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THE ROLE OF AGGRESSION AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHILD–TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

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The role of children's aggression and three indices of social competence (peer-preferred behavior, teacher-preferred behavior, and school adjustment) in children's perceived relationships with their teachers was assessed. Participants were 1,432 third through fifth graders (688 males, 744 females) and their teachers. The results from hierarchical regression analyses showed statistically significant interaction effects. Poor school adjustment was associated with more negatively perceived child teacher relationships for boys than for girls. In addition, the perceived child–teacher relationship among aggressive children was more favorable among those with high levels of school adjustment than among those who were poorly adjusted at school. Implications for school psychologists and teachers are discussed. © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

The child–teacher relationship is important because of the implications it has for children's school-related outcomes (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994). Two important influences on the quality of the child–teacher relationship are children's aggression (Coie & Koeppl, 1990; Fry, 1983) and social competence (LaFreniere & Sroufe, 1985; Mitchell-Copeland, Denham, & DeMulder, 1997). Aggressive children and children with poor social competence are likely to have negative relationships with their teachers (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Fry, 1983; Walker, Irvin, Noell, & Singer, 1992), and are at risk for later engaging in delinquent behavior (Walker, Stiller, Severson, Feil, & Golly, 1998). The purpose of this paper is to expand on the literature by assessing the combined contribution of child aggression with each of three indices of social competence in children's perceptions of their relationships with their teachers.

Review of Literature

The Child–Teacher Relationship

Negative child–teacher relationships are associated with short-term and long-term negative outcomes for children. Birch and Ladd (1997) found that children with conflictual child–teacher relationships were less likely than others to display independent and self-directed behavior. They were also less inclined to like school, and more likely to avoid school. Long-term negative effects of poor child–teacher relationships were reported by Pianta and colleagues, who found that dysfunctional child–teacher relationships in kindergarten were related to low competence in the first grade (Pianta, 1994) and conflictual and overly dependent child–teacher relationships in second grade (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995).

Positive child–teacher relationships, on the other hand, have an ameliorative effect on outcomes for children. Baker (1999) reported that third through fifth graders with supportive child–teacher relationships were more satisfied with school than children who perceived less teacher support. Murray and Greenberg's (2001) study indicated that among fifth and sixth graders, one

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third of whom had disabilities, a supportive child–teacher relationship was positively correlated with school-related adjustment. Aggressive children who had highly affective child–teacher relationships were found to be less aggressive the subsequent year (Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999). The child–teacher relationship also influences peers' perceptions of a child. Howes, Matheson, and Hamilton (1994) reported that when teachers responded positively to children during peer interactions, the children were more accepting of each other. Supportive child–teacher relationships have been found to impact academic achievement by affecting students' learning (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989) and engagement in school, which, in turn, predicts school achievement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Baker (1999) and Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) reported that supportive child–teacher relationships reduce student alienation, particularly among poor and minority children, many of whom are at risk for negative school outcomes.

The quality of the child–teacher relationship differs by gender. Studies by Birch and Ladd (1997, 1998) indicated that teachers rated girls higher than boys in cooperative participation, and reported closer relationships and less conflict with girls than boys. These gender differences may be due to boys being more aggressive than girls, which is consistent with most aggression studies (e.g., Farver, 1996; Hyde, 1984; LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). Morrison, Robertson, and Harding (1998) suggested that girls have more "teacher-pleasing skills" than boys. In their study, even aggressive girls were more compliant than boys in meeting teachers' requests. Regardless of aggression level, girls typically have a better relationship than boys with their teachers.

Aggression

Of the studies addressing the role of aggression in the child–teacher relationship, the general consensus is that children's aggression puts them at risk for poor relationships with their teachers. Children with high levels of conduct problems have fewer social contacts with teachers than do children with no conduct problems (Fry, 1983). When aggressive children do interact with their teachers, the result is often negative. Birch and Ladd (1998) reported that antisocial behavior, defined in terms of aggression and hyperactivity, was positively correlated with child–teacher conflict in kindergarten and first grade. Teachers' interactions with aggressive children have been found to be angry and punishing (Coie & Koeppl, 1990), and lacking in warmth and encouragement (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Itskowitz, Navon, & Strauss, 1988). It is not surprising, then, that aggressive children are less likely than nonaggressive children to have securely attached child–teacher relationships (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994). Since children's aggression is aversive to teachers and frequently results in child–teacher conflict, the outcome is often school sanctions for aggressive children (Walker & Rankin, 1983).

