

## Mindful teachers report closer relationships with preschoolers

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Being a good preschool teacher is no easy matter. Good teachers are both self-aware and socially aware. They are sensitive to children's developmental levels, learning styles, familial and cultural contexts, and social and emotional competencies. Good teachers must simultaneously self-regulate their inner emotional states and vigilantly monitor the complexities of classroom process while maintaining a focus on educational goals.

All of this is important because teacher's social and emotional competencies play a crucial role in facilitating preschoolers' personal and academic growth. This raises the question of how to help teachers develop the personal qualities they need to foster optimum teacher-pupil relationships.

One way might be to help teachers develop higher levels of dispositional mindfulness, or nonjudgmental moment-by-moment attentiveness. This may be especially important when workplace stress—the combined effect of high job difficulty, low perceived support, and low sense of control—makes preschool teaching even harder.

**Becker et al. [*Journal of School Psychology*]** analyzed data from an online survey of preschool teachers to test the relationships between teachers' dispositional mindfulness, their perception of their degree of closeness and conflict with their pupils, and their levels of depression and perceived workplace

stress.

The researchers explored data from an online staff wellness survey of 1,001 preschool teachers (98% female; 89% Caucasian; 51% college graduates) working for Head Start in Pennsylvania. The teachers completed self-report measures of the perceived quality of their relationships with their students (closeness vs. conflict), dispositional mindfulness (as measured by the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale-Revised), depressive symptoms, and perceived workplace stress.

Results showed that higher levels of dispositional mindfulness were significantly associated with higher levels of perceived closeness with students ( $r = .20$ ) and negatively associated with perceived conflict with students ( $r = -.28$ ), depressive symptoms ( $r = -.55$ ), and workplace stress ( $r = -.25$ ).

A path analysis showed that mindfulness's positive association with student closeness was an entirely direct one, and not indirectly due to mindfulness's relationships with depressive symptoms or workplace stress. Mindfulness's negative association with student conflict was primarily direct but there was also an indirect pathway mediated by mindfulness's association with fewer depressive symptoms.

The study shows that preschool teachers who report being more mindful also report having closer, less conflictual relationships with students, and feeling less stressed and depressed. It adds support to the hypothesis that improving teacher's mindfulness may improve teacher morale and mental health, as well as teacher-pupil relations.

The study is limited by the absence of a measure of social desirability bias. Additionally, its measure of student-teacher relationships only ascertains teacher perceptions of those relationships. The fact that teachers rated their relationships with students "in general," makes the results especially vulnerable to reporting bias.

Reference:

Becker, B. D., Gallagher, K. C., & Whitaker, R. C. (2017). Teachers' dispositional mindfulness and the quality of their

relationships with children in head start classrooms. *Journal of School Psychology*, 65, 40-53.