

## The comparison of the effects of parent-child and teacher-child relationships on Chinese preschoolers' social emotional abilities

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**Abstract:** This study compared the effects of parent-child and teacher-child relationships on Chinese preschoolers' social emotional abilities. Participants were 211 children from different preschools in a small city of Henan Province, China. Parents rated the parent-child relationships and children's social emotional abilities at home and teachers rated the teacher-child relationships at school. After controlling for family socioeconomic status, the results showed parent-child relationship was a stronger predictor on preschool children's social emotional abilities than was teacher-child relationship. Parent-child closeness positively predicted self-management, prosocial behavior and social skills and negatively predicted problem behavior. Parent-child conflict positively predicted problem behavior and negatively predicted self-management, prosocial behavior and social skills. While teacher-child relationships did not significantly predict children's social emotional abilities. The findings highlight the importance of parent-child closeness in children's early social emotional abilities.

### 1. Introduction

Children's social emotional development influences the extent to which they get on well with other children and adjust well in their preschools. It also influences some other skills they have to learn, such as cognitive skills [1]. Moreover, the development of children's early social-emotional skills has long-lasting influence on a range of later outcomes, such as life satisfaction, educational attainment, employment and social-economic status [2]. Since social and emotional abilities are meaningful for both individuals' well-being and the whole society, government and organizations these years became more concerned about promoting social emotional learning programs in early years [3]. To better improve the quality of early social emotional learning, it's essential to find out factors that influence preschool children's social emotional abilities.

A number of factors were found to be linked to children's social emotional abilities. Some family factors like family socioeconomic status, parental engagement and parenting style were linked to children's social emotional abilities [4-6]. Other factors like interpersonal relationships, such as parent-child relationships, peer relationships and teacher-child relationships, were also associated with children's social emotional abilities [7-8]. Among the factors above, as two main interpersonal relationships, the parent-child relationships and the teacher-child relationships were strongly associated with children's early social and emotional skills. [9-10].

Since the second half of the 20th century, home-school cooperation has increasingly become a trend in the world to solve the problems of early year's education quality [11]. During the process of cooperation, what aspects should parents focus on and what aspects should schools focus on? Between parents and teachers, if we can identify who played a more important role in certain aspects of child development, the home-school cooperation will be more effective. While, limited research has compared the effects of parent-child and teacher-child relationships on preschoolers' social emotional abilities. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine, between parent-child relationships and teacher-child relationships, which factor influence preschoolers' social emotional abilities more.

## **1.1 Parent-child relationships and social emotional abilities**

Attachment theory offers one of the frameworks to understand children's social and emotional abilities. Bowlby (1982) posits that parent-child relationships play a key role in children's later social adaptation and personality development [12]. Previous research has shown children who experienced securely attached parent-child relationships are able to employ effective emotion regulation strategy [13]. Children with high-level parent-child closeness also demonstrate better interpersonal character and peer acceptance [14]. For children at risk for developing social skills or with other developmental problems, a positive caregiver-child relationship is able to have a buffering effect [15-16].

A negative parent-child relationship, on the other hand, is often linked to social emotional problems or challenges. Previous research has shown children who experienced parent-child conflict tend to deficit in behavior regulation [17]. Children with high-level parent-child conflict also demonstrate lower peer acceptance and lower academic achievement [18]. In addition, a previous study has demonstrated that the interaction between psychopathological symptoms and a conflictual parent-child relationship negatively predict children's social skills and coping strategy [19]. Considering that parent-child relationships play a key role in children's social and emotional developmental outcomes, the current study would focus on the effects of parent-child relationships on social emotional abilities.

## **1.2 Teacher-child relationships and social emotional abilities**

Given that children spend most of the time in preschools, teacher-child relationship is a primary factor that affects children's social emotional abilities. Previous research has shown that teacher-child closeness was positively related to children's school adjustment, such as academic performance, school liking and self-directedness [20]. High closeness in teacher-child relationships predicted better social competence and prosocial behavior [21-23].

