

# EXTERNALIZING AND INTERNALIZING BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS IN PRESCHOOLERS: THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

During the early stages of childhood, educators play a pivotal role as influential figures in a child's life. The dynamic between teacher and child holds the potential to either foster or jeopardize the child's developmental trajectory. The present study investigated the predictive role of teacher-child relationships in behavior problems for Turkish children. A predictive correlation design was used in this study. Eight preschool teachers rated the quality of their relationships with 138 children aged 4–6 years and their externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors. Findings revealed that the quality of the teacher-child relationships was a significant predictor of both externalizing and internalizing problems. Closeness in teacher-child relationships is associated with a decrease in children's externalizing and internalizing behavior problems. Conflicts in teacher-child relationships, in contrast, have been linked to increased problem behaviors exhibited by children. Notably, conflict emerges as a more influential predictor for externalizing behavior problems, whereas the level of closeness exerts a more substantial influence on internalizing behavior problems. Findings provide new perspectives on how teacher-child relationship patterns affect children's behavior problems in Turkey context.

**Keywords:** teacher-child relationship, pre-schooler, externalizing behaviour problems, internalizing behaviour problems

## INTRODUCTION

The relationships between adults and children play a central role in child development. In early childhood, the teacher is one of the most fundamental people in the child's life (Pianta et al., 1995). A preschool teacher, the first and most important figure in a children's life except for their family, has a continuous bond with the child and prepares the ground for the child's future success or failure in the school environment (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009). The relationship with the teacher is an essential part of the classroom experience of every child and is a potential source for improving developmental outcomes. These relationships may benefit the child or become the source of conflict or risk in the child's life (Pianta, 1999). Children's competence

in many fields is associated with the quality of teacher-child relationships (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). The teacher-child relationship significantly affects the children's social, emotional, and behavioural competence (e.g., Driscoll & Pianta, 2010; Pianta et al., 1995). A positive teacher-child relationship increases children's positive attitudes toward school (Buyse et al., 2009; Driscoll & Pianta, 2010), improves their academic success (McCormick, & O'Connor, 2015), and reduces behaviour problems (Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Van Campen vd., 2009). On the contrary, a negative teacher-child relationship is associated with peer victimization (Shin & Kim, 2008), high level of behavioral problems (O'Connor et al., 2012; Sabol & Pianta, 2012), negative attitude towards school (Ladd & Burgess, 2001) and low academic achievement (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). The fact that the quality of the teacher-child relationship has such significant consequences for children makes it necessary to increase the studies to be done in this field. It is considered essential to reach up-to-date information about the nature of the relationship between teacher-child relationship quality and problem behaviours. To this end, the current study examined the relationship between teacher-child relationship quality and children's problem behaviours in a sample of low-income pre-schoolers. This research provides up-to-date and new insights into the existing body of literature.

### **Behaviour Problems in Pre-schoolers**

Behaviour problems include any patterns of behaviour that inhibits the learning and development of the child, resulting in harm to the children, their peers, or adults in their life and putting the child at risk of future social problems and academic success (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007). These behaviour seen in preschool can be examined in two broad classifications, namely externalizing and internalizing behaviours (Gimpel & Holland, 2003). Externalizing behaviour problems include verbal and physical aggression, anger, opposition, and damaging property (Campbell, 1995; Pollastri et al., 2013). In one of the influential studies, preschool teachers reported that they widely experience externalizing behaviour problems in their classrooms (Snell et al., 2012). Internalizing behaviour problems, on the other hand, are characterized by sadness, anxiety, social withdrawal, shyness, crying or hiding, and persistent avoidance of activity (Campbell, 1995; Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2001).