Social Competence

In addition to aggression, children's social competence is also related to the child–teacher relationship. Although there is no clear, empirically based definition of social competence that is agreed upon by the majority of researchers, social competence generally refers to "behaviors that indicate a well-adjusted, flexible, emotionally mature, and generally prosocial pattern of social adaptation" (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996, p. 373). Socially competent children tend to be well liked by their teachers (LaFreniere & Sroufe, 1985), and have secure attachments with them (Mitchell-Copeland et al., 1997).

Although many researchers assess social competence as a global construct, various dimensions of social competence have been identified. Three dimensions that are frequently addressed are peer-preferred behavior, teacher-preferred behavior, and school adjustment (e.g., Walker et al., 1992). Peer-related adjustment is defined as effectively negotiating peer group dynamics; for example, developing friendships and coping with peer provocations. Teacher-related adjustment

refers to students meeting behavioral expectations in the learning environment. Peer- and teacher-preferred behaviors are related to another dimension of social competence, school adjustment (Walker et al., 1992). School adjustment refers to academic achievement, attitude toward school, and involvement in school activities (Birch & Ladd, 1997). School adjustment is positively related to the child–teacher relationship (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992), although the nature of this relationship (i.e., causality) has not been determined.

The research suggests that aggression and social competence are related to the child–teacher relationship. Although the effects of these variables have been studied independently, very little is known about their joint effects on the child–teacher relationship. The purpose of this study was to assess the combined effects of child aggression and three indices of social competence (peer-preferred behavior, teacher-preferred behavior, and school adjustment) on the child's perceived relationship with their teacher. It was hypothesized that there would be significant interaction effects for aggression and each of the three social competence subscales. Specifically, it was anticipated that high social competence would buffer the negative effects of aggression on the child–teacher relationship. It was also anticipated that low aggression would buffer the negative effects of low social competence on their perceived child–teacher relationship.

Method

Participants

The data for the present investigation were baseline data from a longitudinal study of the effects of a violence prevention program (see Embry, Flannery, Vazsonyi, Powell, & Atha, 1996). Only the baseline data were used so that there would be no effects of the program on the findings. Participants for the current study included 1,432 third, fourth, and fifth graders who were participating in the school-based program. Specifically, 572 participants were in the third grade, 399 were fourth graders, and 461 were fifth graders. Participants consisted of 688 males and 744 females. The children were not asked to report their race. However, the following is the racial composition of the participating schools: 55% Hispanic, 26% Caucasian, 14% Native American, 4% African American, and 1% other/unknown.

Measures

Respondents consisted of the third through fifth graders and their teachers. The children completed the Relationship With Teacher questionnaire in the classroom. This survey was a 9-item paper-and-pencil scale that assessed children's perceived relationships with their teachers. For this study, the Relationship With Teacher scale was adapted from the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire (Robin & Foster, 1989), which is age-appropriate for adolescents, to be applicable to elementary school-age children. The items focused primarily on the children's perceived support from their teachers. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was .78. Two correlational analyses were conducted to assess the criterion-related validity of the Relationship With Teacher scale. A significant positive correlation existed with the perceived supportiveness of the child–teacher relationship and (a) the degree to which the students liked school ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), as well as (b) how happy they were each day at school ($r = .40$, $p < .001$). See Appendix for items of this measure.

For each child, teachers completed two paper-and-pencil measures, both of which had extremely high internal reliability. One measure was the 25-item aggression subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist Teacher Report Form (Achenbach, 1991). Sample items included, "The child destroys his/her own things" and "The child gets in many fights." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .97. The second measure was the 19-item elementary school version of the Walker–McConnell Scale

of Social Competence and School Adjustment (Walker & McConnell, 1995). This measure has been found to demonstrate high internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and is highly correlated with other teacher and child self-report measures of social competence (Walker & McConnell). The measure consisted of three subscales: Peer-Preferred Behaviors, Teacher-Preferred Behaviors, and School Adjustment. Sample items from each subscale, respectively, included "The child shares laughter with peers," "The child can accept not getting his/her own way," and "The child does seatwork assignments as directed." Cronbach's reliability coefficient for the entire social competence measure was .95. The reliability coefficients for peer-preferred behavior, teacher-preferred behavior, and school adjustment were .95, .92, and .94, respectively.

