



# Teacher–child relationships and behavioral adjustment: Transactional links for preschool boys at risk

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## ABSTRACT

In this short-term longitudinal study, transactional links between teacher–child relationships and behavioral adjustment were investigated in a sample of preschool boys ( $N = 175$ ) at risk for developing externalizing problems. Teachers ( $N = 175$ ) reported about the quality of the teacher–child relationship (i.e., Closeness, Conflict, and Dependency) and about children's behavioral adjustment (i.e., Externalizing Behavior, Internalizing Behavior, and Prosocial Behavior) at three occasions within one school year. Cross-lagged path-analytic models showed positive bidirectional associations between Conflict and both Externalizing and Internalizing Behavior from Time 1 to Time 2, but not from Time 2 to Time 3. In addition, there was a transactional sequence with more Conflict at Time 1 leading to less Prosocial Behavior at Time 2 which, in turn, predicted more Conflict at Time 3. Closeness was reciprocally and positively related to Prosocial Behavior over time, and was positively and unidirectionally predicted by Internalizing Behavior. Dependency showed positive reciprocal links with Internalizing Behavior over time, and negatively and unidirectionally predicted Prosocial Behavior. These findings suggest that interventions may be most effective if they adjust their focus and strategy depending on children's specific behavioral and relational needs.

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## 1. Introduction

Previous research has shown that the affective quality of teacher–child relationships affects children's behavioral adjustment (e.g., Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009; Graves & Howes, 2011; Henricsson & Rydell, 2006; Myers & Morris, 2009). On the other hand, children's problem behaviors are also found to predict the quality of the teacher–child relationship (e.g., Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Van Damme, & Maes, 2008; Henricsson & Rydell, 2004; Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Rudasill, 2011). Most research has investigated the teacher–child relationship as either a predictor or an outcome of children's behavioral adjustment. Far less is known about reciprocal links between teacher–child relationships and behavioral functioning over time. The few studies that did examine bidirectional influences focused on one or two dimensions of the relationship (e.g., closeness and conflict) and behavioral adjustment (e.g., externalizing and internalizing behavior; Zhang & Sun, 2011). In the present study, we looked at three dimensions of both the teacher–child relationship (i.e., closeness, conflict, and dependency) and children's behavioral adjustment (i.e., externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, and prosocial behavior). In addition, previous studies used community samples (i.e., samples that were not selected on the basis of special criteria, such as child characteristics or problem behaviors). In the present study, we investigated bidirectional influences between teacher–child relationship quality and children's behavioral adjustment in a sample of preschool boys who are at risk for developing externalizing problems.

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In the following sections, we will review the literature about the predictive role of teacher–child relationships for children's behavioral adjustment and of children's problem behaviors for teacher–child relationship quality. This overview contains studies with children from preschool to sixth grade. As we are interested in associations over time, we will focus on longitudinal studies here, although occasionally cross-sectional studies are also mentioned. Some studies examined associations over different school years, whereas other studies performed two or more data collections within one school year. The present study will investigate associations between teacher–child relationships and behavioral adjustment at three time points within one school year.

### 1.1. Teacher–child relationships as predictors of children's behavioral adjustment

Research about the impact of the teacher–child relationship on young children's school functioning has often been based on an extended attachment perspective, which originates from research about parent–child relationships (Bowlby, 1969). According to this perspective, sensitive teachers, just as parents, can serve as a secure base for children from which they can explore the school environment and which will enhance their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Davis, 2003; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997). During the last two decades, research has shown strong support for the association between teacher–child relationships and several aspects of children's school adjustment, such as behavioral adjustment, school engagement, and academic achievement (e.g., Buysse et al., 2009; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005).