In contrast, a negative teacher-child relationship, was often associated with social and emotional problems. Previous research has shown teacher-child conflict in children's early year childhood predicted their problem behaviors [24-25]. Children at higher-level teacher-child conflict demonstrated more aggressive behavior [26]. Previous study also has shown that teacher-child conflict was significantly correlated to children's internalizing, externalizing problems and peer behavior [27-29]. Therefore, the quality of teacher-child relationship was also a primary factor on children's social emotional abilities in this study.

## **1.3 The Current Study:**

To sum up, the present study addresses two questions:

(1) What are the correlations between parent-child relationships, teacher-child relationships and different dimensions of social emotional abilities?

(2) To what extent are parent-child relationships and teacher-child relationships related to different dimensions of social emotional abilities? Do parent-child relationships influence preschoolers' social emotional abilities more or teacher-child relationships influence preschoolers' social emotional abilities more?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

211 children (54% middle class, 46% senior class) were randomly selected in 8 different classes across 4 preschools in a small city in Henan Province, China. Information was obtained from one of their parents and from their preschool homeroom teachers (n=8).

In the preschools, each class includes about 20-30 children, 1 homeroom teacher and 1 assistant teacher. Only homeroom teachers participated in this research, because they were mainly responsible for all the children in the class, and they were the most familiar with the children. In terms of the parent sample, among the fathers, 15.2% didn't complete high school, 53% graduated from high school, and

31.8% had bachelor's degree and above. Among the mothers, 13.7% didn't complete high school, 50.3% completed high school degree, and 36% had bachelor's degree and above.

## **2.2 Measures and procedures**

### **2.2.1 Control variables**

As family social economic status and parental engagement can often be seen as factors that have impacts on children's early social emotional skills, parents' educational levels, educational investment and parental time with children were considered as control variables in this study.

1. Parents' educational level. The parents reported their educational levels (1= junior high school and below, 2= senior high school, 3= bachelor's degree and above). In this study, referring to Davis-Kean (2005)'s research, the higher educational attainment of parents was used as an indicator of family education [30].

2. Educational investment. Parents were asked to report annual cost on their children's education by filling blanks. This investment includes children's tuition fee and cost of purchasing books, magazines, school things and other leaning materials.

3. Parental time with children. Parents were asked to report how many hours they spend in accompanying children every day by filling blanks. The accompanying activities include learning, playing, chatting and watching TV with children when they are awake.

### **2.2.2 Teacher-child relationships**

In order to measure teacher-child relationships, the Chinese version of Pianta and Steinber's (1992) Student-Teacher Relationship Scale was used in this study, which has showed good reliability and validity in the past research [31-32]. It consists of the Closeness and Conflict subscales. The Closeness subscale (11 items) measures close and affectionate relationship between a child and a teacher. (E.g. This child always naturally shares some information about herself with me.) The Conflict subscale (12 items) measures conflictual and even hostile relationship between a teacher and a child (e.g. this child thinks I always punish and criticize him/her). Teachers reported their relationships with children on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (definitely not apply) to 5 (definitely not apply). Good parent-child relationships are defined by high closeness and low conflict. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients are .76 for closeness and .83 for conflict.

### **2.2.3 Parent-child relationships**

Parent-child relationships were assessed by Chinese version of Pianta and Steinberg (1992)'s Child-parent Relationship Scale (CPRS), which was previously proved to be reliable in Chinese context [33-34]. It also includes the Closeness subscale and Conflict subscale. The Closeness subscale measures a warm and affective relationship between the parent and the child, and the Conflict subscale measures the conflict and disharmony between them. An example of items for closeness (9 items) is my child always asks me for comfort when he or she feel upset. An example of items for conflict (11 items) is my child always thinks I treat him/her unfairly. Good parent-child relationships can be defined by high level of closeness and low level of conflict. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for parent-child closeness is .74 and for parent-child conflict is .80.

