

# The Effect of Teacher-child Relationships on School Adjustment and Social Competence after The Covid-19 at the Preschool Children

*This research has been conducted to examine the relationship between teacher-child relationships school adjustment and social competence variables after Covid-19. In total of 414 preschool children (216 boys, 198 girls), and their teachers participated in the study. Preschool teachers completed three questionnaires: The Student-Teacher Relationship Scale, the Social Competence and Behaviour Evaluation Scale (SCBE-30), and the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment. The relational survey method was used in this study. The results of this study there is a significantly positive relationship between the level of teacher-child closeness sub-dimension and social competency, school liking, classroom participation, and self-directiveness scores. In addition, there is a significantly negative relationship between the level of teacher-child closeness sub-dimension and anger/aggression, anxiety/introversion, and school avoidance scores. In other results, there was found to be a significant positive relationship between the level of teacher-child conflict sub-dimension and anger-aggression and anxiety/introversion scores. On the other hand, a negative correlation was observed between the level of teacher-child conflict sub-dimension and social competency, school liking, classroom participation, school avoidance, and self-directiveness scores. According to the results, levels of teacher-child closeness predicted the levels of social competency, school liking, classroom participation, and self-directiveness. According to the results, levels of teacher-child closeness predicted the levels of social competency, school liking, classroom participation, and self-directiveness. Also, levels of teacher-child conflict predicted the levels of anger aggression, anxiety/introversion, and school avoidance.*

**Keywords:** Teacher-child relationships, school adjustment, social competence, Covid-19, preschool.

## Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the world (Prime et al., 2020). Indeed, many countries around the world have taken unprecedented steps to prevent and contain the spread of the virus. Most countries have closed schools and early childhood education and care institutions, playgrounds, businesses, restaurants, and entertainment centers to reduce physical distance. Globally, school closures have affected at least 1.4 billion children (Cluver et al., 2020; Robertson, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). School closures particularly deeply affected children, as schools serve as an essential mental health support system for many children (Golberstein et al., 2020). During the pandemic, children were unable to receive face-to-face education and could not participate in group activities or hands-on activities during distance learning sessions.

Considering the scope of individuals affected by COVID-19, children are more likely to be harmed by crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic and

the repercussions of these crisis experiences than individuals in other developmental periods in terms of their cognitive, social, physical and language development levels (Feinberg et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, children were put at risk for loss of routine with the closure of schools, reduced social contacts, increased behavioral problems (externalizing), and symptoms of depression and anxiety (internalizing) (Bartlett et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2020; Feinberg et al., 2021; Giannotti et al., 2021; Khoury et al., 2021; Waller et al., 2021; Yeasmin et al., 2020). Quarantine and confinement at home reduced children's social encounters with their teachers, peers and other adults due to their inability to visit their school, friends or relatives frequently, affecting their social and emotional behavior (Xiang et al., 2022).

In general, it is observed that the pandemic process affects all social, emotional, and behavioral development areas of children (UNICEF, 2020). There are studies on children and families in terms of the effects of the Covid-19 process (Feinberg et al., 2021; Spinelli et al., 2020). However, there are almost no studies investigating how and how children's relationships with their teachers and peers change during this period when they are separated from school. However, with the re-opening of schools and the transition to face-to-face education, it is very important to understand the reactions and emotions of children correctly in order to meet their needs well (Jiao et al., 2020). In addition, short-term exposure to crisis situations such as pandemics, earthquakes, etc. can be overcome with support conditions, but it leaves children vulnerable to any disadvantages that may be experienced at a later stage. Therefore, a better understanding of the long-term effects of quarantine would be beneficial for children's development. In this context, the main purpose of this study is to reveal the effects of the pandemic in terms of children's school adaptation and social competencies development after the quarantine process in the context of teacher-child relationships after the pandemic.