Analysis of Data

Hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to test aggression and social competence as predictors of the perceived child–teacher relationship. The first regression equation was calculated using the overall Social Competence score. However, because Peer-Preferred Behavior, Teacher-Preferred Behavior, and School Adjustment, the three Social Competence subscales, each tap into unique aspects of the global construct of social competence, three additional hierarchical multiple regression analyses were computed, one for each of these Social Competence subscales. The three additional regressions were also run in order to reduce the chance for multicollinearity, since Pearson correlation coefficients showed that the three Social Competence subscales were highly intercorrelated (Peer- and Teacher-Preferred Behavior: $r = .45$, $p < .001$; Peer-Preferred Behavior and School Adjustment: $r = .52$, $p < .001$; Teacher-Preferred Behavior and School Adjustment: $r = .68$, $p < .001$). For each regression equation, the children's perceived Relationship With Teacher was the dependent variable. The regressions were computed as follows: To control for children's gender and age, these variables were entered first as a block. Aggression and the Social Competence subscale were entered in the second block, and the two-way interactions of Aggression × Gender, Social Competence subscale × Gender, and Aggression × Social Competence subscale were entered in the third block. The three-way interaction term of Aggression × Social Competence subscale × Gender was entered in the fourth block.

Results

For the regression equation that included the overall Social Competence score, only the first two blocks were statistically significant (see Table 1). Gender and Age contributed 9% to the explained variance. Both of these variables were statistically significant contributors to the equation. The second block of Aggression and Social Competence accounted for an additional 4% of the variance, with both variables being statistically significant contributors to the equation. As expected, higher levels of aggression were related to more negatively perceived child–teacher relationships, and higher social competence scores were related to more favorably perceived child–teacher relationships. Neither blocks 3 nor 4 were statistically significant. The effect size for this equation ($f^2 = .15$) was in the medium range (Cohen, 1988).

For the regression analysis that included the Peer-Preferred Behavior subscale, only the first two blocks were statistically significant (see Table 2). The second block, Aggression and Peer-Preferred Behavior, accounted for 3% of the variance, in addition to the 9% accounted for by the first block, Gender and Age. Aggression was the only statistically significant contributor in the second block. Neither the two-way interactions, nor the three-way interaction were statistically significant. The effect size for this regression equation ($f^2 = .14$) was in the small range (Cohen, 1988).

As shown in Table 3, the results of the regression analysis containing the Teacher-Preferred Behavior subscale were similar to that containing Peer-Preferred Behavior. Only blocks 1 and 2

Table 1
Hierarchical Regression Testing Aggression and Social Competence as Predictors of Perceived Relationship With Teacher

Predictor Variable	Adjusted R^2	Sign. of Inc. in R^2	Zero-Order Correlation	Beta in Final Equation	Sign. of Beta
Step 1: Demographic Variables	.09	<.001			
Gender				.20	<.001
Age			−.22	−.22	<.001
Step 2: Behavior	.13	<.001			
Aggression			−.24	−.13	<.001
Social Competence			.23	.11	.001
Step 3: 2-Way Interactions	.13	.06			
Aggression × Gender				−.03	.26
Social Competence × Gender				−.03	.08
Aggression × Social Competence				.00	.02
Step 4: 3-Way Interaction	.13	.21			
Aggression × Social Competence × Gender				.00	.18

were statistically significant. The second block, Aggression and Teacher-Preferred Behavior, contributed 3% of the variance beyond the 9% accounted for by the first block. Aggression was the only statistically significant contributor in the second block; Teacher-Preferred Behavior only neared significance ($p = .06$). The block of two-way interactions had no statistically significant impact on the perceived child–teacher relationship, nor did the three-way interaction. The effect size of this regression equation ($f^2 = .14$) was in the small range (Cohen, 1988).