Behaviour problems experienced at an early age are a huge inhibitor of social-emotional improvement and are believed to be the courier of severe disharmony in a child's academic life and adulthood (Campbell, 1995; Dunlap et al., 2006). Research proves that children with behaviour problems have low social abilities and peer acceptance (Ladd et al., 1988; Olson & Rosenblum, 1998) and are rejected by their peers (Hanish & Guerra, 2002). In a recent meta-analysis study, Yue and Zhang (2023) found a strong positive association between peer rejection and aggression. Similarly, Vaillancourt et al. (2013) reported that internalizing problems predict future peer victimization. A different study by Laurent et al. (2020) showed that aggressive children's expressive emotional understanding, peer acceptance, and prosocial skills were lower when comparing the children with non-aggressive groups. In addition, the school interests of children with problem behaviours decrease over time (Egeland et al., 1990), and these children have academic hardships (Powell et al., 2006; Sutherland et al., 2012). D'Souza et al. (2020) found that behavioural difficulties during early childhood are more likely to show language and executive control delays than children with no behavioural difficulties. Moreover, these children are at greater risk of showing delays across multiple cognitive domains. Burchinal et al. (2020) showed that lower internalizing problems were related to faster acquisition of math and reading skills. These children also have problems transitioning

to kindergarten because they lack behavioural help (Stormont et al., 2005). Welchons and McIntyre (2017) demonstrated that higher levels of adaptive behavior and fewer problem behaviors in preschool significantly predicted positive kindergarten transition outcomes.

Research shows that behaviour problems at an early age usually continue to exist in older ages (Basten et al., 2016; Gimpel & Holland, 2003; Mesman et al., 2001); if not treated at an early age, it can cause the present mental issues to strengthen and become chronic (Beyer et al., 2012). For example, Briggs-Gowan et al. (2006) determined that 50% of 12-40-month-old children who were determined to have high levels of externalizing problems by their parents showed high levels of externalizing problems one year later. Similarly, children with internalizing behaviour problems were found to be 38% more likely to show the same problems one year later. The coexistence of internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems indicates that these children most likely have permanent problems. Basten et al. (2016), in their study examining the stability of internalization and externalization problems from 1.5 to 6 years old, determined the behaviours of 7206 children through the Child Behavior Checklist filled by their mothers. They found that children with internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems that occur together in the early stages of life are most likely to display problem behaviours at six. In a different study, Pianta and Caldwell (1990) reported that children's behaviour problems might continue to occur in elementary school without treatment in preschool. At this point, it is of utmost importance to investigate the factors that influence behavioral problems among pre-schoolers, as it directly influences their current and future academic and social well-being. The examination of children's behaviour problems is believed to be most effectively examined within the context of teacher-child interactions. Consequently, determining the extent to which children's behavior problems are influenced by conflict and closeness within these relationships is seen as a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature.

### **The Qualities of Teacher-Child Relationship**

The teacher-child relationship is characterized by closeness and conflict categories (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta et al., 1995). Closeness indicates the warmth between the children and the teacher and expresses open communication and support (Pianta, 1999). Children sharing their emotions and experiences with their teacher and seeing their teacher as a support and comfort in coping with their strong emotions are associated with closeness (Buyse et al., 2009). Closeness in the teacher-child relationship supports children's adaptation to school and improves their social-emotional and academic abilities (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). Children with close relationships with their teachers have positive attitudes toward school (Birch & Ladd, 1997). They adapt better to school (Pianta et al., 1995), have higher academic success (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004), and have improved language and literary abilities (Burchinal et al., 2002). The close relationship between the children and the teacher positively affects children's social, emotional, and behavioural abilities and academic success. Children with close relationships with their teachers have higher social abilities than their peers (Ewing & Taylor, 2009). Closeness in the teacher-child relationship is associated with reducing problem behaviours and increasing behavioural abilities (Pianta et al., 1995). When a close relationship between the teacher and the child is developed, children are less likely to behave aggressively and be antisocial (Van Campen et al., 2009). In addition, the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the child is seen as the predictor of the future behavioural outcome with their teachers having high social abilities (Howes, 2000) and performing fewer problem behaviours (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

On the contrary, conflict in the teacher-child relationship indicates a frequent conflict between teachers and children (Pianta, 1999). Conflict in teacher-child relationships affects children's behaviours negatively. It is characterized by tension and anger between the teacher and the child (Van Campen et al., 2009). Conflict relationships may cause children to drift apart from school and negatively toward school (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Children who develop conflicting relationships with their teachers love school less, attend fewer activities (Ladd & Burgess, 2001), and have lower academic success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Spilt et al., 2012). Children who frequently have conflicts with their teachers are less likely to obey classroom rules and practice their responsibilities (Ladd et al., 1999). Conflicting relationships cause a decrease in children's social competence and increase problem behaviours (Birch & Ladd, 1998). Pianta et al. (1995) stated that children who develop conflict relationships with their teachers in preschool have more problem behaviours than children who have close relationships with their teachers and have lower behavioural competence two years later. Further, Sabol and Pianta (2012) reported that the conflict relationships could exacerbate adverse outcomes for children with internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems. Having negative classroom relationships with teachers may reinforce or initiate maladaptive interpersonal behaviours, which leads children to persist on externalizing trajectories or switch to a more behaviourally risky trajectory (Silver et al., 2010).

