

Research Note

Teaching to Care: Emotional Interactions between Preschool Children and their Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigated interactions between teachers and children at three early childhood centres over a period of 10 weeks. We aimed to explore what aspects of teacher–child interactions influence preschool children’s emotional competence, and how these experiences can be harnessed to improve children’s emotional understanding in everyday situations. It was observed that the quality of these interactions also coloured the emotional atmosphere of preschool classrooms. A naturalistic observational methodology was implemented, and observations were conducted on a time sampling basis by two observers. Results suggest that the settings promoting interactions which consider children’s emotions, and which used more responsive strategies such as emotion coaching were observed to have less aggressive conflict and more often worked towards resolution. These findings highlight the importance of teacher’s strategies when facing children’s emotional communications and the quality of interactions provided to support young children’s emotional competence. Preschoolers would benefit from these emotion learning opportunities. Teachers would benefit from further training in emotional awareness in order to meet children’s emotional needs. Differences identified between the centres have provided interesting possibilities for further research.

Introduction

During the early years learning takes place within the context of a dependant relationship to another human being. It is the quality of this relationship which deeply influences children’s ability to express, understand and regulate emotions as well as influencing the capacity to remain open and curious to new experiences. Early relationships define relationship with the world and especially with learning at different stages of the life span.

Parents play an important role in their children’s development of emotional competence; however some children may have limited exposure in their homes to opportunities which build up those experiences. It is especially in these cases when adult and peer interactions in easily accessible early childhood programmes could provide a significant additional source of learning from emotional experiences. Early childhood teachers potentially play an

important part in the life of young children by providing a framework which may either assist or hinders emotional and mental growth.

A fundamental part of children's emotional development is the acquisition of emotional competence. Emotional competence is usually defined as the ability to understand the nature and causes of emotion, the skills to effectively regulate emotion and to manage emotional expression in a functional way (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). An essential building block of emotional competence is that, across the preschool years children come to understand their own feelings as well as those of others.

This definition contains the main components of young children's emotional competence which are emotional expressiveness, emotion knowledge, and emotion regulation (Denham et al., 2003). Emotional expressiveness is central to emotional competence. Children often develop characteristic emotional responses, and these patterns of expressiveness either lead to positive interactions with age-mates or serve as barriers to successful interactions. Patterns of positive expression of emotions help in the development of healthy relationships, while negative expressions of emotion, interfere with peer relationships (Denham et al., 2003).

Emotional knowledge involves identifying emotional expressions in others and responding to the emotional displays of others in adequate ways. Children who understand the emotion expression of others typically associated with social situations are more likely to respond prosocially to friends and adults. These children are usually regarded as more likeable by peers and teachers (Denham et al., 1990).

Emotional regulation, involves the ability to manage arousal and behaviour during social interaction (Denham, 2006). Young preschoolers often need additional support to acquire the adequate skills to cope with emotional arousal. Both negative and positive emotions can overwhelm the child, often leading to disorganized thinking and problematic behaviour (Ashiabi, 2000). For children who demonstrate difficulty in regulating emotion, their expression of emotion often seems aggressive or intense. This has the potential to interfere with these children's ability to interact with others in socially acceptable ways.

The three components of emotional competence have been linked to social competence in profound ways by developmental researchers (Denham 2003). Consequently, building emotional competence helps children form positive social relationships and positive self-esteem, and is critical for school readiness and ongoing academic success. Social emotional and cognitive learning are interconnected in the development of young children (Suveg, Southam, Goodman & Kendall, 2007).

Beyond children's home environments and interactions with parents and caregivers, the early childhood centre context provides opportunity for teachers to foster emotional health and competence. Every interaction with a child is an opportunity to support the development of emotional skills that will allow children to experience success within the centre and other contexts. As they interact with children, teachers have opportunities to coach children regarding appropriate responses during peer interactions and centre activities, and serve as role models of appropriate expression of emotions (Hyson, 2004). However, teachers are rarely trained in the assessment and promotion of emotional competence. This lack of preparation may cause teachers to overlook or minimize the implications of emotional competence on children's social competence and behaviour within the centre.

