



## Does the Squeaky Wheel Get More Oil? The effect of children's temperament on teacher-child relationships

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I'll never forget the time I volunteered at my son's preschool and was warned by the teacher to "watch out for that one....he's a real handful". As she said this, she pointed to a little boy across the room, who was arguing with another child about whose turn it was to play at the train table. Apparently, this child didn't often follow directions and was usually on his own agenda. I could see that, even though the school year had just started, this teacher had already developed a negative perception of this little boy.

We all know that some children are "easier" than others – easier to play with, easier to talk to and easier to manage. These are the kids whose parents get glowing reports during parent-teacher interviews. But what about children who aren't "easy" – children who have outbursts, who don't always do as they are told, who aren't as easy to talk to or engage, who don't answer questions in class....do we need to worry about them? What impact does a child's temperament have on his interactions with his teacher? And what implications does this have for SLP/Ts who consult to early childhood educators and teachers?

### Study on the Roles of Child Temperament and Teacher-Child Interactions

A 2009 study using data compiled by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in their Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD) addresses this topic. The NICHD SECCYD collected longitudinal data for over 1000 children (beginning at age one month) from 1991 until 2009 in relation to their child care experiences and their developmental outcomes. Many papers have been

published based on the NICHD SECCYD data (our September 2012 *Wig Wag Minute* article "[Recommending Child Care to Parents: Is this based on evidence?](#)" references one of these papers). Kathleen Moritz Rudasill and Sara Rimm-Kaufman used the NICHD SECCYD data to examine factors that contribute to teacher-child relationships in "Teacher-child relationship quality: The roles of child temperament and teacher-child interactions" (Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009).

## The Importance of Teacher-Child Relationships

As SLPs, we know that children's communication styles can affect how teachers respond to them, thereby influencing the type of input a child receives. As the context for our language intervention is adult-child interaction, we appreciate how important positive, stimulating, child-centred interactions are. This is why one of the first pages in the Learning Language and Loving It™ guidebook (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002) talks about the importance of interaction for the development of communication:

"Communication and language learning take place within the everyday interactions children have with their caregivers.....These interactions must be enjoyable and frequent and should continue over an extended period of time...Most important, the child should participate actively in these conversations..." (p.10)

Besides providing a context for language development, research has shown that a young child's relationship with his teachers influences his development in several other ways, including the:

- ability to develop and use social skills to negotiate challenges at school
  - academic performance
  - perception of school in general
  - visual and language scores on standardized tests
  - work habits
  - self-regulation and behaviour
- (Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009)

While positive teacher-child relationships work as a protective factor for children's social and academic development, negative relationships operate as a risk factor for children's school success (Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009).

## In-Depth Look at the Quality of Teacher-Child Relationships

In order to add to the literature that predicts the mechanisms underlying successful teacher-child relationships, Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman (2009) examined the extent to which:

- **children's temperament and gender contribute to teacher-child relationship quality** (as perceived by teachers) (e.g. are girls closer to their teachers than boys?)
- **children's temperament and gender contribute to the frequency of teacher-child interactions** (e.g. do outgoing children initiate more interactions with their teachers, which then predicts closer relationships with teachers?)
- **teacher- and child-initiated interactions contribute to each other and to teacher-child relationship quality** (e.g. when children initiate interactions more frequently with teachers, is this reciprocated with more teacher-initiated interactions? Or do teachers initiate less with these children as they perceive them as less needy? Or do children who receive more teacher-initiated interactions initiate fewer interactions themselves because they don't want extra teacher attention?)

Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman (2009) examined data for 819 children from the NICHD SECCYD (413 girls and 406 boys). The data used in this study, collected when the children were 54 months of age and when they were in first grade, included information about:

### Children's Temperament

Data about the children's temperament was gathered at age 54 months using a parent-report measure called the "Children's Behavior Questionnaire" (Rothbart, Ahadi, Hershey, 1994). Three subscales from this measure were used to create a "shyness" variable and an "effortful control" variable.

