

# Study: Teacher-student bonds may be especially important for homeless kids

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Credit: Gautam Arora

A recent study of homeless preschoolers found a strong correlation between the bonds those children formed with teachers and the children's risk of behavioral and emotional problems.

"It's well established that [children](#) who are homeless are at higher risk of a wide variety of negative outcomes," says Mary Haskett, corresponding

author of the study and a professor of psychology at North Carolina State University. "However, there's a lot of variability within this group. We wanted to learn more about what makes some of these children more resilient than others."

For their study, researchers drew on survey and interview data from parents and teachers about 314 children participating in the Head Start preschool program.

The researchers found that 70% of the children were well adjusted and exhibited healthy behaviors, such as playing well with other kids. The remaining 30% struggled with behavioral and emotional challenges to varying degrees.

The study found that a high-quality child-[teacher relationship](#) was the variable that best predicted whether a child was in the healthy, low-risk group.

"The emotional bond or connection between teacher and child, and the lack of conflict in that relationship, was closely associated with the child being resilient," Haskett says. "This was an [observational study](#), so we cannot say that the teacher-child relationship causes the resilience. But there is ample evidence that these relationships are important for all students, and this work suggests that it may be particularly important for housing insecure children."



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"This finding has practical implications in the [real world](#)," says Kate Norwalk, co-author of the study and an assistant professor of psychology at NC State. "It highlights the importance of giving teachers—particularly teachers working with at-risk kids—the support they need in order to allow them to form these warm bonds with children."

"We would also love to do more work to determine if this is a [causal relationship](#), meaning that the teacher-child relationship is what contributes to emotional resilience," Haskett says. "If so, more research could also help us determine how effective different interventions are at

establishing and strengthening that bond."

The study, "Exploring Variability in Social and Behavioral Adjustment Among Children in Head Start Experiencing Homelessness," appears in the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*.

**More information:** Mary E. Haskett et al. Exploring Variability in Social and Behavioral Adjustment Among Children in Head Start Experiencing Homelessness, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/10824669.2020.1869554](https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2020.1869554)

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