According to the bio-ecological model explaining environmental factors in a child's development, a child's development is affected by experiences in a series of nested systems that interact (Sabol, & Pianta, 2012). These systems range from the microsystem (the immediate context), which includes the child's experiences with his or her immediate environment, such as family, classroom, and teacher, to the macrosystem (the distant context), which is the broader environment that includes cultural values, laws and policies. The microsystem comprises interactions with the immediate environment (family, teachers, and peers) that most strongly influence a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 2006; Cross, & Hong, 2012; Degol, & Bachman, 2015; Nasiopoulou, Williams, Sheridan, & Hansen, 2019). From the perspective of the bio-ecological model, the positive dynamics between teacher and child are an essential close context that facilitates learning and development. Teachers provide children with a safe and supportive learning environment and support children's engagement in effective pedagogical practices that influence children's learning processes (Lippard, et al., 2018). One of the most critical components of a supportive environment is the consistent and secure relationship between teacher and child (Pianta, 1999; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997).

## 1 *Teacher- Child Relationships*

2  
3 The teacher-child relationship is defined as a form of interpersonal  
4 relationship that occurs during the interaction between preschool teachers and  
5 children (Ainsworth, 1991). Theories of teacher-child interactions and various  
6 studies testing these theories show that preschool teachers have a significant  
7 impact on children's development (Ansari et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2018). As  
8 children transition from home to preschool, the teacher's role is not only in the  
9 context of the child's cognitive development, but also has an impact on their social  
10 development (Buettner et al. 2016; Egert, Dederer, & Fukkink, 2020; Lippard, La  
11 Paro, Rouse, & Crosby, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020; Plotka, 2019; Rojas &  
12 Abenavoli, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2018).

13 According to attachment theorists, positive teacher-child relationships provide  
14 children with a secure base that helps them feel safe while exploring the  
15 environment and a safe haven where children can seek support and comfort from  
16 their teachers during stressful times (Pianta et al., 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Zhu  
17 et al., 2023). In contrast, negative teacher-child relationships tend to evoke feelings  
18 of insecurity in children and therefore prevent them from exploring the  
19 environment. As a result, children who share positive relationships with teachers  
20 tend to be competent and adaptive at school, whereas negative teacher-child  
21 relationship experiences can harm children's school functioning and well-being  
22 (Pianta et al., 2003; Zhu et al., 2023).

23 Researchers often assess the levels of closeness and conflict in teacher-child  
24 relationships (Pianta, 2001; Saral, & Acar, 2021; Settanni et al., 2015). In the  
25 current study, the teacher-child relationship was conceptualized within the scope  
26 of these two basic dimensions. Closeness reflects relational security, and children  
27 who have positive teacher-child relationships characterized by open communication  
28 based on warmth and affection tend to exhibit fewer internalizing and externalizing  
29 problems (Baardstu et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2016; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman,  
30 2003; Wu et al., 2015). A positive teacher-child relationship can serve as a  
31 protective factor, allowing children to feel safe in the classroom and enjoy school  
32 more (Hamre, & Pianta, 2001; Valiente et al., 2008). Conflict is linked to relational  
33 insecurity and reflects the degree of disharmony, argumentation and negativity  
34 between teachers and children (Pianta et al., 2003; Roorda et al., 2014). Teacher-  
35 child conflict in preschool years can affect children's social skills (Graves, &  
36 Howes, 2011) and school adaptation (Birch, & Ladd, 1997). It may cause the child  
37 to develop negative feelings and attitudes towards school, withdraw from school,  
38 have adjustment problems at school, and develop behavioral problems (Acar et al.,  
39 2021; Acar et al., 2022; Coplan et al., 2017; Hamre, & Pianta, 2001). Negative  
40 interactions have been shown to be ineffective in helping children regulate their  
41 emotions and control behaviors (Plotka, 2019; Zhu et al., 2023). For example,  
42 Hartz et al. (2017) found that positive and close relationships between teachers and  
43 preschool children are associated with peer interactions. Research results indicated  
44 that warm, responsive, and supportive teacher-child interactions encourage  
45 children to use social-emotional skills (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2020; Colwell &  
46 Lindsey, 2003).