Our research focuses on how teachers create an emotional climate that is conducive to learning and support the emotional experience that promotes positive emotional competence in young children. We were also interested in the ability of teachers to generate synchronous

relationships with young children that allow emotional competence to develop through language and other cognitive processes. These two aspects are inter-linked, in that the general atmosphere allows teachers to be more mindful, less reactive, and more strategic in responding to children's emotion. The first phase of our research project is summarised in this paper.

The objective of the present project was to describe these interactions in order to extract naturally occurring learning opportunities that can be taught to teachers to support the emotional competence in children. We also aimed to identify the presence of strategies used by teachers during these interactions which usually aim to reduce behaviour problems in early childhood centres.

Our purpose was to explore:

1. What aspects of teacher-child interactions may influence preschool children's emotional competence?
2. How might preschool teachers respond to children's emotional communications and what strategies they use?
3. The relation between teacher-child interactions and children's emotional conflict and resolution in ECE centres.

Method

Sample

Participants were 60 preschoolers (ages 3 to 5) and 12 early childhood teachers from three early childhood centres in the Wellington region.

Design

We conducted a natural experiment by selecting three different preschool programmes that differed in style and atmosphere. We carried out 10 weeks of naturalistic observations, recording through detailed narratives all events that took place that might be judged as emotional in tone or content. We divided the streams of behaviour in these complex ecologies into events. An event could be a child-child interaction or a teacher-child interaction. Typically, events had initiating stimuli (something happens) some expression of emotion, and had some kind of ending of the event (such a full resolution of the disagreement).

Two observers were encouraged to adopt a literal and factual method of presenting their observations, using everyday language closed to the immediate reality of the situations. Events were recorded in enough detail to capture the essence of what transpired, but with as little interpretation as possible. They wrote their observational report immediately after the observational visit was finished. This method was created by Esther Bick (1964) and has been traditionally implemented as part of Psychodynamic Psychotherapy clinical training and infant observation at the Tavistock Clinic in London and it is judged as a non intrusive method when the focus of the study is on emotions and interactions of feelings (Rustin, 1995).

For most observations a second observer was present and thus narratives could be compared to confirm adequate reliability. After 10 weeks of observations, the data were assembled and read thoroughly, comparing the reports of events recorded for reliability purposes.

Procedure

Following the approval from Massey University Human Ethics Committee, written consent was obtained from children (through their parents) and from teachers. The majority of the parents returned their consent and one centre had a 100% response rate. Only the children whose permission was granted were observed during this study. After an initial period of observation, teachers were shown examples of the events recorded and these were discussed with them.

For the analysis of data, all the observations and notes were compiled, and emotionally relevant content was highlighted in the text and comments made in the margins. Events that contained any emotionally relevant child-teacher interactions, and strategies used by teachers in the form of behaviours embedded within the interactions, were highlighted. Common themes were identified and comparisons and contrasts between different incidents and the different centres were also examined as a way of finding incipient themes. Patterns began to appear and two types of information were identified and selected (interactions and strategies). Portions of raw data were extracted as exemplars of the themes. A reliability process in a group situation was conducted to examine the accuracy of correspondence between categories and examples. The categorized qualitative data was then quantified. Frequencies of interactions and teachers' strategies together with other salient variables were compared to identify differences between centres. Pseudonyms were used to prevent the identification of individual children and participant centres.

Definitions

Interactions. Interactions are events that clearly involved both the teacher and the child in a joint activity involving reciprocal actions.

Strategies. Specific strategies used by teachers to manage emotional situations. Three types of strategies were evident: preventive, responsive, and reactive.

Routines Specific activities introduced each day, or the usual sequence for a set of activities, such as washing hands before snack time, or going outside to plant seeds, or doing an art project, or putting away one's play materials before sitting in a circle to hear a story being read.

