



# Preschool teachers' classroom behavioral socialization practices and low-income children's self-regulation skills



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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined associations between teachers' classroom behavioral socialization practices and the development of preschoolers' self-regulation skills throughout the year, as well as the moderating roles of child gender and initial self-regulation skills. The predominantly low-income sample consisted of 216 children from 68 preschool classrooms within 29 private child care centers. Findings suggest that teachers devoted very little time to whole-group classroom behavioral socialization practices. Hierarchical linear models revealed that classroom behavioral socialization time negatively predicted both spring self-regulation scores (lagged dependent variable models) and change in children's self-regulation scores from fall to spring (change score models). These patterns remained even after controlling for a variety of child, family, teacher, and classroom characteristics. Cross-level interactions indicated that the negative association between behavioral socialization time and change in self-regulation was stronger for girls than for boys. Preschoolers' initial self-regulation in the fall did not moderate the association between behavioral socialization time and self-regulation in either model. Implications for practice are discussed.

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## Introduction

Accumulating research has demonstrated that self-regulation, or the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors, is critical to understanding individual differences in children's school readiness skills (Blair, 2002). Difficulties with self-regulation place many children at a disadvantage early in life. Children in preschool and elementary school who have more difficulty regulating their emotions and behaviors are more likely to display lower academic achievement (Blair & Razza, 2007; Dobbs, Doctoroff, Fisher, & Arnold, 2006; McClelland et al., 2007; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Normandeau & Guay, 1998; Ponitz, McClelland, Matthews, & Morrison, 2009) and lower social functioning (Olson, Sameroff, Kerr, Lopez, & Wellman, 2005; Posner & Rothbart, 2000; Valiente et al., 2004). The preschool years are a crucial time period for the development of self-regulation (Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000; Murphy, Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, & Guthrie, 1999), and increasingly, researchers have stressed the importance of teachers promoting or socializing the self-regulatory skills that preschoolers

will need to successfully transition into school (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007; McClelland & Morrison, 2003). These socialization practices are particularly relevant in the preschool years, during which major advances in the development of areas of the brain responsible for self-regulation occur (Blair, 2002). Unfortunately, research on teachers' naturalistic behavioral socialization attempts to improve children's self-regulation skills, delivered at the classroom-level within formal preschool settings, is currently lacking from the developmental literature. There is little known about how often they employ these large-group socialization practices, and how these practices are related to children's development in self-regulation. In addition, there is little information regarding the importance of child characteristics in moderating the association between classroom behavioral socialization time and self-regulation.

The current study focuses on teachers' *classroom behavioral socialization* practices, which involve discussions, activities, or lessons about behavioral knowledge and regulation that are disseminated on a class-wide or universal scale, rather than dyadic interactions between teachers and individual students. Behavioral socialization, therefore, includes attempts to prevent and redirect misbehavior, such as going over classroom rules, reading stories about appropriate social behavior, or reminding children of the consequences for misbehaving. In recent years, there has been increased attention on how the types and frequencies of

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instructional exposure are related to children's literacy and math achievement in preschool and early elementary school (Bachman, Degol, Scharphorn, El Nokali, & Palmer, 2013; Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004; Connor, Morrison, & Petrella, 2004; Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Klibanoff, Levine, Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, & Hedges, 2006). Cognitive theory and empirical evidence suggest that greater time devoted to activities that explicitly target a given skill (e.g., emergent literacy) is beneficial, particularly for at-risk students (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998; Morrison, Bachman, & Connor, 2005). The current study extended this line of inquiry to behavioral socialization practices by examining the amount of time preschool teachers devoted to behavioral socialization strategies targeting the improvement or management of children's self-regulation. More specifically, the present study conducted a naturalistic examination of the amount of time teachers allocated to socializing efforts within low-income preschool classrooms. We sought to identify how time spent in these behavioral socializing practices were associated with children's development in self-regulation skills, and whether the association was moderated by important child characteristics, such as child gender and initial self-regulation skill level.

