

Assessing Preschoolers' Disruptive Behavior: Associations Among Teachers, TAs, and an Impartial Observer

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This study examined associations among Teachers, TAs, and Observational ratings of children's disruptive behavior. Alignment between Teachers and TAs did not predict observational measures above a single teacher's ratings. Teachers and TAs were equally aligned with observational measures, except for ratings of oppositionality. Findings point to the importance of a multi-method assessment that gathers information from various sources, including TAs.

Children who display disruptive behaviors in the preschool classroom are at risk of expulsion, later mental health disorders, and school failure. This makes it critical to identify these children early in development. Assessment in the preschool classroom plays a critical role in this process. Recommendations indicate that information should be gathered from multiple adults and from multiple measures. However, collecting data from different sources can be time-consuming, and information from various sources is often discrepant, making it challenging to integrate results.

The Study

The present study investigated how to combine information about children's disruptive behaviors using teacher and TA ratings and observational measures. Our study added to the literature by including TA ratings, as there has been limited research examining the TAs' perspectives on young children's disruptive behavior. We examined teacher and TA ratings of disruptive behavior to see whether two adults—both of whom have comparable roles, interact with children in the same context, and do so for the same amount of time each day—evaluate children's classroom behavior similarly. We also investigated whether teacher/TA agreement predicted observational methods, as we hypothesized that agreement might be indicative of objectivity. Finally, to better understand how to combine assessment information, we investigated whether teachers or TAs were most associated with observational measures.

Participants included 122 teachers and TAs in Head Start, state-funded, and private programs from three different sites across the South Eastern United States.

Within the first month of school, teachers rated 360 children across the domains of hyperactivity/impulsivity, inattention, oppositionality, and total disruptive behavior. Children were observed in their classrooms within the first six weeks of school using the InCLASS, an observational measure of children's classroom engagement. The dimensions from the InCLASS that are conceptually related to teacher-rated disruptive behavior domains were used in the current study.

Findings

Teacher and TA ratings were moderately associated with each other, in line with previous research that has examined ratings from reporters in similar contexts. Teacher and TA ratings were only modestly associated with observational measures. Contrary to our hypotheses, we found that teacher/TA agreement did not relate to observational measures of children's disruptive behavior. In addition, across all domains of disruptive behavior, teacher and TA ratings were equivalent in their relation with observational measures. However, lead teacher ratings were significantly more aligned with observed oppositionality than TA ratings. We found that using both teacher and TA ratings did not really aid in predicting observed behavior when compared to using a single teacher's report alone.

Practical Implications

The current results support the importance of using multiple informants (e.g., teachers and TAs) and multiple assessment methods (e.g., observations and rating scales) when assessing preschoolers' disruptive behavior. Although teacher and TA ratings were moderately associated, the correlations from our study are still too low to ensure that a similar picture of a child was obtained from each teacher.

Study Measures

Direct Observations:

Individualized Classroom Assessment Scoring System (inCLASS)

Pros:

- 1. Capture environmental functioning**
- 2. Minimize bias using impartial observer**
- 3. Evaluate actions when they occur**

Cons:

- 1. Timely**
- 2. Costly**
- 3. Difficulty detecting behaviors that occur infrequently but are clinically significant**

Rating Scales:

Teacher/TA ratings of disruptive behavior

Pros:

- 1. Can be completed by more than one adult**
- 2. Take into account children's behavior across a wide span of time**

Cons:

- 1. May be biased due to characteristics of rater**
- 2. May conflate behaviors, thereby artificially increasing or decreasing ratings**
- 3. Items may be misunderstood or misinterpreted**

This highlights that while one teacher may find a child's behavior particularly problematic, another teacher in the same classroom may perceive a child's behavior quite differently.

The modest associations between observational measures and TA and Teacher ratings were in line with other studies. These results suggest that observational measures and rating scales may be tapping different constructs. The finding that Teacher/TA agreement did not relate to observational measures points to the importance of gathering both observational assessments and using teacher report, as even when raters agree about the severity of children's behavior, this does not appear to be indicative of the information captured by an independent observer.

We found that for hyperactivity/impulsivity, inattention, and total disruptiveness, teacher and TA ratings were not differentially related with observational measures. However, the associations between lead teacher ratings of oppositionality and observed disruptive behavior were significantly stronger than for TAs. This difference may be a product of the varying roles that teachers and TAs play in the classroom.

Studies in older grades indicate that TAs are increasingly interacting with children in small group settings and supporting children who have special needs.

If TAs tend to work with children in smaller, more individualized settings in preschool while lead teachers are involved in directing whole group instruction and transitions, children may be more likely to display difficult behaviors with lead teachers given the high attentional and behavioral demands of whole group activities. More research will be important in understanding and testing this hypothesis.

For early childhood educators, this work shows that

it is important for teachers and TAs to refrain from assuming that they view children's disruptive behavior similarly. Even when teachers and TAs do agree about behavior, an independent, impartial observer is likely to provide additional information that may not be captured by teachers' and TAs' reports. Rather than assuming that one teacher's report or an observation's results represent "the truth," it may be helpful to gather more information about the underlying reasons for discrepancies from teachers and observers themselves. If children's disruptive behavior is less severe during particular times or with particular teachers, providing children with linked supports could be helpful in reducing problematic behavior in the classroom. Because children who exhibit disruptive behavior in preschool are at risk of a variety of negative outcomes, gaining a better understanding of how multiple individuals and measures evaluate children's behavior will be critical for assessment, and in turn, effective early intervention systems for young children.

Teacher and TA Ratings of Preschoolers' Externalizing Behavior Agreement and Associations With Observed Classroom Behavior
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