Results

Overall Observation of Each Centre

Setting 1 provided a structured preschool environment following a Montessori philosophy. The teachers in the centre remained stable from week to week. The children's behaviour was observed to be orderly and cooperative. They were normally engaged in clearly defined teacher led activities and there was an overall sense of calmness. For example as the children headed out to play, they put on their gumboots without direction from the teachers. They used the garden tools correctly and returned them to their proper place when they had finished. The garden offered much for the children to do. Animal habitats (guinea pigs, chickens, birds, mice) and a compost garden had been set up and the children helped manage this.

"The teacher was sitting on the couch with a group of kids. Carol wanted to sit on the couch next to Anissa but there was a boy sitting in the space. She began to cry. The teacher rubbed her back, explaining to her that there was a space on the other side of the boy, next to her. The girl didn't move

and continued crying. The teacher changed her tactic and asked the boy if he could tell if his friend was upset, the boy nodded. The teacher suggested that to make her feel better he could move into the empty space so that Carol could sit next to Anissa. The boy was happy to move and Carol climbed onto the couch”

Setting 2 provided childcare primarily for parents in employment. The children were usually engaged in free play and craft activities. Children’s interactions occurred spontaneously during play and activities were usually led by the children and supported by adults, with the exception of established group routines (singing and story telling) and meal times. They were rarely engaged in structured learning tasks. Normally there were 4 to 5 teachers present at any one time and a high turnaround of different teaching staff was noticed during the observational period.

“There were approximately 10 children playing in a large playground area. Two teachers were around the swings area helping children to swing. Robby was holding a toy shovel and making a pile of sand. He shouted loudly to a girl nearby “this is your birthday cake Melanie”. Another boy tried to snatch the shovel from him. He protested loudly saying “leave it alone,” pushing the boy backwards, trying to keep the shovel. The teacher interrupted what she was doing and came over to the boys. She asked them firmly “What’s going on?” Robby said “I got it first.” The teacher said “This is not the way that children that are nearly five are supposed to behave. Play nicely.” She then turned her gaze back towards the swings area, and Robby carried on shovelling on his own.”

Setting 3 provided a preschool environment with a number of teachers and other adults present, but in which teachers and children interacted mostly during play and in the garden area. A few teachers led learning tasks which were usually games within small groups and individual story reading. Meals and sleeping times were structured routines. Teachers were warm and welcoming; however aggressive conflict on the part of the children was not uncommon. Teachers tended to offer more physical contact (e.g. hugs). There was little turnover of teaching staff with the same teachers being present for most of the observational period.

“The children were playing inside of a plastic pool with coloured balls. One of the teachers was close by, looking at the group of children jumping and coordinating turns to enter the pool. The children were coming in and out regardless of the teacher’s attempts to keep order. Jason hit Tama, knocking him down on the floor. Tama cried and the teacher approached him and offered her hand to help him up. She asked him what part of his body was hurting. Tama pointed to his knee. The teacher rubbed his knee softly saying “You’re all right,” patting him on his back, and encouraging him to come back to the pool. Tama went back inside and looked for Jason and started hitting him repeatedly. Jason protested loudly to Tama but said nothing to the teacher. The teacher spotted the conflict and called Tama back to her. She said “It was an accident, Jason did not mean to hurt you...go and apologise.” Tama went back inside the pool without apologising and continued jumping”.