### **The Present Study**

The primary focus of this study centered on examining the quality of teacher-child relationships, specifically concerning behaviour problems, within the context of Turkey. Previous research has demonstrated that the quality of teacher-child relationships (closeness and conflict) affects children's behavioural problems (e.g., Arbeau et al., 2010; Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Henricson & Rydell, 2004; O'Connor et al., 2012). Nevertheless, this prior research originated predominantly from samples from Western and developed countries. Few studies investigated the relationship between teacher-child relationship quality and children's problem behaviours in other cultural contexts (e.g., Zhang & Sun, 2011). It is acknowledged that culture can influence the quality of teacher-child relationships and contribute to shaping children's behaviour problems. At this point, it is essential to understand how the teacher-child relationship quality could predict children's behaviour problems, especially in a non-Western country. Thus, it provides new perspectives on how teacher-child relationship patterns affect behaviour problems in a different cultural context and shows the generalizability of the findings from Western culture. The present study examines the role of the quality of the teacher-child relationships on children's behaviour problems within the context of Turkey, which incorporates Eastern and Western cultures (Kagıtcıbası, 2006). A few studies have examined these contributing factors in Turkey's context (e.g., Dereli, 2016; Ertürk Kara, 2017). The difference of the current study is that (1) the focus of the research is externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems, and (2) participant teacher-child dyads are selected from low-income school backgrounds. Huaqing Qi and Kaiser (2003) stated that children from low-income families are likelier to have problem behaviours. Teachers who teach these children may be less sensitive and use harsh discipline strategies. This situation can potentially have a negative effect on the teacher-child relationship quality of children, particularly for children residing in low socioeconomic conditions. Current research will examine the nature of these relationships and provide up-to-date and new insights to the existing body of literature. The present study focuses explicitly on the predictive role of the quality of the teacher-child relationships on externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems of Turkish pre-schoolers. Specific research questions were as follows;

- i) How do teacher-child relationships (closeness and conflict) correlate with pre-schoolers' externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems?
- ii) Does the closeness and conflict dimensions of the teacher-child relationship predict pre-schoolers' externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

In this study, predictive correlation design, one of the correlational research types, was used. In predictive correlation studies, it is possible to predict the value of the other variable if the current value of one of the two variables with a sufficiently large relationship between them is known (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The present study aimed to determine the link between teacher-child relationship quality and children's problem behaviours and the level of predicting children's externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems by the quality of the teacher-child relationships.

### **Participants**

This study was conducted using the convenience sampling method, a type of non-random sampling method. This method provides easy access to the participants and collects data without economic limitations. Eight preschool teachers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 30.75$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ) and 138 pre-schoolers, for whom the teachers filled in the scales, took part in the study. Accordingly, preschools that are easily accessible by the researchers were invited to participate in the research. First, the preschool's administrators were contacted by phone. Second, the preschools interested in the research were visited, and the research process was explained in a low socioeconomic background preschool where all teachers agreed to participate in the research voluntarily. Third, children in these teachers' classrooms were invited to participate in the study through a two-step inclusion criterion: 1) the child had no developmental delay or difficulty, and 2) parental consent to participate in the research. An information letter was sent to the parents of the children, and 150 parents signed a consent form.