## *School Adjustment*

Adjustment is the process of finding a balance between children's developing personalities and the increasing demands of their environment (Saraç, Gülay Ogelman, & Yıldırım, 2023). For preschool children, getting used to the preschool environment means actively participating in the process, enjoying school and establishing healthy relationships (Birch, & Ladd, 1997).

Adjustment to preschool includes the acquisition of academic readiness skills, behavioral regulation at school, and social interactions with teachers and peers (Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997; Yoleri, 2015). This adjustment process is important for children's development (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2010; Wu et al., 2015). Children who adapt effectively are more likely to be accepted by their peers (Santos et al., 2020; Shehu, 2019; van der Wilt, van der Veen, van Kruistum et al., 2019). In contrast, poor adjustment to preschool may set the stage for further social problems and school failure (Karaman, 2022; Yoleri, 2015).

An important factor in children's school adjustment is their relationship with their teachers (Birch, & Ladd, 1997; Hamre, & Pianta, 2001). A friendly teacher who communicates with children can help support children's adjustment to school. However, problems or miscommunication between the teacher and the child may cause the child to feel lonely at school, have negative feelings towards school and want to stay away from school (Birch, & Ladd, 1997).

Some research results reflect the delay in children's behavioral, social and academic adaptation caused by school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lehman et al., 2021; López-Bueno et. al., 2021). Research by Gordon and Burgess (2020) in 46 countries indicated that there were some negative effects on children associated with school closures. Returning to preschool at the end of such a period is expected to bring some problems and negatively affect children's adaptation. In this case, preschool children may be more prone to maladjustment when they return to preschool. Preschoolers returning to kindergarten may be unfamiliar with the daily routines, activities, peers and teachers of preschool and may not be able to adjust to the situation. It is thought that the fact that children have been away from their peers, teachers and the school atmosphere for a very long time may cause them to experience new adjustment problems when they return to school. It is important to identify the problems that may be experienced in the new period in advance in order to reduce the negativities to be encountered by preschool children who have been away from face-to-face education for a long time. Based on this, the aim of this study was to obtain information about preschool children's adaptation process to school when face-to-face education is started.

## *Social Competencies*

Teachers play a key role in helping children develop social competencies (Goble, Sandilos, & Pianta, 2019; Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013; Schmitt et al., 2018). Since positive child-teacher relationships have a strong impact on children's social competencies development, there is a strong need to develop these

relationships, especially from preschool period, when children come together for the first time with adults other than their primary caregivers (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003); Sabol & Pianta 2012). Therefore, teachers can be seen as a reference point for building positive relationships and initiating a stronger communication process (DeJames, 2001).

As in the bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), positive dynamics between teacher and child mean that the more supportive relationships teachers have with children, the greater their ability to inhibit impulsive reactions, and to change and maintain their behavior (O'Connor, 2010; Rudasil et al., 2020). Children with developed social competence have positive interactions with teachers and enjoy school and activities (Soininen, Pakarinen, & Lerkkanen, 2023; Loomis, 2021). On the other hand, children with inattention and impulsivity problems when they start school experience more conflicts with teachers throughout preschool (Li, & Lau, 2019).

Research shows that anger, anxiety, aggression, and introversion are among the factors that affect children's social competence in the process of developing social competence (Hanish et al., 2004). For example, anger-aggression shows externalizing behaviors such as challenging adults, acting maladaptive and aggressive, whereas anxiety-introversion shows internalizing symptoms such as children's unhappy and depressed feelings and showing shyness in a group (La Freniere & Dumas, 1996).

When assessing the development of children's social competencies, two general distinctions are made for social-emotional problems: externalizing problem behavior and/or internalizing problem behavior (Lilienfeld, 2003; Stone et al., 2015). Externalizing conduct problems are manifested in externalizing behaviors, including aggression and hyperactivity (Liu, 2004), while internalizing conduct problems are characterized by anxiety and depression, fear, social withdrawal, and somatic complaints (Göbel et al., 2016).