### The importance of self-regulation skills

In the wake of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), accountability mandates and high-stakes standardized testing have contributed to the increasingly academically-oriented focus of kindergarten and preschool classrooms throughout the United States (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2005). The increased emphasis on academics in early childhood education (ECE) programs may place greater demands on young children to regulate their behaviors, emotions, and impulses. Without these self-regulation skills, preschoolers have an increased likelihood of experiencing difficulty adapting to the rules and routines of a typical kindergarten classroom (Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009). Moreover, poor emotion regulation and high impulsivity in early childhood have predicted later antisocial and criminal behaviors (Caspi, 2000; Farrington, 2005; Frick & Morris, 2004; Tremblay, Pihl, Vitaro, & Dobkin, 1994), as well as unemployment, interpersonal relationship quality, and substance abuse in middle childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood (Caspi, 2000; Tarter et al., 1999). Although concerns have been raised about possible neglect of social or emotional functioning in ECE programs in this climate of growing academic accountability (Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003), it remains unclear how frequently teachers are explicitly targeting these skills at the classroom-level in preschool settings.

The importance of cultivating self-regulation skills early in a child's life is best articulated through bioecological (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and sociocultural theories (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) of development. Bioecological theory posits that children are embedded within multiple contexts that interact to shape development over time. Some of these systems are more proximal (microsystems), including the experiences that children have within their homes and classrooms, while others are more distal (macrosystems), such as the larger cultural context, social norms and policies. The most powerful developmental influences are the proximal processes located within the microsystems, which consist of the daily interactions that children encounter with important individuals (e.g., teachers, parents, siblings, and peers). Therefore, classroom behavioral socialization practices that target the improvement of children's behaviors should influence children's social development. Similarly, sociocultural theory points to the importance of social interactions embedded within cultural contexts that shape

children's developmental skills and competencies. The kindergarten classroom is a relatively novel context for many children, and some enter school with fewer behavioral "tools" to rely upon when adjusting to this new environment. Children with poor self-regulatory skills will need greater assistance from their teachers before they can move into a higher level of mastery and effectively regulate on their own. Without the opportunity to experience a preschool classroom environment in which the teacher spends time acclimating children to the rules, routines, and behavioral expectations of the classroom (e.g., waiting your turn, raising your hand, participating in structured activities, etc.), many children will experience difficulty regulating their behaviors both throughout preschool and at the transition to kindergarten. Group behavioral socialization within the classroom environment is, therefore, central to the successful development of self-regulation among young children.

Teachers' intentional provision of classroom behavioral socialization activities or discussions is especially relevant for preschoolers from socioeconomically disadvantaged households. Children from low-income families tend to score lower on observational assessments and adult reports of self-regulation (Raver, 2004), have higher rates of behavioral problems (Qi & Kaiser, 2003), lower overall socioemotional functioning (McLoyd, 1998), and greater difficulty adjusting to school (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Growing neurocognitive and biophysiological research has demonstrated that low-income children's exposure to chronic ecological stressors (e.g., trauma, familial separation, parental depression, harsh or punitive parenting) activates stress hormones which affect neural activity in children's developing brains, particularly the prefrontal cortex (Blair & Raver, 2012; Noble, Norman, & Farah, 2005; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). The elevated cortisol levels (Blair et al., 2011) and allostatic load (Evans & Schamberg, 2009) associated with chronic stress are detrimental for working memory (Evans & Schamberg, 2009) executive functioning, and emotion regulation (Blair et al., 2011; Blair & Raver, 2012).

In addition, significant numbers of low-income children attend preschool programs prior to kindergarten entry. According to the U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics (2011), in 2007 approximately 60% of children aged 3–6, not yet enrolled in kindergarten, attended some type of center-based child care arrangement (e.g., day care, Head Start, prekindergarten, nursery school), with over 40% of children from low-income households attending some center-based care. Thus, early childhood educators are in a prime position to prepare low-income children for the transition to kindergarten and the social demands of elementary school. To date, however, little empirical data are available to elucidate how often teachers employ these group behavioral socialization strategies, and how the frequency of these practices are linked to children's self-regulation skills.

### Classroom behavioral socialization

Historically, past socialization research focused heavily on parent-child socialization practices (Maccoby, 1992). However, a growing body of research has emerged emphasizing the importance of dyadic teacher-student interactive processes, such as emotional support or relationship quality, on children's social and behavioral skills (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Howes, 2000; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Much of the research linking teacher socialization practices to social skills and behavior problems has focused on the effectiveness of classroom socioemotional curricula or interventions (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999; Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003;

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