Chapter 52

Teachers Can Play Too:
Teacher–Child Relationships, Social–Emotional Development, and Academic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Positive teacher-child relationships are key factors for children's social-emotional development and academic success in schools. Teachers' ability to provide children with emotional support and understand children's unique needs may improve challenging behaviors in the classroom. Play-based teacher intervention training models provide teachers opportunities to become therapeutic agents and learn how to use humanistic play therapy skills and language to communicate with children and respond to their unique needs. In this chapter, the authors introduce four play-based teacher intervention training models: Kinder Training, Child-Teacher Relationship Training, Relationship Enhancement for Learner and Teacher, and Teacher-Child Relationship Building. The authors also illustrate these models' goals, training structure, research support for their effectiveness with teacher-child relationships, children's behavioral issues, academic engagement, and teachers' classroom management skills.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), approximately 5.4 percent of U.S. children age 5 to 17 were reported by a parent to exhibit social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties. Children with emotional or behavioral problems may have difficulty managing their emotions, focusing on tasks, and/or regulating their behavior (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003). Thus, good emotional and behavioral health is a key component to children's healthy development and may facilitate academic achievement (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2012).

Research has shown that the teacher-child relationship has long-lasting effects on children's social-emotional development and academic success in schools (Rimm-Kaufman, 2011). Children's social-emotional or behavioral difficulties may cause significant stressors for teachers and impact their ability to provide children with emotional support. Additionally, teachers' responses to children's behaviors may affect children's psychological, social, and cognitive development, as well as academic engagement and achievement (Baker, 2006; Pianta, 1999; Ray, 2007). Hence, it appears beneficial for teachers to receive professional development training aimed at improving teacher-child relationships, managing students' challenging behaviors, and responding to students' emotional needs. In addition, providing teachers support and helping them develop effective ways of communicating with children may increase their confidence in managing children's behaviors and emotional difficulties, reduce teaching stress, and improve overall job satisfaction (White et al., 1997).

THE IMPACT OF TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Children's primary relationships with significant adults, such as parents, caregivers, and teachers are highly influential in young children's lives and can greatly influence their development (Draper, Siegel, White, Solis, & Mishna, 2009; Guerney, 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Landreth & Bratton, 2006). Pianta (1999) discussed the impact of inadequate attachment with significant adults on children's lifelong developmental outcomes. Specifically, children who have experienced unstable and negative relationships in early childhood have a higher risk for challenges in social, emotional, and cognitive development and therefore have the potential to exhibit poor school performance and classroom adjustment (Janson & King, 2006; Perry, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

Children's relationships with their teachers are among the most important relationships they establish in the school environment (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Given the large amount of time teachers spend with students, teachers can be significant role models in children's lives (Stulmaker, 2012). Researchers have suggested that children's developmental outcomes largely depend on the quality of teacher-child relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001, 2005). Research also has shown that healthy teacher-child relationships may enhance children's social-emotional development and academic success. Positive teacher-child relationships encourage children's active participation in learning and peer relationships, contributing to a functional classroom environment (Baker, 2006; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Howes, 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). However, negative teacher-child relationships have been linked to children's poor behavioral and academic outcomes as well as negative attitudes about school (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Garner & Waajid, 2008).

Birch and Ladd (1997) categorized the nature of the teacher-child relationship as one of the three categories of close, conflictual, and dependent. They examined the relationship between the closeness, dependency, and conflict features of teacher-child relationships in 206 kindergarten children's school adjustment.

Birch and Ladd (1997) found that close teacher-child relationships were strongly linked with academic performance as well as school liking and self-directedness. In close teacher-child relationships, teachers provide emotional security, facilitate open communication, and create stable environments that may function as a support for children in the school setting. Children may therefore have positive attitudes toward school, experience successful academic performance, and foster healthy social-emotional development

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