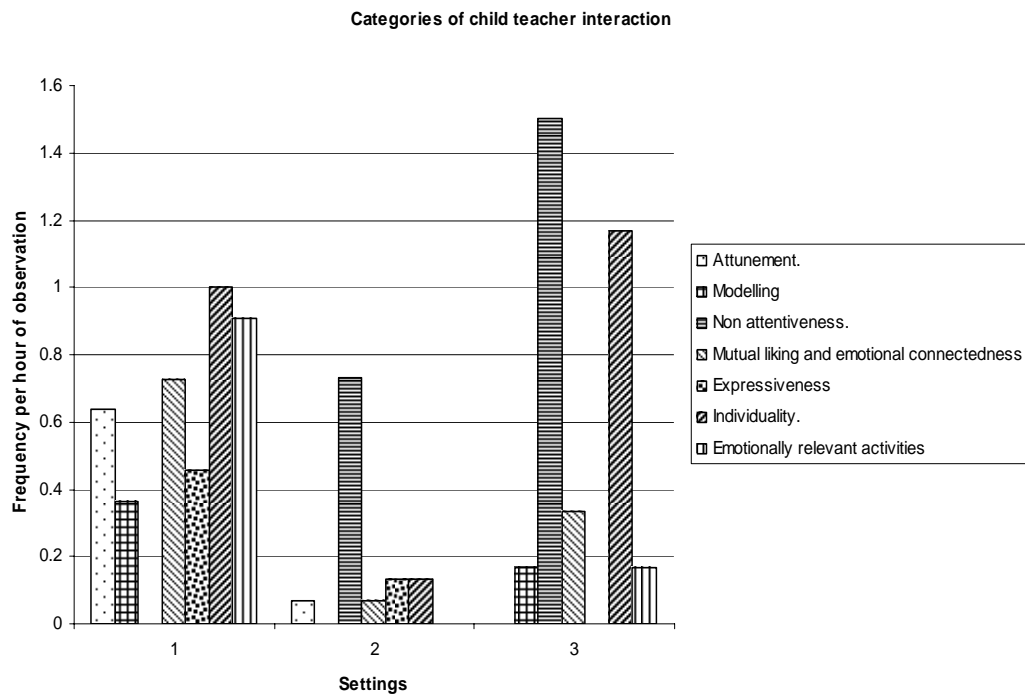
Frequency of Identified Interactions

The results show a difference in the frequency of interactions depending on the setting.

In Setting 1, the most frequent teacher-child interaction observed was individuality. In this setting teachers were more attentive at acknowledging specific personality and cultural features in the children. They were also often engaged in interactions that encouraged modelling, attunement, and expressiveness (individual style of emotional response). Emotionally relevant activities were also commonly observed in this setting.

In Setting 2, the most predominant teacher-child interaction was non attentiveness. Children and teachers tended to pay less attention towards emotionally relevant episodes, and often overlooked their importance. Teachers and children were observed to be sporadically engaged in interactions which supported emotional understanding, such as individuality, expressiveness, and emotional connectedness.

In Setting 3, the most common interaction observed was also non attentiveness of emotional events or incidents; however, they frequently valued and honoured children's individuality, especially in relation to cultural differences and art products. Contrasting to Setting 1, Setting 3 showed an absence of interactions that encourage emotional expressiveness and attunement, which describes the encouragement of affective awareness and receptivity to others.



Teachers' Strategies

There were three broad types of strategies identified during the observational period. Strategies used to prevent the outburst and escalation of potentially emotional incidents, strategies used in reaction to an emotional event, and responsive mindful strategies used in response to emotional or potential emotional conflict.

