

# Preschool teacher depression linked to behavioral problems in children

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Depression in preschool teachers is associated with behavioral problems ranging from aggression to sadness in children under the teachers' care, new research suggests.

The study identified one contributing factor to this link: a poor-quality atmosphere in the child care setting that exists as a result of the teacher's depressive symptoms. In this study, "teacher" refers to both classroom instructors and in-home child care providers.

Researchers conducted the study using data from a large national study that collected family information primarily from low-income, single-mother households.

"We were interested in that sample because we thought that [children](#) of low-income single mothers might experience a more emotionally vulnerable home environment, and we wanted to see if the role of teachers affected their psychological health," said Lieny Jeon, lead author of the study and a postdoctoral researcher in human sciences at The Ohio State University.

Behavioral [problems](#) in young children – in this case, 3-year-olds – can result in later issues that include lower academic achievement and a lack of social skills, according to previous research. The problems rated in this study included externalizing behaviors such as aggression, anger and a lack of control, as well as internalizing behaviors: depression, anxiety, sadness and withdrawal.

Jeon and colleagues aim to develop an intervention allowing teachers to address their own psychological needs – all in the name of giving children the best chance for appropriate behavioral development.

"We know high-quality early childhood education is critical and we also know that very few programs in the United States are truly high in quality. So how do we get there?" said Cynthia Buettner, associate professor of human sciences at Ohio State and senior author of the paper. "It's incredibly important. Teachers can have a really big impact on children's development."

The research is published in the current issue of the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

The study sample came from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, an ongoing large, federally funded examination of single-parent families living under low socioeconomic conditions in 20 large U.S. cities. The study contains data from families in 15 cities that reported using child care services for 3-year-old children for at least five hours per week. In a supplemental study, a research team surveyed the teachers of those children and observed their child care environments. A total of 761 families and teachers from the national data are represented in Jeon's analysis.

Teachers completed a survey that rated their depressed mood during the preceding two weeks. Assessments of the quality of the child care atmosphere looked at space and furnishings, personal care, learning activities, social interactions and discipline.

Compiling a number of factors from this broad national data, Jeon applied statistical analysis to the variables and developed a model describing the relationships between teacher depression and childhood behavioral outcomes. The behavioral problems in children had been

scored separately by both mothers and teachers.

The analysis showed a direct relationship between teacher depression and both externalizing and internalizing problems in children reported by teachers as well as internalizing problems reported by parents. The teacher depression did not predict externalizing problems as reported by the children's mothers.

"We were interested in responses about behavior from both mothers and teachers because they sometimes disagree on these issues, perhaps because they see children in different environments," Jeon said. "The significant association between teacher depression and internalizing problems at home could be because kids are modeling the teachers' negative moods."

The study also showed that when the quality of the child care climate – in a home or an educational center – was factored into the analysis, the relationship between teacher depression and parent-reported behaviors changed. Teacher depression predicted an overall lower-quality child care atmosphere, which in turn predicted teacher-reported externalizing and internalizing problems among the children. In this case, however, the poor-quality [child care](#) climate linked to teacher depression did not predict mother-reported behavioral problems.

"This path between teacher depression and childhood behavioral problems can likely be explained in several ways. One of the reasons this relationship manifests with behavior problems is because the classroom has an unhealthy climate," Jeon said.

Jeon is extending her work by surveying preschool teachers about how depression and other factors contribute to their overall social and emotional capacity – a term coined by the research team. She is asking them about their work environment, relationship to colleagues, pay and

benefits, coping strategies, commitment to professional development and attitudes about children. Once she has data on these aspects of teacher life, she hopes to develop a way for teachers to spend some time looking after themselves.

"Most training for teachers is about managing the classroom and addressing [behavioral problems](#)," Jeon said. "They don't have the time or resources to address their own psychological difficulties, or access to any specialized mental health services."

Salary is a considerable issue for this population, Jeon and Buettner noted. The average annual pay for a preschool teacher is \$27,130.

"There's a real mismatch between the expectations for [teachers](#) and what they get paid," Buettner said. "They're frequently low-paid positions with not a lot of respect for the work people do."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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