The results of the multiple regression containing the School Adjustment subscale are shown in Table 4. For this regression analysis, the first three blocks were statistically significant, but the Aggression × School Adjustment × Gender interaction term was not significant. The effect size of this regression equation was $f^2 = .16$, or in the medium range (Cohen, 1988). Both Aggression and

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression Testing Aggression and Peer-Preferred Behavior as Predictors of Perceived Relationship With Teacher

Predictor Variable	Adjusted R^2	Sign. of Inc. in R^2	Zero-Order Correlation	Beta in Final Equation	Sign. of Beta
Step 1: Demographic Variables	.09	<.001			
Gender				.20	<.001
Age			−.22	−.22	<.001
Step 2: Behavior	.12	<.001			
Aggression			−.24	−.18	<.001
Peer-Preferred Behavior			.09	.03	.20
Step 3: 2-Way Interactions	.12	.41			
Aggression × Gender				−.02	.40
Peer-Preferred Behavior × Gender				.00	.16
Aggression × Peer-Preferred Behavior				−.04	.38
Step 4: 3-Way Interaction	.12	.13			
Aggression × Peer-Preferred Behavior × Gender				.00	.13

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Testing Aggression and Teacher-Preferred Behavior as Predictors of Perceived Relationship With Teacher

Predictor Variable	Adjusted R^2	Sign. of Inc. in R^2	Zero-Order Correlation	Beta in Final Equation	Sign. of Beta
Step 1: Demographic Variables	.09	<.001			
Gender				.20	<.001
Age			−.22	−.22	<.001
Step 2: Behavior	.12	<.001			
Aggression			−.24	−.15	<.001
Teacher-Preferred Behavior			.21	.06	.06
Step 3: 2-Way Interactions	.12	.15			
Aggression × Gender				−.03	.28
Teacher-Preferred Behavior × Gender				−.07	.04
Aggression × Teacher Preferred Behavior				−.08	.21
Step 4: 3-Way Interaction	.12	.65			
Aggression × Teacher-Preferred Behavior × Gender				.00	.65

School Adjustment were statistically significant contributors in the second block. Higher aggression scores were related to children's perceptions of less supportive child–teacher relationships, and higher School Adjustment scores were associated with more favorably perceived child–teacher relationships. As a block, these variables accounted for 4% of the variance beyond the 9% accounted for by the first block, Gender and Age. The two-way interactions made a small, but statistically significant contribution, adding 1% to the explained variance. The significant contributors in the two-way interactions block were the School Adjustment × Gender interaction and the Aggression × School Adjustment interaction. As shown in Figure 1, a plot of the School Adjustment × Gender interaction term indicated that the perceived child–teacher relationship of children who had low (below median) scores on School Adjustment was much lower for boys than girls.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Testing Aggression and School Adjustment as Predictors of Perceived Relationship With Teacher

Predictor Variable	Adjusted R^2	Sign. of Inc. in R^2	Zero-Order Correlation	Beta in Final Equation	Sign. of Beta
Step 1: Demographic Variables	.09	<.001			
Gender				.20	<.001
Age			−.22	−.22	<.001
Step 2: Behavior	.13	<.001			
Aggression			−.24	−.11	.001
School Adjustment			.25	.14	<.001
Step 3: 2-Way Interactions	.14	.03			
Aggression × Gender				−.03	.22
School Adjustment × Gender				−.09	.01
Aggression × School Adjustment				−.09	.04
Step 4: 3-Way Interaction	.14	.22			
Aggression × School Adjustment × Gender				.00	.22