- **the shyness subscale** items measured children's social inhibition, such as how they respond to people, items, or events that are new or unfamiliar. Research has shown that less shy (outgoing) children show more spontaneous speech, sociability, and child-initiated interactions than their shy peers. However, these interactions are not always positive, and therefore outgoing children could develop either more conflict or more closeness with their teachers.
- **the effortful control variable** was made up of items from an "inhibitory control" subscale and an "attentional focusing" subscale. Inhibitory control refers to a child's ability to inhibit an inappropriate response (e.g. stopping an activity when told "no", or waiting in line for something). Attentional focusing refers to a child's ability to concentrate and focus on an activity. Together, inhibitory control and attentional focusing contribute to effortful control, which is theorized to be a dominant system of temperament (Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Low effortful control has been linked to children's problems forming relationships at school due to externalizing behaviours (behaviour problems such as disruptive, hyperactive, or aggressive behaviour, where the child negatively acts on the *external* environment (Liu, 2006)).

### Teacher-Child Interactions

Data about teacher-child interactions was gathered through observations of the children's grade one classrooms. Data was gathered about:

- **teacher behaviour** – the number of teacher-initiated interactions was calculated. These included moments when the teacher interacted one-on-one with the child for at least five seconds. Types of teacher-initiated interactions included: asking the

child a question, listening to the child read aloud, and conversation with the child about school work, discipline, and class rules. Therefore, teacher-initiated interactions (as defined in this study) could be positive or negative in nature.

- **child behaviour** – this was calculated by counting the number of times that the child asked for help from the teacher, volunteered to help the teacher upon her request, or engaged the teacher in social interaction. Therefore, child-initiated interactions (as defined in this study) were positive in nature. Child behaviours not included in the tally of child-initiated interactions included responses to the teacher (e.g. complying with a request) or disruptive behaviours (e.g. calling out in class or bothering another child).

### Teacher-Child Relationship Quality

A teacher-report instrument called the “Student-Teacher Relationship Scale” (Pianta, 2001) was used to collect information about teachers’ feelings of closeness with the children and the extent of conflict in their relationships with the children.

## Key Findings

Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman (2009) observed the following when they examined the above data about children’s temperament, teacher-child interaction, and teacher-reported relationship quality:

- **Less shy (outgoing) children had more conflict with teachers but also more teacher closeness.** These children likely needed more teacher attention or re-direction (e.g. due to calling out or talking to peers during teacher instruction), which led to more conflict with teachers. However, they initiated more with their teachers which likely contributed to teachers’ feelings of closeness with these children.
- **Shy children initiated less with teachers and were less likely to have close relationships with their teachers.** Shy children made fewer bids for the teacher’s attention. They also received less attention from the teacher, likely because they didn’t demonstrate as much off-task or acting out behaviour. They are therefore at risk for “invisibility in the classroom” (Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009, p. 116).
- **Teachers initiated more with children with low effortful control, and teachers had more conflict and less closeness with these children.** Children with less effortful control have difficulty behaving appropriately in the classroom and require more re-direction and attention from the teacher. This contributed to more teacher-initiated interactions (likely negative attention), and teachers’ feelings of more conflict and less closeness.
- **Children with higher levels of effortful control had less conflict with teachers and more closeness.** These children follow classroom rules and demonstrate appropriate “school readiness” behaviours. Therefore, teachers spend less time re-directing these children, and these children were regarded more positively by their teachers.