Teachers have a bachelor's degree. Seven (87.5%) of the teachers are female, and a teacher (12.5%) is male. Teachers' age ranges from 29 to 34. The teachers had a mean teaching experience of 7.88 years ( $SD = 1.13$ ). Each class has one teacher. Class sizes range from 21 to 34, with an average of 27 children ( $SD = 6.02$ ). The age of children ranged from 47 to 70 months, with a mean age of 61.78 months ( $SD = 4.96$ ). There was no significant age difference between boys ( $n = 70$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 62.00$ ,  $SD = 5.12$ ) and girls ( $n = 68$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 61.55$ ,  $SD = 4.81$ ). Of the 138 mothers, 22 (15.9%) graduated from primary school, 39 (28.3%) had a secondary school degree, 45 (32.6%) graduated from high school, 11 (12.0%) had an associate degree, and 21 (15.2%) had a bachelor's degree. Thirteen (9.4%) of the fathers graduated from primary school, 23 (16.7%) had secondary school diplomas, 62 (44.9%) graduated from high school, four (2.9%) had an associate degree, and 36 (26.1%) have a bachelor's degree.

## **Measures**

The Student-teacher Relationship Scale-Short Form (STRS-SF; Pianta, 1991) measures the teacher-child relationship, and Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation Scale-30 (SCBE-30; LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996) is used for measuring children's behaviour problems.

### ***Student-teacher Relationship Scale – Short Form***

The STRS (Pianta, 2001) measures teachers' perceptions of their relationships with a particular student in the class. The Turkish adaptation of STRS-SF was made by Şahin and Ocakbay (2018) and has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of the teacher-student relationship. The STRS-SF consists of 15 items in two subscales: closeness and conflict. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = definitely does not apply, 5 = definitely applies) and summed to obtain the subscale score. Internal consistency reliability was .76 for closeness and .84 for conflict, with a median of .82. Test-retest scale reliability was found .83 for closeness and .87 for conflict, with a median of .83.

### ***Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation Scale-30***

SCBE-30 (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996) is a teacher report measure to evaluate pre-schoolers' emotional and behavioural problems and social competence. The Turkish adaptation of the SCBE-30 was made by Çorapçı et al. (2010). The SCBE-30 has three 10-item subscales: social competence (SC), anger aggression (AA), and anxiety withdrawal (AW). The items are scored on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 6 = always) and summed to obtain the subscale score. Internal consistency reliability was .88 for SC, .87 for AA, and .84 for AW. Since the present study's dependent variable was children's behaviour problems, only AA and AW subscales were used.

## **Analysis Plan**

Pearson correlation coefficient was used to identify the association between the quality of teacher-child relationships and children's behaviour problems. In addition, multiple regression analysis was used to determine to what extent the closeness and conflict in the teacher-child relationship predicted children's externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems. Before proceeding to the multiple regression analysis, the test's assumptions were examined. The first assumption of the test is to provide a multivariate normal distribution. In this context, first, univariate outlier analysis was carried out, and the data of 12 children were found to be outliers, and the data were excluded from the study. Then, Mahalanobis distances were calculated to determine the multiple extreme values, and the lowest value was found to be .05. Then, the normality distribution of the data was examined through the skewness and kurtosis coefficients, and it was seen that the coefficients obtained were between -2 and +2 limits. In line with all these procedures, it was accepted that the research data were in accordance with the normal distribution. The second assumption of multiple regression analysis is that there is no multicollinearity between predictor variables. The problem of multicollinearity between predictor variables was examined through Pearson correlation coefficients, and it was seen that the correlation coefficient between variables was .15, not .80 and above. In addition to the Pearson correlation coefficient, the multicollinearity problem between the variables was also

examined through tolerance and VIF values. The tolerance value is .979, and the VIF value is 1.02, indicating no multicollinearity in the regression model (Tolerance>.20, VIF<10). The last assumption that must be met in order to perform multiple regression analysis is that the error terms do not show autocorrelation. Whether there is an autocorrelation problem was determined using the Durbin-Watson test. Durbin Watson test coefficients ranged from 1.887 to 2.053 and were found to be in the acceptable range.

## RESULTS

The association between the closeness and conflict teacher-child relationship and children's externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems were examined with the Pearson correlation coefficient. Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients.