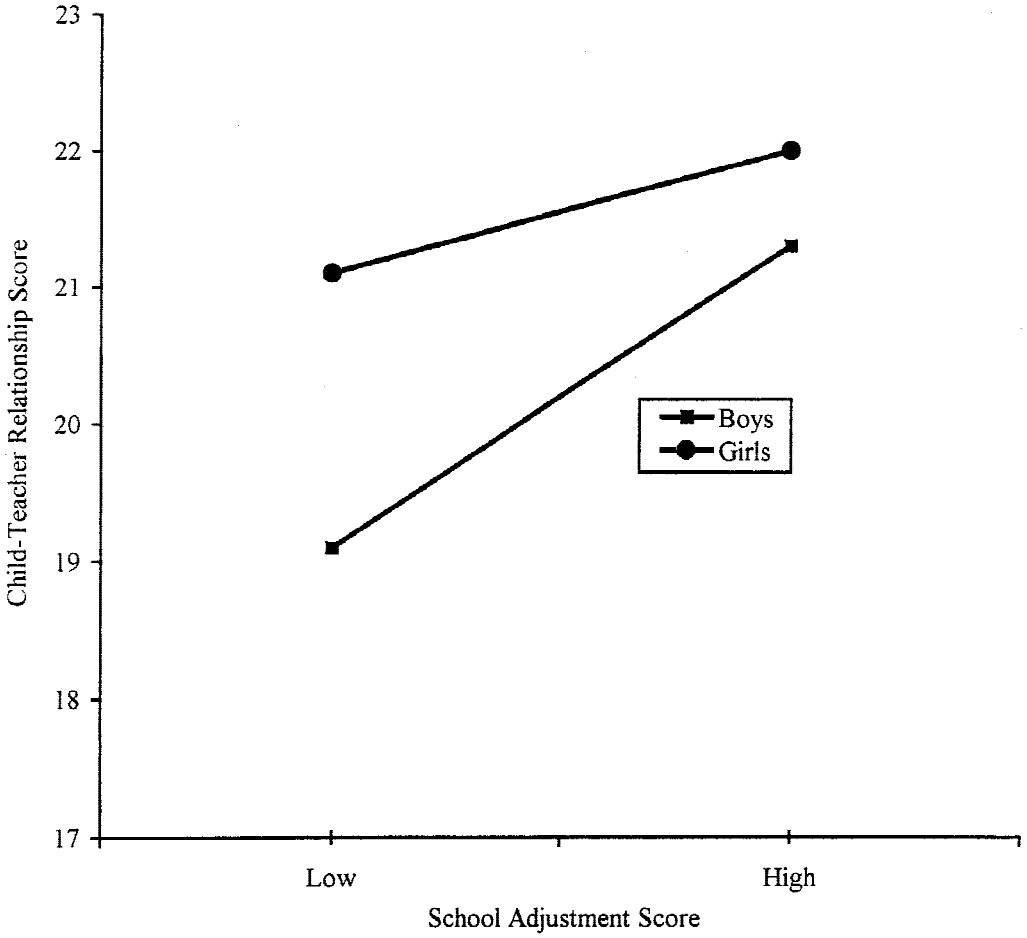

FIGURE 1. Interaction of school adjustment with child gender predicting the child-teacher relationship.

That is, when looking at children with low school adjustment, the boys perceived their child–teacher relationship less favorably than did the girls with low school adjustment. However, when looking at children with high (above median) school adjustment scores, boys and girls perceived their child–teacher relationships much more similarly.

A plot of the significant Aggression × School Adjustment interaction effect is shown in Figure 2. The plot, which is based on median splits of Aggression and School Adjustment scores, shows that the perceived child–teacher relationship of aggressive children is more favorable for those who are well adjusted at school than for aggressive children with poor school adjustment. Furthermore, the perceived child–teacher relationship of children with poor school adjustment is more favorable among those who are not aggressive than among those who are aggressive.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies have assessed the association between children's aggression and the child–teacher relationship. Another body of literature has focused on the association between social