### **2.2.4 Social emotional abilities**

To assess children's social emotional abilities, Behar's (1974) Children's Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ) was adapted [35]. In this study, the whole social emotional ability scale was divided into four subscales including 38 items: self-management (11 items), problem behavior (17 items), social skills (7 items) and prosocial behavior (3 items). Parents reported children's behaviors on a 4-point scale (1= very not similar, 2= not similar, 3= similar, 4= very similar). For self-management, prosocial behavior, problem behavior and social skills, higher scores mean that children have better social emotional abilities. For problem behavior, lower scores mean that children have better social emotional abilities. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the social emotional ability scale is .70.

### 2.2.5 Procedures

Around April 2021, participating parents received the questionnaires that assess children's social emotional abilities, parent-child relationships and consent forms. After finishing the questionnaires, parents returned them to the homeroom teachers. The teachers completed the questionnaires that measure teacher-child relationships. All data were collected within one week.

### 2.3 Control of common method variance

In the present study, participating parents need to complete both social emotional ability and parent-child relationship questionnaires. To avoid the common method variance, the method of Harman's single-factor test was used. A single factor will appear and explain most of the covariance in the predictor and outcomes variable as long as there is common method variance in this study. After using factor analysis, 17 factors were extracted and greater than one and the proportion of Factor 1 is 21.75% (less than 40%). This mean common method variance doesn't influence the result of this study.

## 3. Results

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlations among teacher-child relationships, parent-child relationships and social emotional abilities.

	M(SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Parents' educational level	2.35 (.65)	1										
Educational investment (thousand/yuan)	18.32 (13.68)	.27**	1									
Parental time with children (hour)	5.34(2.60)	-.11	-.10	1								
Parent-child closeness	36.56 (4.89)	.10	.15*	.10	1							
Parent-child conflict	24.27 (6.64)	.00	-.03	.01	-.29**	1						
Teacher-child closeness	37.74 (5.77)	.09	.12	.06	.19**	-.01	1					
Teacher-child conflict	19.94 (5.41)	.08	.04	-.10	-.09	.18**	.09	1				
Self-management	31.51 (4.71)	.07	.01	.02	.30**	-.56**	.05	.10	1			
Prosocial behavior	10.44 (1.62)	.04	.13	.07	.40**	-.36*	-.10	-.14*	.44**	1		
Problem behavior	28.39 (7.27)	-.19**	-.09	-.07	-.37**	.64**	-.11	.17*	-.61**	-.48**	1	
Social skills	21.32 (3.40)	.07	.14*	.05	.39**	-.30**	.18**	-.02	-.26**	.43**	.33**	1

\* p<0.05 \*\* p<0.01

Overall means and standard deviations of children's social emotional abilities were shown in Table 1. Table 1 also presents the correlations among control variables, relationship variables, and children's social emotional abilities through Pearson correlation analysis. The results are summarized in Table 1. For control variables, parents' educational levels were negatively related to problem behavior, and educational investment was positively related to social skills. However, there were no relations among parental time with any dimensions of social emotional abilities.

For parent-child relationships, parent-child closeness was positively correlated with three domains of social emotional abilities-self-management, prosocial behavior, and social skills and negatively correlated with problem behavior. Meanwhile, parent-child conflict was negatively correlated with

three domains of social emotional abilities-self-management, prosocial behavior, and social skills, and positively correlated with problem behavior.

For teacher-child relationships, teacher-child closeness was positively related to social skills. In addition, teacher-child conflict was positively associated with problem behavior and negatively associated with prosocial behavior.

