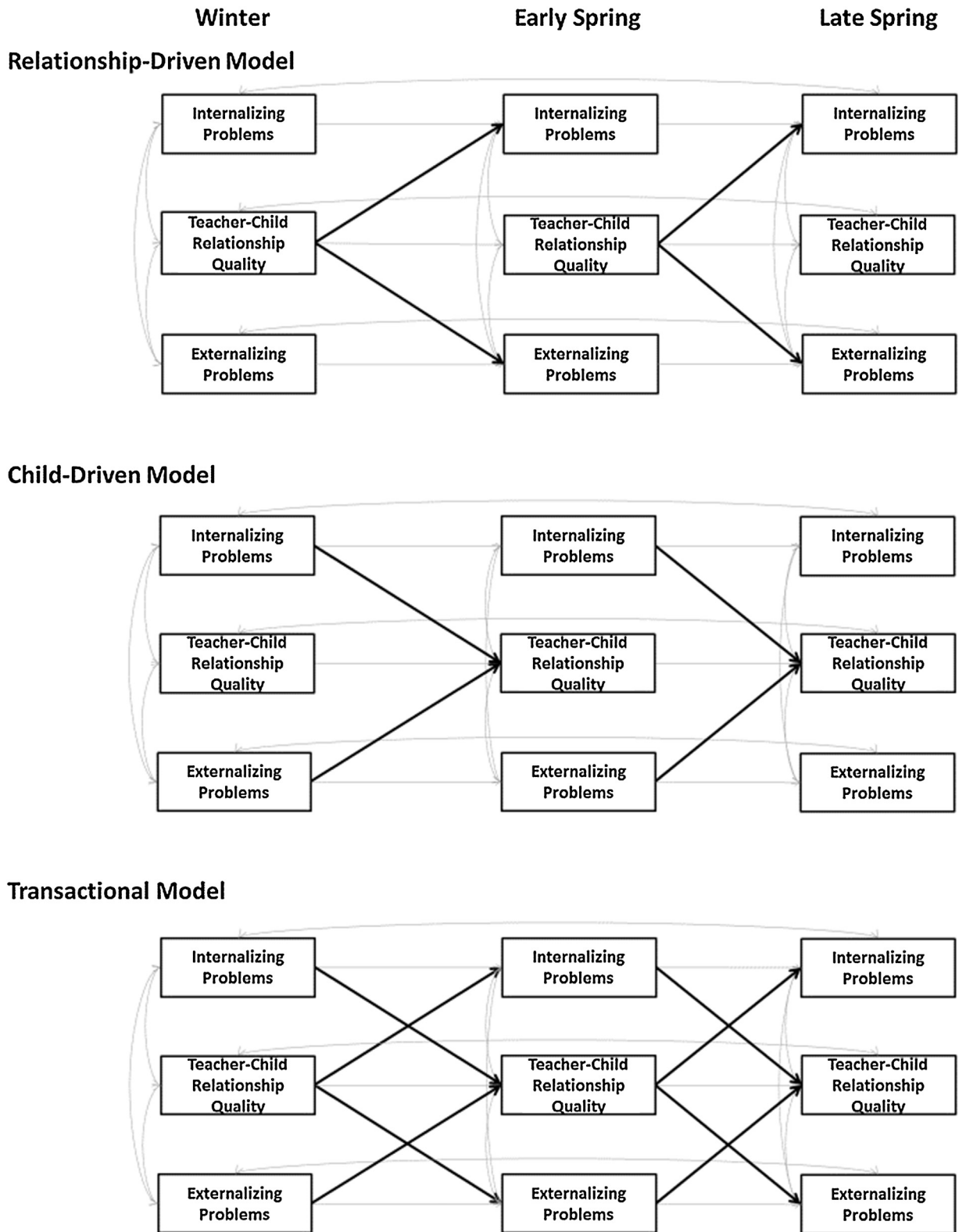


Fig. 1. Hypothesized associations between adjustment problems and teacher-child relationship quality. The faint lines indicate the autoregressive paths and within-time correlations from the stability models that are also included in the primary models.

internalizing and externalizing problems relate to distinct dimensions of teacher-child relationship quality (closeness, conflict, and dependency) over time, such as over the course of one school term.

The current study tests three alternative theoretical models of the directional associations between children’s adjustment problems and their relationship quality with teachers over the course

of one school term (see Fig. 1). The *relationship-driven model* draws from an attachment perspective to propose that children’s relationship quality with their teacher contributes to their prospective levels of internalizing and externalizing problems (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Guided by socialization theory, the *child-driven model* proposes that children’s vulnerability to internalizing and

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