

Study identifies a key to preventing disruptive behavior in preschool classrooms

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Curry Professor Amanda Wiliford says preschoolers whose teachers used better classroom management practices at the beginning of the year experienced the most significant reduction in disruptive behavior. Credit: University of Virginia

Young children who display disruptive behavior reduce those behaviors when their teacher spends extra time playing individually with them,

according to a new University of Virginia study published in December in the journal *Child Development*.

Children who display early disruptive behaviors such as being impulsive, oppositional and/or aggressive are at risk for short- and long-term negative outcomes – even being expelled from preschool. According to the study's lead author, Amanda Williford, a research associate professor at UVA's Curry School of Education, research has shown that if these children can form a strong, positive relationship with their [teachers](#), they tend to show better social-emotional and behavioral skills over time. The reality, however, is that children who are disruptive are much more likely to have conflictual teacher-child interactions.

Williford and her team, which also includes UVA colleagues Jennifer LoCasale-Crouch, Jessica Vick Whittaker and Jamie DeCoster, found that preschool teachers who spent extra time playing individually with [young children](#) who exhibit [disruptive behavior](#) had fewer behavior problems across the school year as reported by parents and teachers.

"This study shows that building a strong and supportive connection with a young child, where teachers get to know and accept the child for who they are, is important for children's early success in school, especially for children who sometimes act out in the classroom," Williford said.

The researchers tested two methods of individual play focused on improving teacher-child interactions, "Banking Time" and "Child Time."

Banking Time encourages teachers to let children lead the play, and to use specific techniques such as observing and commenting on children's behaviors and feelings. In addition, teachers were asked to refrain from praising specific behaviors, asking questions and teaching skills.

Child Time focuses on increasing the time teachers spent with an

individual child, but gave no direction as to how that time was spent. For example, teachers in Child Time could choose to play with children (similar to Banking Time) or teach children early academic skills.

During the study, which included 183 teachers and 470 children ages 3 to 5, teachers played with three children displaying disruptive behavior (one at a time) during the year. Teachers played with one child on a regular schedule (10 to 15 minutes per session, two to three times a week) for seven weeks, and then played individually with the second and the third children.

In Banking Time, children and teachers engaged in art projects, pretend play with figurines or other open-ended activities. Banking Time teachers were careful to let the child decide what to do and to be in charge of the play. They sat back and carefully observed how the children played, commented on what they were doing, and conveyed to children that they were "there for them" by saying things like "I'm here if you need me" or "I'll always be here to help you."

Child Time teachers were given no directives on how to spend the time and were much more likely to spend time engaging with children in early literacy or math activities, or playing games of the teachers' choosing.

The study found that increasing the individual time teachers spend with children who display disruptive behavior – whether through Banking Time or Child Time – improved children's behavior compared to children in the control condition, who were not asked to spend individual time with teachers. Preschoolers whose teachers used better classroom management practices at the beginning of the year experienced the most significant reduction in disruptive behavior.

Teachers who played with children using Banking Time displayed lower negativity toward the disruptive children, compared to teachers who

were assigned to Child Time or the control condition.

"When teachers spend individual time with a child, this alone seems to improve children's behavior, according to parents and teachers. The message here is that simply spending time with a child may help them to be more successful in the classroom," " Williford said.

Ironically, Banking Time teachers also displayed fewer positive interactions with children.

"Interestingly, teachers using Banking Time are discouraged from engaging in some teacher-directive behaviors that are most often perceived as positive," Williford said. "For example, they intentionally refrain from asking questions, using praise, or teaching a skill."

The early childhood classroom is a place where children can learn essential school readiness skills. Preschoolers who display disruptive behavior often miss critical early learning opportunities. This study provides support that interventions focused on increasing positive teacher-child interactions can have impacts on adults' perceptions of [children](#)'s disruptive behavior and the quality of teacher-child interactions.

More information: Amanda P. Williford et al. Changing Teacher-Child Dyadic Interactions to Improve Preschool Children's Externalizing Behaviors, *Child Development* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12703](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12703)

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