Table 2: Multilevel regression analysis: control variables, children's interpersonal relationships and social emotional abilities.

	self-management		prosocial behavior		problem behavior		social skill	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Model 1		.01		.02		.05**		.03
Parents' education level	.10		-.00		-.20***		.03	
Investment in education	-.06		.08		.01		.07	
Parental time with children	.03		.05		-.06		.02	
Model 2		.35***		.21***		.43***		.18***
Parent-child closeness	.17**		.31***		-.18***		.30***	
Parent-child conflict	-.52**		-.25***		.56***		-.22***	
Model 3		.00		.01		.01		.02
Teacher-child closeness	-.00		.02		-.06		.12	
Teacher-child conflict	.01		-.07		.07		.04	

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

To compare the effects of teacher-child relationships and parent-child relationships on children's social emotional abilities, multilevel regression was conducted. Parents' educational level, educational investment and parental time with children were first entered as control variables in the regression. Then parent-child closeness and parent-child conflict were entered. Finally, teacher-child closeness and teacher-child conflict were entered. Multicollinearity was diagnosed in each model using the variance inflation factor (VIF) test [36]. In each model, all VIFs were  $< 5$ , which indicated no serious multicollinearity in these regression models (As a rule of thumb, a VIF  $> 10$  indicates serious multicollinearity). The final regression model of social emotional abilities is presented in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, after controlling for parents' educational level, educational investment and parental time with children, parent-child closeness significantly and positively predicted three dimensions of social emotional abilities-self-management, prosocial behavior, and social skills, and negatively predicted problem behavior. Besides, parent-child conflict significantly and negatively predicted three dimensions of social emotional abilities-self-management, prosocial behavior, and social skills, and positively predicted problem behavior. In contrast, both teacher-child closeness and teacher-child conflict didn't predict four dimensions of social emotional abilities.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study is designed to examine the effects of parent-child relationships and teacher-child relationships on different dimensions of children's social emotional abilities.

First, parent-child closeness was markedly related to all dimensions of social emotional abilities, positively with self-management, social skills and prosocial behavior and negatively with problem behavior. Meanwhile, parent-child conflict was also significantly related to all dimensions of social emotional abilities, negatively with self-management, prosocial behavior and social skills, and positively with problem behavior. These findings are in line with attachment theorists' viewpoints [37-38]. They posit that the quality of caregiver-child relationships significantly contributes to children's social adaptation.

Second, teacher-child closeness was positively correlated with social skills. In order to promote preschool children's social skills, teachers had better establish close teacher-child relationships and

provide emotional support to children. Besides, teacher-child conflict was positively related to problem behavior and negatively related to prosocial behavior. Similarly, Ferreira et al's (2016) also found teacher-child relationships were linked to children's prosocial behavior [39]. As children spend much time learning in preschool and having interactions with teachers and peers, teachers can play a part in promoting children's positive social changes by building behavioral expectations and delivering daily teaching activities [40].

Last but not least, the findings suggest that parent-child relationships contribute more than teacher-child relationships on all dimensions of children's social emotional abilities. Parent-child relationships significantly predict all dimensions of children's social emotional abilities. Parent-child closeness positively predicted self-management, prosocial behavior, and social skills and negatively predicted problem behavior. However, teacher-child relationships didn't predict any dimensions of social emotional abilities. The finding is similar with Pianta et al. (1997)'s research showing that mother-child relationship was a stronger predictor to school adjustment behavior than was teacher-child relationship [41]. It should be noted that the finding is inconsistent with Zhang et al.'s (2008) research showing that teacher-child relationship is a better predictor. Zhang et al. posit that teacher-child conflict could negatively predict preschool beginners' problem behavior and moderate the association between mother-child relationship and children's externalizing and internalizing problems [42]. The different findings might be due to the age of the participants. In Zhang et al.'s research, the participating children were newly enrolled preschoolers and in Pianta et al.'s research and this research, the preschoolers were all between four to five years old. Another explanation is that this survey is conducted just after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the result may be influenced by this special factor. The participating children are in the second and third preschool year and the data was collected in April 2021, while in the whole year of 2020, children spent more time learning online at home with their parents because of the lock-down and suspended class policy in China. Nevertheless, the possible contextual reasons actually can enlighten our understanding and the results can still show the importance of parent-child relationships in preschool children's social emotional abilities. Parents and teachers should be aware of the key roles of parent-child closeness in children's social emotional abilities in the process of home-school cooperation, especially during the present epidemic period.

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