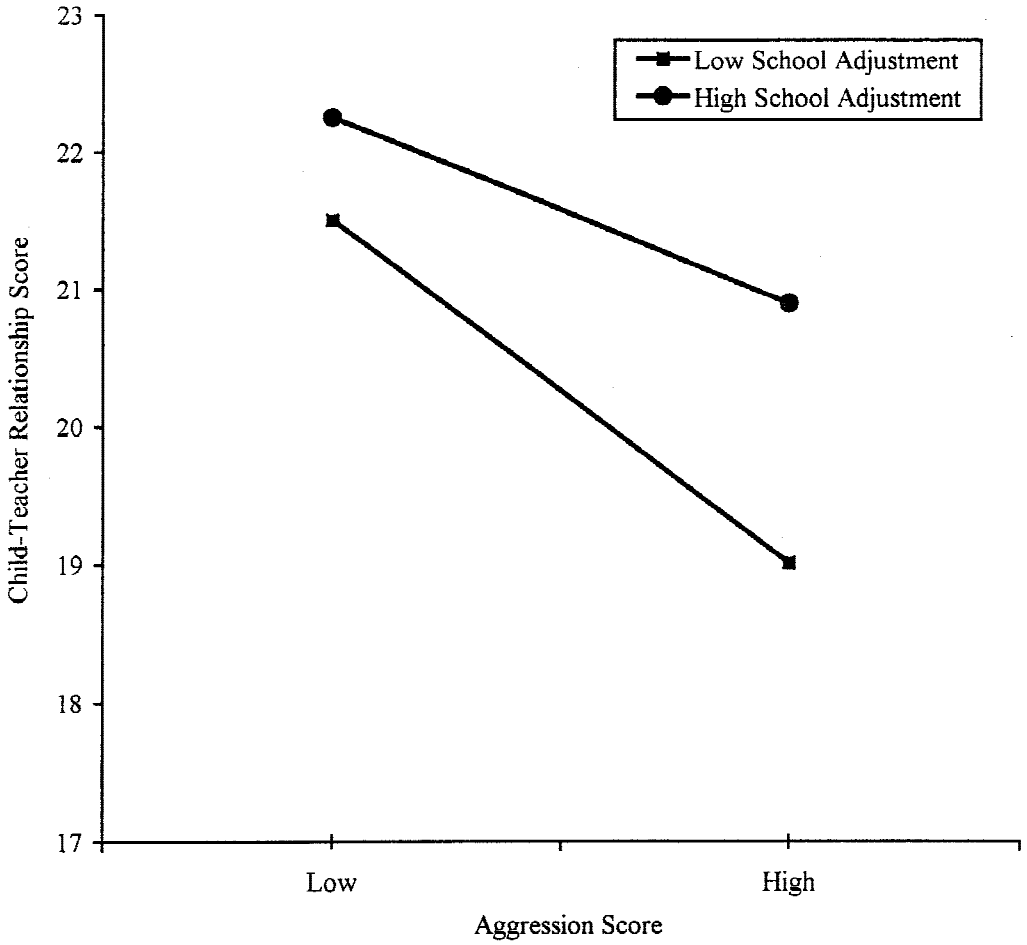

FIGURE 2. Interaction of aggression with school adjustment predicting the child-teacher relationship.

competence and the child–teacher relationship. These studies did not take into account the potential combined effects of child aggression and social competence on the child–teacher relationship. The present study assessed the joint effects of child aggression and social competence on the child's perceived relationship with their teacher. Although some of the findings were statistically significant, they are limited in clinical significance. Of the four regression analyses conducted, at best only 14% of the variance in the perceived child–teacher relationship was accounted for by the predictors. Nonetheless, the results suggest that clinicians and researchers should further examine the interactive nature of aggression and social competence in the child–teacher relationship.

Discussion of Regression Results

The results of the study indicate that the overall social competence score was a statistically significant predictor of the perceived child–teacher relationship. However, additional analyses showed that of the three subscales comprising the overall social competence score, only school adjustment contributed to this significant effect. There were no main effects, nor interaction effects

for the Peer-Preferred Behavior and Teacher-Preferred Behavior subscales of social competence. Therefore, the results of this study provide support for examining different components of social competence, instead of only assessing social competence per se, which is a very global and complex construct. Merely including social competence as a variable in analyses fails to acknowledge the individual dimensions believed to comprise social competence.

There were two statistically significant interaction effects present for school adjustment: (a) the effect of school adjustment on the perceived child–teacher relationship differed by gender, and (b) the effect of school adjustment on the child–teacher relationship differed according to the children's level of aggression. The first interaction effect suggests that poor school adjustment is associated with more negatively perceived child–teacher relationships for boys than for girls. That is, boys who do not use their free time appropriately, hand in poor quality work, and do not listen to instructions, for example, perceive their teachers as less supportive than girls who engage in similar behaviors that are indicative of poor school adjustment. This is consistent with the literature suggesting that teachers report closer relationships and less conflict with girls than boys (Birch & Ladd, 1998).