Table 1  
*Bivariate correlations among study variables.*

	1	2	3	4
1. Conflict	-			
2. Closeness	-.145	-		
3. Externalizing behaviour problems	.519*	-.234*	-	
4. Internalizing behaviour problems	.349*	-.535*	.366*	-

\* $p < .001$

Findings revealed that conflict in the teacher-child relationship had significant, positive, and moderate to high relationships with children's externalizing behaviour problems ( $r = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and children's internalizing behaviour problems ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Closeness in the teacher-child relationship correlated significantly and negatively with children's externalizing ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and internalizing ( $r = -.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ) behaviour problem scores. Finally, a significant positive correlation was found between children's externalizing and internalizing behaviour problem scores ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Table 2  
*Findings of multiple regression analysis for teacher-child relationship predicting externalizing behavior problems.*

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Constant	15.109	5.009		3.016	.020	0.543	0.295	28.188*
Conflict	1.003	0.148	0.6495	6.777	.000			
Closeness	-.270	0.122	-.162	-2.219	.028			

\* $p < .001$

The quality of the teacher-child relationship was found to be a significant predictor of children's externalizing behaviour problems ( $F(2,135)=28.188$ ,  $p < .001$ ), explaining 30 % of the variance. Both conflict ( $\beta = .65$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and closeness ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) scores made a significant contribution to the externalizing behaviour problem score. Considering the direction of the relations, findings revealed that conflict has a positive relationship with children's externalizing behaviour problems, whereas closeness has a negative relationship with children's externalizing behaviour problems. Based on the standardized regression coefficients

( $\beta$ ), the relative importance of predictive variables on externalizing behaviours was conflict and closeness in teacher-child interaction, respectively.

Table 3

*Findings of multiple regression analysis for teacher-child relationship predicting internalizing behavior problems.*

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Constant	34.036	3.815		8.922	.000	0.601	0.361	38.176*
Conflict	0.450	0.113	0.278	3.996	.000			
Closeness	-.659	.093	-.494	-7.112	.000			

\* $p < .001$

The quality of the teacher-child relationship was found to be a significant predictor of children's internalizing behaviour problems ( $F(2,135)=38.176$ ,  $p < .001$ ), explaining 36 % of the variance. Both conflict ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and closeness ( $\beta = -.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ) scores made a significant contribution to the externalizing behaviour problem score. Considering the direction of the relations, findings revealed that conflict has a positive relationship with children's internalizing behaviour problems, whereas closeness has a negative relationship with children's internalizing behaviour problems. Based on the standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ), the relative importance of predictive variables on internalizing behaviours were closeness and conflict in teacher-child interaction, respectively.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study investigates the predictive role of the teacher-child relationship on externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems in Turkish children. Findings revealed that the quality of the teacher-child relationships significantly predicted both externalizing and internalizing problems. The presence of closeness in the teacher-child relationship is associated with decreased externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems among children. In contrast, conflict in teacher-child relationships has been linked to an increase in children's problem behaviours. Findings are discussed based on the related literature.

The findings of this study prove that the teacher-child relationship is a predictor of children's problem behaviours. This research showed that closeness in the teacher-child relationship is a negative predictor of externalizing behaviour problems, and conflict in the teacher-child relationship is a positive predictor. While improving close relationships with a teacher can decrease the risk of children's externalizing behaviour problems, conflict in the teacher-child relationship can cause children likely to exhibit externalizing behaviour problems. This finding aligns with existing scholarly literature (Dereli, 2016; Ertürk Kara, 2017; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta et al., 1995). and it provides evidence for research examining the teacher-child relationship and problem behaviours. The teacher-child relationship is an important context determining children's in-class behaviours (Silver et al., 2005). Conflict in teacher-child relationships is strongly associated with externalizing behaviour problems in children. Research revealed a substantial increase in behaviour problems when a relationship between teacher and child was characterized by conflict (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta et al., 1995). Thijs and Koomen (2009) suggested that both the teacher and the child contribute to their relationship. Hence, as the teacher-child relationship affects children's problem behaviours, children's behavior problems also affect the quality of the

teacher-child relationship. Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) stated that children with behaviour problems tend to develop conflicted relationships with their teachers compared to their peers. In their observational study, Henricsson and Rydell (2004) showed that children with externalizing behaviour problems have more conflicting and angry interactions with their teachers. Further, Nurmi (2012), in a meta-analysis study, found that teachers reported more conflict and less closeness when interacting with students who exhibit high levels of external or internal problem behaviour. Indeed, the relationship between child problem behaviours and the teacher-child relationship quality is thought to be a dynamic process that develops over time. Children with more adjustment problems may develop a negative relationship with their teachers, which increases the risk that children will experience higher levels of adjustment problems over time. Alternatively, children developing a negative relationship with their teachers may increase their risk of higher adjustment problems, which can further weaken the quality of their relationships with their teachers (Mejia & Hoglund, 2016). Considering that teachers use negative behaviour strategies towards children they think with problem behaviours (e.g., Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Latham, 1997), it is believed that these children do not receive the positive behaviours they need. It may cause children's behaviour problems to get stronger and make the teacher-child relationship more prone to conflict.

