

Conflicts in kindergarten can reduce children's interest in reading and math

November 5 2020



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Teacher-perceived conflict predicts lower interest and pre-academic skills in math and literacy among kindergarteners, a new study from Finland shows.

Kindergarten represents a crucial context in which children develop school-related skills and patterns of engagement that form the basis for the development of later competencies important for [academic success](#). Kindergarten achievement has been found to be highly predictive of later academic skills.

Given the long-lasting effects that kindergarten experiences have on later schooling, it is important to understand the factors associated with [children's learning](#) and motivation during this time. The quality of [teacher](#)-student interaction has been found to be important in terms of many different academic and socio-emotional outcomes. However, much of the previous work in the field has focused on children in later grades in elementary school and has been conducted in the United States. Fewer studies have been conducted in other educational contexts and in kindergarten specifically.

Researchers from the University of Jyväskylä, the University of Eastern Finland and New York University of Abu Dhabi investigated bidirectional links between the quality of teacher-child relationships and children's interest and pre-academic skills in literacy and math in Finland. Participants were 461 Finnish kindergarteners (6-year-olds) and their teachers (48). The study is part of the Teacher Stress Study, led by Professor Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen and Associate Professor Eija Pakarinen at the University of Jyväskylä.

The results indicated that teacher-perceived conflict predicted lower interest and pre-[academic skills](#) in both literacy and math. It is possible that when children experience conflict with teachers, the negative emotions attached to these conflicts are harmful for children's engagement in learning and diminish their interest in academic tasks. It is also possible that children experiencing conflicts are missing out on time on learning literacy and math, either because they are disengaged from instructional activities or because teachers have to spend more

instructional time on behavioral management.

The findings highlight the importance of kindergarten teachers being aware of how their relationships with children can influence children's later schooling. It would be important to develop pre-service and in-service programs and interventions to assist teachers in building supportive, low [conflict](#) relationships with children. Teacher education programs may also benefit from educating teachers not only about academic content and pedagogical practices but also in strategies that build supportive relationships with children.

"Compared to daycare, [kindergarten](#) introduces children to a more structured learning environment. The experiences children gain in this environment may have long-term consequences on the development of their academic motivation and competencies. Therefore, it is essential that our teachers are aware of the power their interaction with [children](#) may have, and that they are supported in finding optimal ways to interact with each child, while taking individual strengths and needs into consideration," Professor Jaana Viljaranta from the University of Eastern Finland says.

More information: Eija Pakarinen et al, Investigating Bidirectional Links Between the Quality of Teacher–Child Relationships and Children's Interest and Pre-Academic Skills in Literacy and Math, *Child Development* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13431](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13431)

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

Citation: Conflicts in kindergarten can reduce children's interest in reading and math (2020, November 5) retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-11-conflicts-kindergarten-children-math.html>

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