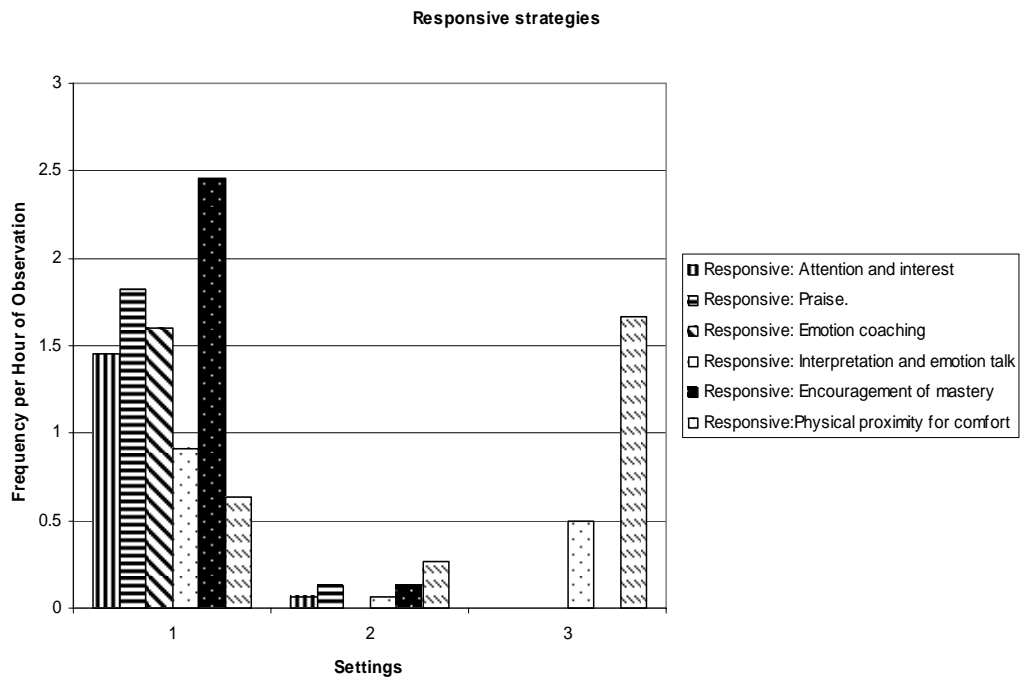
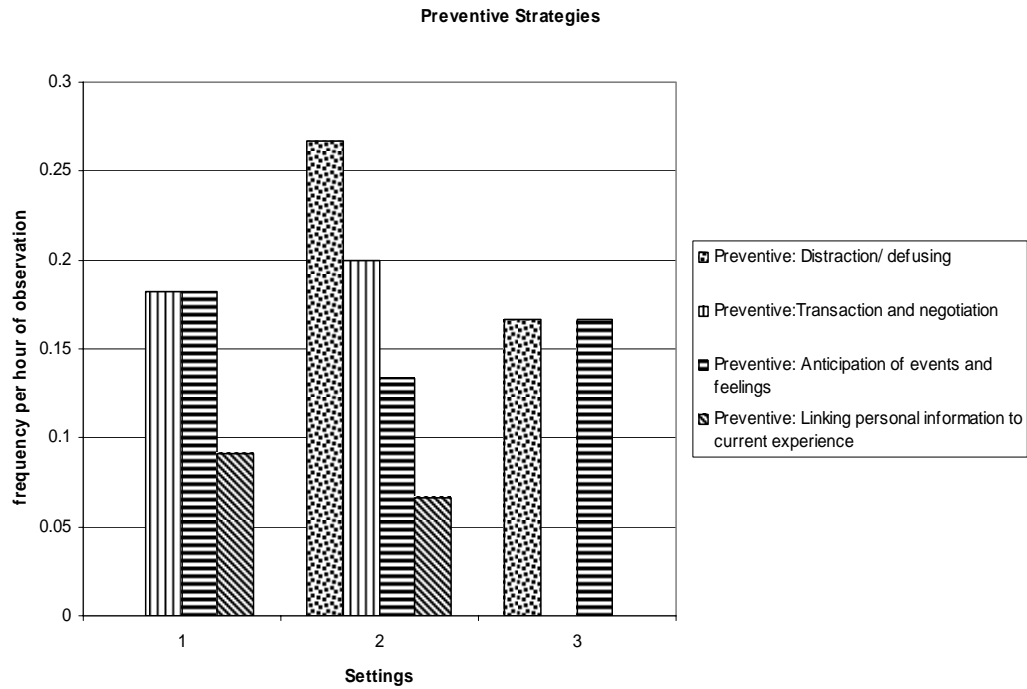
The observed settings showed a diverse implementation of these strategies. Predominantly, Setting 1 used more responsive strategies such as attention, praise, emotion coaching, emotion talk, encouragement of mastery and physical proximity for comfort.

Emotion coaching and encouragement of mastering were the most frequent strategies observed each hour of observation. Only one type of reactive strategy was observed in this setting, and it was control by direct commands. However its frequency was very low. Preventive strategies such as transaction and negotiation, anticipation of events, and feelings and linking personal information to current experience were also frequently observed in Setting 1.

