**IMPACT AREA:**
# Relationships

## Why Do They Matter?

Relationships during the early school years are important for learning and development. Family engagement in children's education provides opportunities to extend learning beyond school. Relationships between parents and teachers, and between teachers and students, are foundational for promoting children's academic, language, and social-emotional skills, and have particular salience for children from marginalized groups.

### ELN'S CONTRIBUTION

We know relationships matter from years of prior research. ELN researchers have expanded the field's knowledge base in ways that can influence early childhood practice and policy by exploring different relationship patterns over time, in both rural and urban settings, including their associations with children's social-behavioral, academic and executive function outcomes. **Teacher-child relationships**, **parent engagement** and **parent-teacher relationships** have been identified as being open to change or improvement through early learning practice and policy decisions.

## What We Learned

- Positive relationships between parents and their children's teachers over the early school years, and positive relationships between teachers and children, hold promise for promoting social skills, reducing skill gaps among students from marginalized groups, and addressing problem behaviors before they escalate later on.

- High-quality educational experiences should include teachers' use of practices to engage families, create and maintain positive interpersonal connections with their students, and form relationships with their students' families.

- Context is important. Efforts to engage families, promote positive relationships between teachers and students, and form relationships between parents and teachers, are necessary across grade levels (i.e., pre-K through elementary school) and in both urban and rural schools.

- Peer relationships are an important part of children's classroom environments and experiences (see Classroom Experiences and Learning Opportunities brief which summarizes studies addressing these important relationships).

### SUPPORTING FINDINGS

### Teacher-Child Relationships

- Correlational findings suggest that the benefits of positive teacher-child relationships on children's functioning are evident,[1] both immediately and over time,[2] and function similarly for children from English- and Spanish-speaking families.[3] Positive teacher-child relationships are associated with improvements in children's social-behavioral skills, academic outcomes, executive function[4] and positive perceptions about peer social support.[5]

- Cumulative conflictual interactions between students and teachers from pre-K to first grade are related to poor social-emotional functioning.[3]

- Experiencing a decrease in teacher-child interaction quality or an increase in teacher-child conflict across grades is associated with poorer outcomes, including children's lower social competence,[3] learning behaviors, and inhibition;[1] higher levels of problem behaviors;[2] and more negative perceptions of peer victimization.[5]
- There are differences in teacher-child relationships from pre-K to kindergarten (including decreased closeness and less positive teacher-child interactions),[1,2] and boys appear to experience larger negative effects than girls during the transition.[1]

## Parent Engagement and Parent-Teacher Relationships

- Parents' support of children's advanced language and math skills at home predict gains in those domains, especially for families with lower levels of parent education.[6]
- Parents' support of children's learning at home increases from pre-K through kindergarten, while parent participation in school activities and events increases during pre-K but decreases through the end of kindergarten.[7]
- Communication between parents and teachers is stable during pre-K and decreases through the end of kindergarten.[7] There tends to be more parent-teacher communication related to students' behavioral problems,[2,3] except for Spanish-speaking families, where there is less overall communication about their child's learning and development.[3]
- Parents in rural communities report providing less support for children's learning at home and less communication with teachers than their urban counterparts.[7]
- Positive parent-teacher relationships during the school year are associated with gains in children's social-behavioral outcomes.[2] Specifically, parent-teacher communication is associated with children's positive social-behavioral well-being, and the associations are consistent for children from English- and Spanish-speaking families.[3]
- Sustained relationships between parents and teachers during the transition from pre-K through first grade are associated with fewer problem behaviors over time.[2] Furthermore, the home-school connection is associated with reducing the skill gap between Black and Latine children in teacher-rated problem behaviors.[8]

# Takeaways & Action Steps

**The key takeaways and action steps for practice, policy and research are intended to be:**

- **Inclusive of all children**, but especially relevant for children from marginalized groups (e.g., racially minoritized, dual language learners).
- **Culturally responsive** in application.
- **Relevant across varied geographic contexts**.
- **The shared responsibility** of all educational faculty, administrators and staff.

## RELATIONSHIPS

### KEY TAKEAWAY

High-quality educational experiences should include educators' use of practices to:
- Engage and form **relationships with families.**
- Create and maintain positive interpersonal **connections with students.**
- Promote and support positive **peer relationships.**

| ACTION STEPS | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Practice* | *Policy* | *Research* |
| • Provide pre-service and in-service educators, administrators and support staff with **high-quality professional learning opportunities**, including customized training and coaching, to: <br> › Engage and form **relationships with families.** <br> › Create and maintain positive interpersonal **connections with students.** <br> › Promote and support positive **peer relationships.** <br> • Support the **pre-K to kindergarten transition** and later grade-level transitions. | Build and modify current **structures/systems** (e.g., time, resources) to support **educators' skills** at forming, strengthening and maintaining **effective and meaningful relationships** with and among students and families across the pre-K to third grade continuum. | Identify existing and new research-based **practices and approaches** for building and maintaining **quality relationships** with and among students and families that can be applied **across contexts** (e.g., rural/urban, pre-K, early elementary). |

# ▶ Dig Deeper

Watch a short research presentation to learn more about the Early Learning Network's findings related to relationships.

*To access the video, visit our media library or use your phone's camera to scan the QR code.*

**Presenter:** Lisa Knoche, Ph.D., *University of Nebraska–Lincoln*

## ENDNOTES

[1] Vitiello, V. E., Nguyen, T., Ruzek, E., Pianta, R. C., & Whittaker, J. V. (2021). Differences between pre-K and kindergarten classroom experiences: Do they predict children's social-emotional skills and self-regulation across the transition to kindergarten? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 59*, 287-299.

[2] Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. L., Boise, C., Witte, A., Koziol, N., Prokasky, A., Schumacher, R., & Kerby, H. (2022). Relationships as malleable factors for children's social-behavioral skills from preschool to grade 1: A longitudinal analysis. *Early Education and Development*, *33*, 958-978.

[3] Nguyen, T., Hofkens, T., Pianta, R. C., Whittaker, J. V., Vitiello, V. E., & Ruzek, E. A. (2020). Cumulative experience of educational assets from preschool through first grade and the social-emotional well-being of English- and Spanish-speaking children. *Perspectives on Early Childhood Psychology and Education, 5*, 103-138.

[4] Nguyen, T., Ansari, A., Pianta, R. C., Whittaker, J. V., Vitiello, V. E., & Ruzek, E. (2020). The classroom relational environment and children's early development in preschool. *Social Development, 29*, 1071-1091.

[5] Chen, J., Jiang, H., Justice, L. M., Lin, T-J., Purtell, K. M., & Ansari, A. (2020). Influences of teacher-child relationships and classroom social management on child-perceived peer social experiences during early school years. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*:586991.

[6] McCormick, M. P., Weissman, A. K., Weiland, C., Hsueh, J., Sachs, J., & Snow, C. (2020). Time well spent: Home learning activities and gains in children's academic skills in the prekindergarten year. *Developmental Psychology, 56*, 710 –726.

[7] Sheridan, S. M., Koziol, N., Witte, A. L., Iruka, I. U., & Knoche, L. L. (2019). Longitudinal and geographic trends in family engagement during the pre-kindergarten to kindergarten transition. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 48*, 365-377.

[8] Iruka, I. U., Sheridan, S. M., Koziol, N., Schumacher, R., Kerby, H., Prokasky, A., & Choi, D. (2022). Examining malleable factors that explain the end- of-kindergarten racial/ethnic gaps. *Elementary School Journal, 122*.