



Better than Teacher's Pet: Building Relationships with Teachers in the Early School Years

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Once your child starts school, teachers may become the most influential adults—besides you as parents—in your children's lives. Research shows that the quality of children's early relationships with teachers during the first years of school is crucial in shaping children's school success over time. In this column, we describe research that reveals the importance of children's relationships with teachers, relationships that involve more than status as "teacher's pet." We will also identify ways in which parents can facilitate children's development of positive relationships with their teachers.

How Are Teacher-Student Relationships Measured?

Researchers in education and psychology have assessed the teacher-student relationship in many ways. However, much of the research on this topic has used the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS). Designed by Robert Pianta, Professor of Education at the University of Virginia, this scale assesses three dimensions of a teacher's perception of his/her relationship with a student: closeness, conflict, and dependency. Items that reflect Closeness include: "I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child," and "If upset, this child will seek comfort from me." Items that reflect Conflict include: "This child and I always seem to be struggling with one another," and "This child easily becomes angry with me." An item that reflects Dependency is: "This child asks for my help when he/she does not really need help."

Why are Teacher-Student Relationships Important?

Although children's relationships with their teachers are important in all grades of school, these relationships seem to be especially crucial early on in setting the stage for children's school experiences in the years to come. The quality of children's relationships with their teachers in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade has been shown to predict children's

classroom behavior, social acceptance, attitudes toward school, and academic achievement both concurrently and in later elementary school. For instance, in an early study published in 1994, Dr. Carollee Howes, a professor of Education at the University of California - Los Angeles, and her colleagues found that children with secure, close relationships with their preschool teachers went on to display more empathetic and sensitive behavior with their peers and were less likely than other children to be withdrawn or aggressive with peers.

Teachers cannot help but be influenced by a child's readiness for school. It is important children have the appropriate behaviors and skills for this initial transition. Yet in a recent survey of over 3,500 kindergarten teachers, researchers with the National Center for Early Development and Learning found teachers reporting that, on average, nearly half (48%) of their students were not prepared for the transition to kindergarten and experienced a difficult adjustment to school. Teachers identified several areas in which students were most likely to be below expectations. In particular, students were most likely to be under-prepared in areas such as following directions, working independently, working in groups and communicating.

Why Are Teacher-Student Relationships Important for my Child with Exceptionalities?

Positive teacher-student relationships seem to be particularly protective for children with disabilities, who are "at-risk" because they are less likely to have these requisite school skills and are more likely to start school with behavior problems, cognitive difficulties or social problems. For these children, a positive teacher-student relationship in the early school years can change the trajectory of school experiences, setting them on a path of positive school adjustment and academic achievement.

Research suggests that children with developmental disabili-

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ities may be in a position to benefit especially well from a positive early teacher-student relationship. For instance, Dr. Pianta and his colleagues examined teacher-student relationship quality among kindergarten children whose low performance on a kindergarten screening test or on classroom tasks placed them at high risk for grade retention or special education placement. Among these high-risk children, even after accounting for social skills and behavior problems, those who had closer, less conflictual relationships with teachers were ultimately less likely to be retained or placed in special education by the end of the school year.

Children with high levels of behavior problems may benefit especially from a positive teacher-student relationship. In a 2005 study, Rebecca Silver and her colleagues at the University of Oregon examined a group of 283 children followed from kindergarten to third grade. The researchers found that, when children began kindergarten with high externalizing behaviors (e.g. acting out, impulsivity, or aggression), teacher-student closeness predicted significant decreases in externalizing behaviors by third grade, whereas teacher-student conflict predicted increased behavior problems.

Recent research indicates that children with developmental disabilities have significantly poorer quality relationships with their teachers. In a study of 138 six-year-old children with and without developmental disabilities, we (Abbey Eisenhower and Jan Blacher, with UCLA colleague Bruce Baker) found the teacher-student relationships of children with developmental disabilities were marked by more conflict and dependency and less closeness, compared to those of typically developing children. However, children's behavior, social competence, and self-regulatory skills – not just IQ or cognitive level – accounted for differences in teacher-student relationship quality. In fact, children's ability to regulate and manage emotions at age three was very predictive of differences in children's teacher-student relationship quality at age six. This finding suggests the possibility for improvement, because parents can play an important role in improving children's self-regulatory abilities through modeling and teaching, as we describe below.

What Can Parents Do to Facilitate Children's Positive Relationships with Teachers?

