



Influences on the congruence between parents' and teachers' ratings of young children's social skills and problem behaviors[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive research base exists concerning the congruence between parents' and teachers' ratings of the behavior of typically developing young children. However, little research has been conducted regarding the degree to which parents' and teachers' behavioral ratings of young children with disabilities are congruent. Additionally, previous research has not always correctly proportioned the variance to that between and within classrooms. The purpose of this study was to examine congruence (using hierarchical linear modeling) at the classroom level, rather than the individual student-level, between parents' and teachers' ratings of young children's social skills and problem behaviors. We also examined the potential impact of selected family and child demographic variables, including disability, on this congruence. Consistent with other researchers, we found moderate levels of congruence for children's social skills (as framed by strengths-based statements) and low levels of congruence for problem behaviors (as described using deficit-based terminology). Parents' and teachers' congruence was higher when rating the social skills of young children with disabilities as compared to young children without disabilities.

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1. Introduction

Identifying young children who have or are at risk for emotional and/or behavior disorders later in development is an important task since a range of evidence-based interventions are available that can alter the trajectory of social/emotional development (Dunlap et al., 2006). Researchers and clinicians have found that while the indicators of young children's challenging behaviors differ qualitatively from those of older children and adolescents, there are dimensions of behavior that can be reliably identified through structured direct assessments, such as clinical observations and indirect assessments from the solicitation of information from informants such as parents and teachers. One common way of soliciting information from parents and teachers is through the use of behavior rating scales (Demaray & Ruffalo, 1995). Information gathered through the use of rating scales completed by parents and teachers can provide

evidence of the persistence of problem behaviors as well as the presence of problem behaviors across situational contexts. Rating scales can also provide evidence of young children's social skills and behavioral strengths (Epstein, Synhorst, Cress, & Allen, 2009; Renk & Phares, 2004).

Wakschlag, Tolan, and Levanthal (2010) indicate that the persistence of behaviors as well as their occurrence across situational contexts are both indicators of behavior disorders in young children. While one would not expect that the behavioral ratings of parents and teachers to be identical, the degree to which they are congruent or are in agreement with each other increases the likelihood that the child has pervasive behavioral challenges that should be addressed. One would also expect the converse to be true – that is, if ratings of social skills (i.e., social competence) are consistent across raters, then one would assume that those skills are established and generalized. Thus, it becomes important to examine the degree of congruence between parents' and teachers' behavioral ratings as well as possible factors that may influence it.

Congruence is defined as the general agreement between two items, and many researchers have examined the congruence between parents' and teachers' information about the social competence and problem behavior for typically developing young children (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Renk & Phares, 2004; Winsler & Wallace, 2002). They have found that the degree of congruence between parents'

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and teachers' ratings of behavior is moderate in level and is dependent upon the ways in which information is obtained as well as the nature of the behavior under investigation. They have also examined how salient demographic variables influence congruence.

Achenbach et al. (1987) conducted a meta-analysis of the congruence between different informants' ratings of behavioral/emotional problems of children and adolescents between the ages of 18 months and 19 years of age. They report that the degree of congruence was higher for those studies involving children between the ages of 6 and 11 years as compared to studies involving older children and adolescents. Achenbach et al. did not report the degree of congruence between parents and teachers of preschool-aged children.

Renk and Phares (2004) also conducted a meta-analysis of cross informant studies of behavioral ratings of social competence, finding that the mean correlation between parents' and teachers' ratings decreased as children got older. Although there were no statistically significant differences between ratings corresponding to the different age groups, the mean correlation between parents' and teachers' ratings of young children's behavior was $r = .33$ as compared to correlations of $.24$ and $.21$ for middle childhood and adolescence, respectively. In a study investigating the psychometric properties of the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS; Gresham & Elliott, 2008), Gresham, Elliott, Cook, Vance, and Kettler (2010) found that the mean correlation between parents and teachers' ratings of children's and adolescents' social skills and problem behaviors was $r = .30$. All of the children and adolescents were in grades 3 through 12.