- **There was a bi-directional relationship between child- and teacher-initiated interactions.** When child variables, (shyness, effortful control, and gender) were included as predictor variables, the following patterns emerged:
  - **More child-initiated interactions were associated with more teacher-initiated interactions.** Outgoing (less shy) children initiated more with their teachers. This, in turn, predicted more frequent teacher-initiated interactions. Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman (2009) explain that outgoing children are more likely to volunteer to help the teacher and tell the teacher about exiting events in their lives. This creates a closer bond between these children and their teachers, and elicits more teacher-initiated interactions.
  - **More teacher-initiated interactions were associated with fewer child-initiated interactions.** Lower effortful control predicted more teacher-initiated interaction and less child-initiated interaction. Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman (2009) provide two explanations for this finding. It could be that these children require more teacher attention to stay on task, therefore the teacher-initiated interactions with these children were likely more negative in nature. These negative interactions could have discouraged these children from initiating with their teachers (the tallied child-initiated interactions in this study were only positive in nature; so any negative child-initiations as a result of this type of interaction weren't coded). Conversely, these children could have felt content with the level of attention they received from their teachers, and didn't initiate as they didn't require additional attention.
- **Boys had more conflict in their relationship with teachers, and girls had closer relationships with their teachers.** Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman (2009) explain that other research has shown that boys are more aggressive than girls and show more externalizing behaviour. Furthermore, uninhibited boys talk more in class than uninhibited girls. These findings put boys at more risk for negative relationships with their teachers.

## Promoting Teacher-Child Relationships

What is evident from this study is that the squeaky wheel *does* get more oil - children who initiate with teachers and who manage classroom expectations engage in more interactions with teachers and form bonds which will promote their social and academic development.

However, some squeaky wheels may receive oil that doesn't promote teacher-child interaction. Children with "low effortful control" who are disruptive and have difficulty managing classroom expectations receive attention from teachers, but this attention isn't always positive, and their relationships with teachers are higher in conflict and lower in closeness. Then there are the children who don't "squeak" at all – the shy children – who don't initiate with teachers, receive less attention, and don't form close relationships with their teachers.

Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman (2009) suggest that their findings can be used to help children who are at risk for poor teacher-child relationships in the following ways:

*...teacher-directed and large group activities should be de-emphasized, and that small group and one-to-one contexts are more likely to encourage shy children to initiate interactions.*

- **Raise teachers' awareness of children's different styles of interaction** – individuals who train ECE's and teachers can provide information about children with whom relationships might be more difficult. Newer teachers might have a tendency to focus on children who are disruptive, overlooking shyer children who go unnoticed in the classroom. This can be highlighted during teacher training.
- **Promote teachers' responsive behaviour in the classroom** – children who initiate more with their teachers are more likely to have close relationships with their teachers. Therefore, child initiations should be encouraged. This can be done by promoting child-centred activities in the classroom, so that all children are encouraged to initiate. Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman (2009) suggest that teacher-directed and large group activities should be de-emphasized, and that small group and one-to-one contexts are more likely to encourage shy children to initiate interactions.
- **Early identification** – when children are having difficulty forming relationships with teachers or peers, these children can be identified early so that teachers can work with parents and support personnel to support the children's social interaction skills.

### *Confirmation of our focus on child communication styles and teacher roles in Learning Language and Loving It™*

Before we can talk about providing a supportive language learning environment for children in the classroom, we must first help early childhood educators think about their interactions with children, as these interactions are the context for conversation. Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman's findings support the discussions we have with ECE's at the beginning of the *Learning Language and Loving It* Program, when we explain:

“Children with sociable conversational styles get attention from you because they initiate interactions with you all the time—and naturally, you respond...you may not realize it, but sociable children create their own language learning environments because they keep involving you in conversation and make it really easy for you to respond.

But what about those children who are language-delayed or lack the confidence to come up to you or to their peers and initiate conversation? They don't engage you, so you are less likely to engage them, and you end up having fewer interactions with them. These

children have fewer opportunities than their sociable peers to develop social and language skills.” (Greenberg, 2008, p. 191).

As SLPs, it can be tempting to quickly cover information about children’s conversational and interaction styles in order to get to the language facilitation strategies. But it is important to remember that without interaction, teachers cannot possibly provide good language stimulation for the children in their classrooms. Furthermore, a language delay can increase the impact of a non-sociable style on a child’s ability to interact and communicate (Greenberg, 2008). It is of paramount importance that we heighten “teachers’ awareness of characteristics that children bring to school that may impact their success” so that they can “promote and foster high-quality relationships with more children” (Moritz Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009, p. 107).

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