We can draw suggestions from research findings for ways in which parents can help their children develop strong, close, positive relationships with teachers:

1) Prepare for Transition. The transition to school and the changes that accompany it can be overwhelming for young children. Here are some ways to prepare for these new challenges:

- During the spring of the school year, arrange for your child or

your child's class to visit a classroom in the grade above him.

- During the summer, arrange play dates for your child with other children who will be in his class in the fall.
- Before school starts, meet with your child's new teacher. Learn what will be expected of your child and how to prepare her for the new classroom routine and demands.
- Arrange for your child to meet his teacher before the school year starts, or encourage your child to write a letter to his teacher introducing himself.
- Before school starts, do a "trial run," or a mock school day with your child, in which she practices making the drive or walk to school, entering the school building, finding her classroom, using her locker, and other aspects of her morning routine.

2) Develop Strong Parent-Teacher Relationships. One of the best ways to ensure that your child is positively connected to her teacher is to establish a strong connection with her teacher yourself and to maintain regular communication. Recognize the teacher as a valuable source of information about your child's behavior, social skills, and learning needs. You can maintain a positive, constructive working relationship with her teacher by asking questions, seeking suggestions about how to address your child's needs, and letting the teacher know how much you appreciate his/her efforts on your child's behalf.

3) Understand Teachers' Expectations. For many children there is a mismatch between teachers' expectations and children's skills at school entry. This discrepancy, which is likely to be even greater for children with disabilities, may make it harder for teachers and students to establish close ties. Parents can help avoid this pitfall in two ways. First, target the four school readiness skills of following directions, working independently, working in groups, and communicating. Provide opportunities for practice that challenge your child's abilities in these areas. Reward even small successes with praise, attention and even small rewards. Second, play "school" with your child and allow her to take turns playing the teacher and the student so that she can practice both following and enforcing these classroom rules and behaviors.

4) Support your Child's Autonomy. In a 2004 study conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Early Child Care Research Network, researchers studying over 600 families found that both fathers and mothers' parenting behaviors predicted children's later social adaptation to school and relationships with teachers. In particular, children had better social skills and behavior in kindergarten through second grade when mothers favored

self-directed child behavior as opposed to adult-directed behavior, and fathers showed sensitive support for their children's autonomy. This study highlights the importance of fathers and their sensitive support and encouragement in promoting children's school success.

5) Assist your Child in Understanding the "Rules for School". The classroom is full of rules and expectations, many of them unspoken. Children are expected to know and follow these upon entering school. You can help reinforce your child's knowledge of these rules by discussing them at home and by praising your child's "good student behaviors" whenever you see them at home. Many school-appropriate behaviors, such as concentration and persistence, sharing, waiting one's turn, asking permission, using a quiet voice, staying in one's seat, and following adults' instructions, are often important at home as well.

6) Help your Child Cope with Frustration. The challenging new tasks of school can be frustrating and overwhelming, especially for children with disabilities. The ability to maintain self-control, remain calm, and work persistently on classroom tasks is important in facilitating children's positive interactions with teachers.

Parents have immense power to help their children build a repertoire of strategies for coping with emotions and for maintaining self-control and persistence. You can model for your child how you choose to take deep breaths, leave the room and count to 10, or use positive self-talk when you are upset. Positive self-talk involves saying aloud, so your child can hear, "I can feel myself getting frustrated right now. I have to calm down and relax and then I can try to solve this problem." When you see your child becoming frustrated, remind him of these strategies until he is eventually able to use these coping methods on his own. Children learn to maintain self-control by imitating their parents' responses to negative feelings.

Taken together, these practices may help your child develop a rich, rewarding relationship with his teachers and a positive connection to school that will set him on a path toward school success. ^{EP}

References cited or consulted provided upon request: Email epedit@aol.com.

Abbey Eisenhower, M.A., is currently a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology at UCLA. Her research examines associations between child developmental disabilities, behavior problems, and family well-being, and assesses school-based interventions for children with developmental or behavioral challenges.



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EVEN EASIER TO TAKE OFF**

**FOR PHYSICALLY
CHALLENGED**

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FIGURE 1
Slip lower half of suit on, one leg at a time.

**MULTIPLE
SCLEROSIS**



FIGURE 2
Slip arms through the arm holes, one at a time.

ARTHRITIS

FIBROMYALGIA



FIGURE 3
Pull left side of suit over to the right side of your body, fastening the Velcro together.

REHABILITATION



FIGURE 4
Pull right side of suit over to the left side of your body, and fasten the Velcro.

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TITLE: Better than Teacher's Pet: Building Relationships with
Teachers in the
SOURCE: The Exceptional Parent 36 no6 Je 2006
PAGE(S): 69-71
WN: 0615203304015

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