Teachers in Setting 2, showed high frequency of reactive strategies, predominantly control by direct commands and control by physical actions (e.g. physically removing the child or the object involved in emotional conflict). Distraction as a preventive strategy appeared very frequently in this setting. It was often used to divert attention from an object or situation. In Setting 2, and as opposed to Setting 1, there were a lower frequency of responsive strategies and non emotion coaching observed during the observational period.

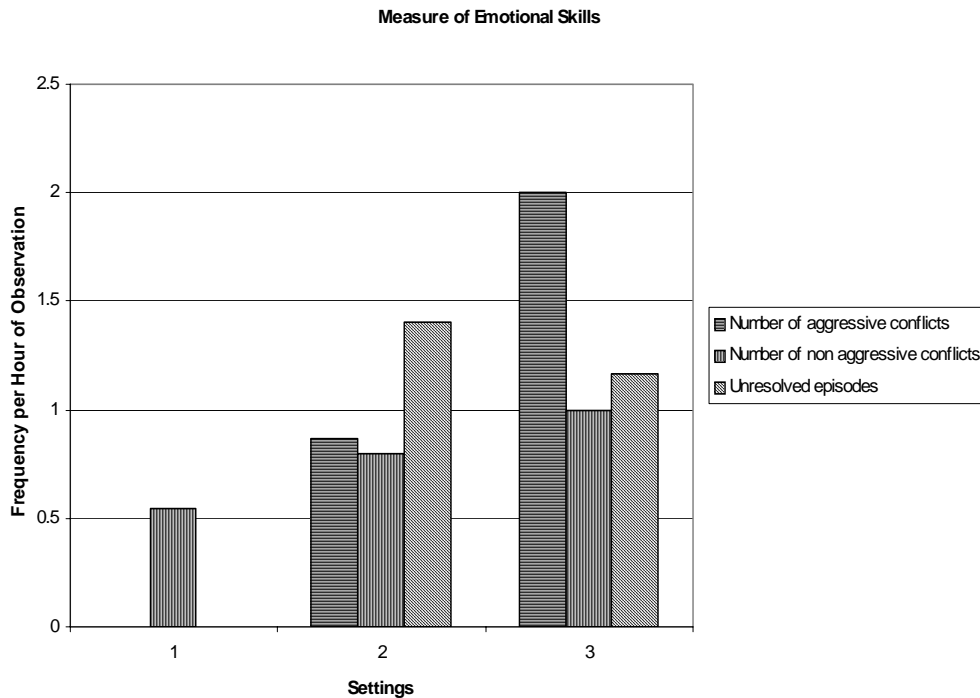
In Setting 3, teachers relied mainly on responsive strategies, such as physical proximity to comfort children affected by emotional conflict. Preventive strategies, such distraction and anticipation of events and feelings, were less frequently observed in Setting 3. Control by direct commands was mostly used as a reactive strategy.

These findings are illustrated in the two graphs on the next page.