The second statistically significant interaction effect, Aggression × School Adjustment, on children's perceived child–teacher relationship suggests that aggressive children are not doomed to have poor relationships with their teachers, particularly if they are well adjusted at school. That is, the negative association between aggression and the perceived child–teacher relationship is stronger for children with poor school adjustment than for those who listen to their teachers' instructions and complete seatwork assignments as directed. This finding suggests that although aggression typically leads to poor child–teacher relationships, school adjustment may serve as a protective factor for aggressive children. An additional finding was that even if children were poorly adjusted at school, but they were not aggressive, they perceived their child–teacher relationships as being more supportive than those of the poorly adjusted *and* aggressive children. This suggests that even if a child does not engage in appropriate school behaviors, such as completing assigned tasks on time, the teacher is likely to be supportive of the child, unless that child is aggressive.

Implications

The results of this investigation have implications for school psychologists and other school personnel, such as teachers. Current school-based intervention programs place little emphasis on the child–teacher relationship. Instead, greater emphasis has been placed on classroom discipline techniques (Hughes et al., 1999). Although this issue is important to include in intervention programs, the child–teacher relationship should also be addressed due to its impact on school outcomes, including peer relationships (Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994), academic motivation, school achievement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991), and satisfaction with school (Baker, 1999), to name a few. Furthermore, it is important for school psychologists and teachers to be aware of the potential interaction effects of gender and school adjustment, as well as aggression and school adjustment on the child–teacher relationship. Poorly adjusted boys may receive less support from their teachers compared to poorly adjusted girls. Also, aggressive students who are well adjusted at school may receive more support from teachers than aggressive students who are poorly adjusted at school. Therefore, when working with children who have poor child–teacher relationships, rather than implementing a uniform procedure with all of the children, their individual aggression *and* school adjustment levels, and their interactive effects may want to be taken into consideration. It should be noted that since aggression is a stable trait (Huesmann & Moise, 1999; Olweus, 1979), chances of success are greater for efforts focused on improving dimensions of the child's social competence, as it is more malleable than aggression (Asendorpf, 1989).

The findings also suggest that, even for aggressive children, if they have certain social skills to build upon, such as those indicative of positive school adjustment, then the children have a better chance for positive outcomes, such as supportive child–teacher relationships. Therefore, school psychologists and teachers may target children's social skills and competencies by building upon those competencies that are already present.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although the findings of this study provide support for examining the combined effects of aggression and school adjustment on the child–teacher relationship, it has some limitations. The dependent variable in the study, child–teacher relationships, was based on children's perceptions and, consequently, is subject to bias and error. Furthermore, the child–teacher relationship variable was based on only one set of respondents: children. Teachers, who reported on the three child social competence dimensions, may have had a very different perception of the child–teacher relationship. Also, the present study did not include archival data (e.g., discipline referrals at school), which may have provided a more complete picture of the child's levels of aggression and social competence. Inclusion of these additional sources of information may have resulted in findings that differed from those of the present study. The most notable limitation of this study is that although some of the findings were statistically significant (the large sample size likely contributed to this), the practical significance of the findings is limited. Nonetheless, the statistically significant findings suggest that future research should be conducted to assess the interactive nature of aggression and social competence on the child–teacher relationship.

Future research should also assess the longitudinal effects of aggression and social competence variables on the child–teacher relationship. Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) conducted a longitudinal study that assessed the school adjustment of aggressive boys. However, they did not address the predictive abilities of school adjustment and aggression for the child–teacher relationship. Longitudinal research would show whether the statistically significant effects found in the present study for the third through fifth graders are present for older children. In particular, although it is known that aggressive children are at risk for negative school outcomes such as dropping out (Parker & Asher, 1987) and poor child–teacher relationships (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994), longitudinal analyses could help determine long-term outcomes for aggressive children who had good child–teacher relationships as a result of high levels of school adjustment. Although this study has limitations, it contributes to the literature devoted to identifying predictors of the child–teacher relationship. In light of the harmful short- and long-term effects of a negative child–teacher relationship, this is a topic warranting further study.

Appendix: Child–Teacher Relationship Items

My teacher listened to me.
My teacher treated me fairly.
I got angry at my teacher.
My teacher got angry at me.
My teacher told my family when I did something good.
If I had a problem, my teacher helped me out.
My teacher noticed the good things I did.
My teacher talked about the things I like.
My teacher gave me choices.

RESPONSES:

1 = No
2 = A little
3 = A lot

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