Studies based on an extended attachment perspective often distinguish between three dimensions of the teacher–child relationship: closeness, conflict, and dependency. Closeness refers to the degree of warmth and open communication in the relationship. Conflict reflects discordant and coercive interactions and dependency refers to overly dependent and clingy behaviors of the child (Pianta, 2001). Previous research has found that these three dimensions of the teacher–child relationship act as predictors for children's behavioral adjustment. Most research has focused on the conflict and closeness dimensions of the relationship, whereas dependency has received less attention in previous research. In addition, research on behavioral adjustment has pointed to three types of behavior: externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, and prosocial behavior. Externalizing behavior refers to undercontrolled and outwardly directed behavior that is usually annoying and disruptive for others, such as hyperactivity and aggression (Merrell, 1999; see also Cicchetti & Toth, 1991). Internalizing behavior reflects overcontrolled and inwardly directed behavior that represents problems with the self and frequently involves behavioral deficits and patterns of social avoidance, such as anxious and withdrawn behavior (Merrell, 1999; see also Cicchetti & Toth, 1991). Prosocial behavior refers to voluntary behaviors that are intended to benefit others, such as helping and sharing (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). With regard to behavioral adjustment, most attention has been paid to externalizing and internalizing behavior, whereas prosocial behavior has only been scarcely investigated.

Evidence for the association between conflict and externalizing behavior is most consistent. Higher levels of conflict have been shown to predict more externalizing problem behaviors, both within school years (e.g., Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Myers & Morris, 2009) and across school years (e.g., Buysse et al., 2009; Silver et al., 2005). For instance, higher levels of teacher–child conflict in first grade predicted more aggressive behavior in third grade (Buysse et al., 2009). In addition, conflict in the teacher–child relationship has been linked with higher levels of internalizing behavior over time (Myers & Morris, 2009). In other longitudinal studies, however, conflict did not predict children's levels of internalizing behavior (e.g., Henricsson & Rydell, 2006; O'Connor, Collins, & Supplee, 2012). Although research about the predictive value of teacher–child relationships for prosocial behavior is scarce, some evidence has been found that high levels of conflict are associated with less prosocial behavior from fall to spring of the preschool year (Myers & Morris, 2009).

In contrast to conflict, most longitudinal studies found that closeness did not significantly predict children's levels of externalizing behavior (e.g., Buysse et al., 2009; Ewing & Taylor, 2009). Only a few cross-sectional studies showed significant, negative associations between closeness and externalizing behavior (Baker, 2006; Spilt, Koomen, & Mantzicopoulos, 2010). In addition, some studies provided evidence that closeness negatively affected children's internalizing problems over time (e.g., Myers & Morris, 2009; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). For example, Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) found that higher levels of closeness in the preschool teacher–child relationship were associated with less mother-rated internalizing problems in first grade. In other longitudinal studies, however, closeness was not a significant predictor of internalizing behavior (e.g., Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Henricsson & Rydell, 2006). Furthermore, some evidence has been found that high degrees of closeness are related to more prosocial behavior from fall to spring of the preschool year (Myers & Morris, 2009).

Finally, the few longitudinal studies that investigated the predictive role of dependency suggest that higher levels of dependency are related to more externalizing and internalizing behavior both within and between school years: Henricsson and Rydell (2006) found that more teacher–child dependency in third grade was associated with both more externalizing and more internalizing behavior in sixth grade. Likewise, Ewing and Taylor (2009) showed that high degrees of dependency in the fall of preschool were related to more anxious-fearful behavior in the spring of preschool. To our knowledge, no studies have examined whether teacher–child dependency predicts children's prosocial behavior over time.

In sum, higher levels of conflict were found to predict more externalizing behavior over time and, although less consistently, more internalizing behavior and less prosocial behavior. Evidence for the predictive role of closeness has been less strong, although some studies found that higher degrees of closeness were associated with less internalizing behavior and more prosocial behavior over time. Finally, although the predictive role of dependency has only been scarcely examined, some evidence has been found that higher levels of dependency predict both more externalizing and internalizing behavior. Together, these studies provide evidence that the teacher–child relationship quality predicts children's behavioral adjustment over time. In the next section, we will describe studies that investigated this association in the other direction—that is, they examined children's problem behaviors as predictor of teacher–child relationship quality.

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