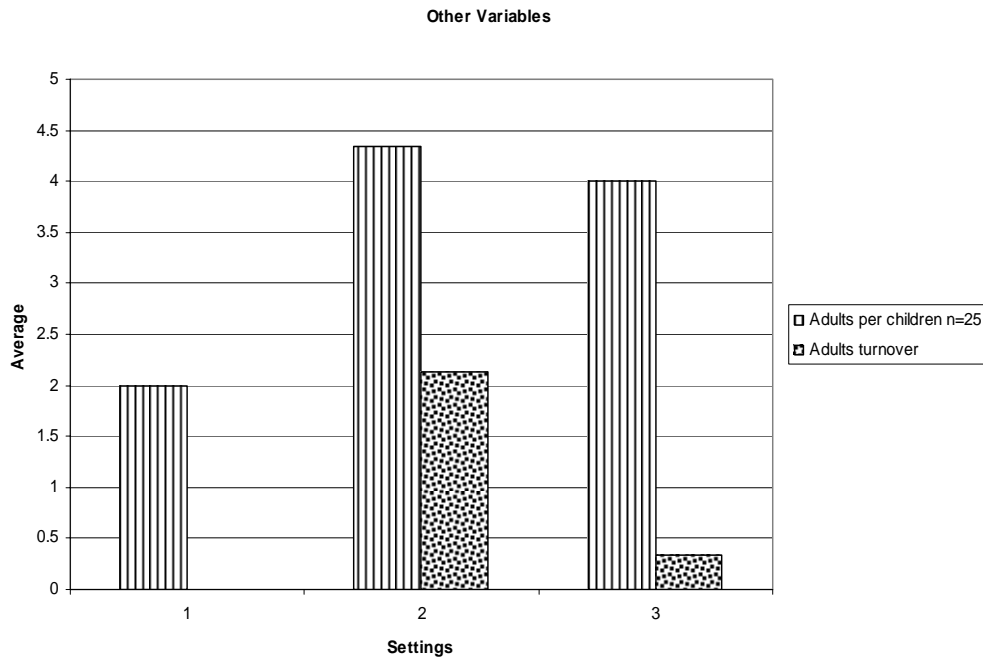
Frequencies of Other Variables

Setting 1 presented a lower number of non-aggressive conflicts in comparison with Setting 2 and 3 (see the graph below). There were no episodes of aggressive conflict, and there were no occurrences of unresolved incidents recorded during the observational period. In Setting 2, aggressive and non aggressive conflict was recorded at a higher frequency, most of them being left unresolved. Setting 3 also showed a high frequency of aggressive conflict compared with non aggressive conflict. However, teachers showed some attempts to encourage resolution.



Number of Adults and Staff Turn-Over

The average adult-child ratio in the three observed settings was another noticeable variable during the observation period (see the graph on the following page). Setting 1 maintained the same number of teachers during the observation period, and no staff changes were observed. Setting 2 had the highest average of adults per children during the observation period, and showed the highest turnover of staff members of the three settings. Setting 3 maintained a constant number of adults per children, and showed low numbers of staff changes during the observation.



Discussion

The results from this observational study suggest that the centre 1 which promoted interactions, which considered children's emotions and which used more responsive strategies such as emotion coaching, encouraging of mastery, expressiveness and emotion talk, showed less frequency of aggressive conflict and, interestingly, had fewer adults involved in the teaching and care of the children.

Centres adopting non-attention as a predominant form of interaction tended to have more aggressive conflicts without coming to a resolution. Teachers in these centres were observed to rely on responsive strategies such physical proximity to contain and manage children's emotions and showed most frequent use of reactive and preventive strategies to regulate children emotions. There was a significant variation between the quality of child-adult interactions and strategies used by teachers across the three observed centres. Each environment had very unique cultural traits which seemed enriched and influenced by the individual sensitivity of teachers and distinctive group dynamics. Because of the small scale of this study generalizations cannot be made, however exploratory relationships between predominant interactions, strategies and salient behaviours were possible to be compared in this study.

Early childhood centres can provide a rich environment for promoting emotional competence and thus preventing the development of behaviour problems in young children. This can be achieved through a combination of appropriate emotional climates, emotionally sensitive interactions, and explicit strategies for using everyday emotional situations as learning opportunities. However, these conditions will not emerge spontaneously if the focus

of teachers is solely on using strategies for behaviour management and/or the curriculum. The results reported here suggest that explicit training in emotional awareness could help teachers develop their 'emotional intelligence' skills to support children's emotional development.

A more complex behavioural analysis of patterns of emotional interactions in early childhood centres is required if we are going to be able to adjust some of these interactions to enhance emotional competence in children attending early childhood centres.

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Ian M. Evans is a Professor of Psychology at Massey University, and the founder of CHERUBS Lab. His research interests include the integration of to schools and families and the possibilities of prevention. He developed Te Āniwaniwa: Warming up the classroom emotional environment, a research project supported by a Marsden grant on the emotional atmosphere of the primary school classrooms in the prevention of school-related behavioural problems.

Fiona Parkes studied psychology and since then she has worked as a research assistant in CHERUBS lab and the School of Psychology at Victoria University. Fiona is also part of the Te Āniwaniwa project.