The present study's findings show that closeness and conflict in teacher-child relationships explain 30% of the variant of children's externalizing problems. This rate proves that different variants affect children's externalizing behaviour problems. Based on the literature, the child's and the family's characteristics affect the externalizing behaviour problems and the quality of the teacher-child relationship. The gender (Campbell, 1994; Hamre & Pianta, 2001) and personality (Gartstein et al., 2012) of the child affect externalizing problems. Besides, some family factors may increase the risk of problem behaviours, such as the socioeconomic status of the family (Anton et al., 2015), the mother's depression and parenting stress (Campbell, 1994; Henninger et al., 2014), mother's child-rearing practices (Stormont, 2001), marriage conflicts (Gamliel et al., 2018), mother's perception of social support (Arikan et al., 2019). These factors must be considered to prevent the development of behaviour problems in children.

The closeness and conflict levels of the teacher-child relationship have contributed to the explanation of children's internalizing behaviour problems by 36%. Closeness in teacher-child relationships has a significant negative effect on internalizing problems, and conflict in teacher-children relationships has a significant positive effect on internalizing problems. Children's behaviour problems decrease as the scores of the closeness between the teacher and the child increase. Additionally, increased conflict in teacher-child relationship scores causes increasing children's internalizing behaviour problems. These findings are consistent with the other research examining the relationships between children's internalizing problem behaviours and the teacher-child relationship quality. Arbeau et al. (2010) reported that negative teacher-child relationships increase children's anxiety, and closeness decreases anxiety during school terms. O'Connor et al. (2012) stated that the lack of closeness in the teacher-child relationship during childhood is associated with internalizing behaviour problems in late childhood. O'Connor et al. (2011) stated that qualified teacher-child relationships indicating low conflict and high closeness serve as protective factors that prevent children with high levels of internalizing behaviours in early childhood from developing a long-term curve of internalizing problems. However, Henricsson and Rydell (2004) observed that their teachers often ignore children with internalizing behavior problems. Social support prevents internalizing problems (Heberle et al., 2015). Considering that the most important social support comes from the teacher in the classroom, it is believed that supporting teachers'

abilities to develop quality relationships is crucial in showing that it affects children's internalizing behaviours. Children close to their teachers can approve of them as a source of support and feel safe in the classroom. As a result, children's internalizing behaviour problems can decrease over time (Pianta, 1999).

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the present study provide evidence supporting the prediction of externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems of children based on the closeness and conflict present within teacher-child relationships. A close relationship with the teacher is associated with low scores for externalizing and internalizing problem behaviours. In contrast, conflict in teacher-child relationships is associated with higher levels of externalizing and internalized problem behaviour. Notably, conflict emerges as a robust predictor for externalizing behaviour problems, while a close teacher-child relationship strongly predicts internalizing behaviour problems. The study's findings, in these terms, draw attention to the importance of teachers' ability to develop quality relationships.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are limitations to the data collected within the study. Initially, the teacher-child relationship was determined by the teacher evaluation used widely in the literature. However, Mantzicopoulos (2005) stated that even though teacher perspectives provide an essential understanding of the context of the teacher-child relationship, they cannot substitute information obtained from children. At this point, further research may provide a context where children assess their relationship with teachers. Second, children's problem behaviour is evaluated based only on teacher statements in this study. It is recommended that in further research, problem behaviours may be calculated in accordance with family statements in addition to teacher statements. This step is crucial in order to provide data independence.

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## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

The author was responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the manuscript.

## **DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE**

No generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the design, data collection, analysis,

interpretation of the findings, or writing of this manuscript.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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