1.1. The relationship between demographic variables and ratings' congruence

In examining adults' ratings of children's social skills and problem behaviors, some researchers have investigated the effects of race/ethnicity and household income (as an index of socioeconomic status/SES) on the congruence between parents' and teachers' ratings of children's social competence (Phillips & Lonigan, 2010). These researchers found that congruence between parents' and teachers' ratings of children's behavior was higher for middle-income parents as compared to low-income parents. Others have also found low levels of congruence between parents' and teachers' ratings when low-income parents were from racial/ethnic minority groups (Manz, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 1999). Differences in parenting styles have been attributed to racial or ethnic status (McWayne, Owsianik, Green, & Fantuzzo, 2008), and it is possible that racial or ethnic status may impact how parents gauge the importance of children's social behavior.

As far as we know, only one study has examined the effects of maternal education on the congruence between parents' and teachers' ratings of preschoolers' behavior (Gagnon, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 1992). These researchers found that maternal education levels affected the congruence between mothers' and teachers' ratings of externalizing behaviors for girls. That is, there were higher levels of congruence (as measured by Pearson correlations) between teachers and mothers who had completed high school versus mothers who hadn't completed high school. The positive effects of maternal education on children's academic and social skills are well-documented (e.g., Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002). Mothers who have higher levels of education might better comprehend the questions asked on rating scales or other protocols. They may also have different expectations for their children's behavior and development, expectations that are more consistent with their children's teachers. Finally, mothers with higher levels of education may have access to resources (e.g., information, social and financial supports) that mothers with lower levels of education lack. Lareau (1987) described these resources as

"cultural capital" (p. 82) and discussed the degree to which middle-class and lower-class mothers differed on the amount of quality of cultural capital available to them. She posited that middle-class mothers (who were more highly educated) held child-rearing views more consistent with teachers than lower-class mothers. In addition, it is possible that teachers view more highly educated mothers as more similar to them and that this perception could have an effect on teachers' ratings (Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003).

1.2. Gaps in the literature on parent–teacher congruence

While the congruence between parents' and teachers' ratings of typically developing young children's behavior has been well-researched, missing are investigations of the congruence between parents' and teachers' information about the social/emotional behaviors of young children with disabilities. Of the 119 studies included in the Achenbach et al. (1987) or the Renk and Phares (2004) meta-analyses, none examined congruence for this population. Holmbeck et al. (2003) studied the congruence between teachers' and parents' ratings of the behavior of preadolescent boys with spina bifida, but we were unable to identify any other studies that looked specifically at parent–teacher congruence of behavioral ratings for preschoolers with disabilities.

Investigating the congruence between parents' and teachers' ratings of the behavior of young children with disabilities makes sense because young children with disabilities often have different communicative styles or patterns of behavior that differ significantly from their typically developing peers. These styles of patterns of behavior can often make it difficult for others (including parents and teachers) to appropriately interpret verbal and nonverbal cues, thus leading to errors or inconsistencies in understanding or judging behavior (Dunst, 1985; Walden, Urbano-Blackford, & Carpenter, 1997). Since rating the behaviors of young children is a subjective task by nature, it is possible that disability status has an effect on congruence between parents and teachers.

Inclusive ECE classrooms present good opportunities to examine not only the degree to which parents' and teachers' ratings of the behavior of children with disabilities are congruent, but compare their levels of congruence to parents' and teachers' ratings of typically developing children who are enrolled in the same classrooms. Inclusive ECE classrooms serve both typically developing young children and those with a range of disabilities and the same teacher works with both groups of children. These classrooms are sponsored by public school districts following Part B, Section 619 regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004).

1.3. The impact of teacher perception on congruence and informant discrepancies

In this study, we recognize that it may be difficult for teachers to rate children's behaviors independent of other children as there is evidence that teachers tend to compare one child's behavior with another's (Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2007; Phillips & Lonigan, 2010). For example, in a class where a number of students present significant challenging behaviors, a child who exhibits problem behaviors, but to a lesser degree might be rated as more "normal." De Los Reyes and Kazdin (2005) discuss the importance of understanding informant discrepancies and posit that discrepancies are due, in part, to informant bias and perception. That is, informants, whether they are parents or teachers, base their ratings of young children's behavior on their memories or perceptions of children's behaviors that may be affected by a number of variables, one of which might be the behavior of other children in the classroom. Mashburn, Hamre, Downer, and Pianta (2006) used a multilevel modeling framework to determine the

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