



Child-care chaos and teachers' responsiveness: The indirect associations through teachers' emotion regulation and coping



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ABSTRACT

Teachers in early child-care settings are key contributors to children's development. However, the role of teachers' emotional abilities (i.e., emotion regulation and coping skills) and the role of teacher-perceived environmental chaos in relation to their responsiveness to children are understudied. The current study explored the direct and indirect associations between teachers' perceptions of child-care chaos and their self-reported contingent reactions towards children's negative emotions and challenging social interactions via teachers' emotional regulation and coping strategies. The sample consisted of 1129 preschool-aged classroom teachers in day care and public pre-K programs across the US. We first found that child-care chaos was directly associated with teachers' non-supportive reactions after controlling for multiple program and teacher characteristics. In addition, teachers in more chaotic child-care settings had less reappraisal and coping skills, which in turn, was associated with lower levels of positive responsiveness to children. Teachers reporting a higher degree of chaos used more suppression strategies, which in turn, was associated with teachers' non-supportive reactions and fewer expressive encouragement reactions to children's emotions. Results of this exploratory study suggest that it is important to prepare teachers to handle chaotic environments with clear guidelines and rules. In order to encourage teachers' supportive responses to children, intervention programs are needed to address teachers' coping and emotion regulation strategies in early childhood education.

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1. Introduction

In early child-care settings, teachers are key socializers of children's social and emotional competence through guiding children's expression and regulation of emotions and social behaviors (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Although teachers play an important role in facilitating children's social and emotional competence in child-care settings, teachers often report that dealing with children's emotions and challenging behaviors is a major source of stress (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Coupled with the fact that teaching is an intensive psychological process, this stress may limit teachers' ability to interact with children in a positive way or even prompt expression of negative emotions towards children (Ahn & Stifter, 2006). There is a lack of understanding, however, of antecedents associated with teachers' contingent reactions to children's

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negative emotions and challenging social behaviors (Denham et al., 2012), and a critical need to explore how teachers might better respond to children's social and emotional challenges.

In the parenting literature, higher degrees of chaotic home environments have been found to be associated with parental psychological difficulties (Deater-Deckard, Chen, Wang, & Bell, 2012) and parenting behaviors (Corapci & Wachs, 2002). Likewise, in more chaotic child-care environments, teachers may experience higher levels of stress, emotional arousal, and burnout, which interfere with their abilities to positively respond to children. In the current study, we first explored teachers' perceptions of child-care chaos, which can be considered an environmental aspect of child-care, and its direct associations with teachers' contingent reactions to children, reported by teachers. In addition, when child-care environments are more chaotic, teachers themselves may need to utilize emotion regulation strategies and coping skills in an effective way to positively respond to children's negative social and emotional displays. If teachers are more capable of remaining calm, regulating their own emotions, and coping with difficulties, they are more likely to provide positive guidance for children (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). For example, Jennings (2015) found that when preschool teachers have higher levels of mindfulness (i.e., nonjudgmental attention and awareness that promote emotion regulation and resiliency and buffer stress), they tend to show more sensitivity in their discipline approaches and better emotional support. Despite the importance of child-care climate and teachers' emotional abilities in their responsiveness to children, there is a lack of research examining this process. Therefore, we explored the direct and indirect associations between child-care chaos and teachers' responsiveness to children's negative emotions and challenging social interactions with peers through teachers' emotion regulation and coping skills.

1.1. Teachers' responsiveness in child-care

Children's social and emotional competence can be taught and developed through early childhood teachers' effective responsiveness and guidance (Denham et al., 2012). For example, Ahn (2005) showed in a qualitative study that preschoolers could identify precipitants of negative emotions and could express the emotions in a constructive way when teachers encouraged emotion-related discussions. When teachers or caregivers respond to children's negative emotions using supportive reactions, children tend to demonstrate a better understanding of their own and others' emotions (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Morris, Denham, Bassett, & Curby, 2013), stronger social skills, and less problem behaviors (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996). Supportive reactions towards children's negative emotions include helping children identify their own emotions and regulate undesirable behaviors, providing children with opportunities to solve problems by themselves, and encouraging children to express their emotions in a positive way to maintain healthy relationships with peers (Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, 2002). On the other hand, caregivers' non-supportive reactions, including punitive or minimization responses that ignore the seriousness of problems, are associated with lower levels of social functioning, coping skills, and emotion regulation in children (Eisenberg et al., 1996; Perry, Calkins, Nelson, Leerkes, & Marcovitch, 2012).

In addition to positively responding to children's negative emotions, it is also important to teach children how to negotiate conflicts constructively and how to make respectful choices in challenging social situations (CASEL, 2013). It is possible that children are more likely to learn and internalize social cues and rules when teachers provide more adequate guidance on managing conflicts with peers in child-care settings. Children whose teachers appropriately intervene with challenging peer interactions are expected to learn ways to overcome challenging interactions. Despite its importance, there is a lack of studies that measure and examine teachers' responsiveness and guidance in children's challenging social interactions. In the current study, we developed a teacher-report measure that examines teachers' responsiveness in children's challenging social interactions. The measure was developed to parallel, in terms of format, an established measure, the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES). The CCNES assesses teachers' responsiveness to children's negative emotions (Fabes et al., 2002) by providing a set of short scenarios and potential responses from which teachers choose the one they would employ in the described situation. The current study examined the antecedents of teachers' responsiveness that supports children's social and emotional learning to explore ways to improve teachers' supportive responses on both children's negative emotions and challenging social interactions.

1.2. The role of child-care chaos

Child-care is the place where teachers and children interact on a daily basis. The overall climate of child-care, including physical environment, has been studied in relation to teachers' caregiving behaviors, emotional support, sensitivity, and responsiveness (e.g., Gordon, Fujimoto, Kaestner, Korenman, & Abner, 2013; Mashburn et al., 2008). For example, Mashburn et al. (2008) found that teachers in well-structured and well-organized classrooms, which are measured by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), tended to show better emotional and instructional support. In addition, the way in which teachers organize routines and learning activities has been found to be correlated with overall child-care quality (Hamre, Goffin, & Kraft-Sayre, 2009). However, the focus of these studies does not include examination of how chaotic the environment is and how such an environment might uniquely affect a teacher's responsiveness. Chaotic environments are defined as having high levels of noise, crowding, instability, unpredictability, disorganization, and a lack of structure, routines, or regularities (Matheny, Wachs, Ludwig, & Phillips, 1995). Some dimensions of chaotic environments, such as teacher-to-child ratio, group size, and routines, have been studied separately as a measure of child-care structural quality (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, Brien, & McCartney, 2002), and a few studies found that higher levels of noise (Hambrick-Dixon, 1988; Linting, Groeneveld, Vermeer, & van Ijzendoorn, 2013; Maxwell & Evans, 2000) or crowding (Maxwell, 1996) in child-care were related to young children's visual attention, reading skills, and social-emotional wellbeing. Only one study, to our knowledge, utilized a comprehensive measure of

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