An increase in social competence supports positive social skills and prevents situations such as withdrawal and anxiety (Gür et al., 2015, Pekdoğan, & Kanak, 2016). Research shows that an increase in social competence scores positively affects attitudes and behaviors towards peers (Balluerka et al., 2023; Shehu, 2019). Juntilla, Vauras, Niemi, and Laakkonen (2012) found that social competence skills predicted anxiety and introversion in children and adolescents. Wichstrom et. al. (2013) found an inverse relationship between social competence and anxiety-introversion in their study with 1000 children.

Research on the effects of lockdown on preschool children's social competencies found that internalizing and externalizing problems increased significantly. Children are more likely to experience higher rates of depression and anxiety symptoms during and after mandatory lockdown than before the pandemic (Liu et al., 2021; Qin et al., 2021).

Children cooperate and learn to work together during play with other children in preschools (Howard & McInnes, 2013; Storli, & Sandseter, 2019) and both express and listen to their peers' views and ideas (Fantuzzo, Mendez, & Tighe, 1998). Interaction with other children supports many aspects of social development, and restrictions severely interrupt these opportunities for interaction.

The pandemic has undoubtedly affected children, causing an increase in their anxiety and stress levels (Mochida et al., 2021). The reduction or complete disappearance of children's social stimulation, such as the inability to communicate face-to-face with peers and teachers, negatively affected their psychological health and development of social skills during the COVID-19 pandemic (Araújo et al., 2020; Egan et al., 2021). Decreased social relationships due to restrictions during the pandemic increased children's negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and difficulty in controlling their emotions and behaviors (Maftai, Merlici, & Roca, 2022; Wijaya et al., 2021). Teachers stated that upon returning to school, children's previously acquired social skills such as sharing, empathy, and self-expression decreased compared to before. In fact, although children have grown older, the social deficit seems to be reflected in their development. In parallel with this, many studies conducted in different countries have found decreases in children's social competencies compared to before the pandemic (Idoiaga et al., 2020; Jiao et al., 2020).

The effects of pandemics are likely to vary developmentally. While many studies have examined the impact of the pandemic on children, limited research to date has explored its effects in early childhood, a key developmental period (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Li et al., 2022). The current research aimed to investigate the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the transitional experiences of children starting face-to-face education at school in the academic year following the first national lockdown in Türkiye. It is thought that this study may guide future studies on preschool children's teacher relationships, social competencies and school adjustment with the restart of face-to-face education during COVID 19.

The aim of the study is to determine the predictive effect of preschool children's relationships with their teachers on their school adjustment and social competencies during the COVID 19 process. The sub-objectives of the research are as follows:

1. Is there a statistically significant relationship between teacher-child relationship and children's school adjustment and social competence skills?
2. Does teacher-child relationship predict children's cooperative participation, school avoidance, self-management, and liking school at a statistically significant level?
3. Does the teacher-child relationship predict children's social competence, anger-aggression and anxiety-introversion at a statistically significant level?

## Methodology

### *Model*

This study used a relational survey method to examine the predictive power of children's socio-demographic variables and TCR subscales on their BSR skills (Chirstensen et al., 2015).

### *Participants*

The study group in the research comprised 414 children (216 boys, 198 girls), ages 5-6, enrolled in public preschools operating in the District of Karabağlar, Province of İzmir. There were six public preschools in Karabağlar district. All of the schools accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Our study was conducted simultaneously in six public preschools based on voluntary participation. Among the assessment instruments given to teachers regarding 700 children, 414 were filled correctly. Thus, 414 children were included in the study.

The average age of the children was five years, five months, and the maximum was six years, one month. All the children showed normal development characteristics according to the teachers' views. None of the children participated in inclusive applications. All of the children live with their families.

On the other hand, all the teachers involved to study were women, ranging in age from 25 to 54, with teaching experience ranging from three to nineteen years; teachers were graduates from four-year universities, having been awarded bachelor's degrees.

### *Data Collection Instruments*

Data were collected with the Personal Information Form, Student-Teacher Relationship Scale-Short Form (STRS-S), The Social Competence and Behaviour Evaluation Scale, short form (SCBE-30) and the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment.

### *Personal Information Form*

Questions related to such as age, gender, teachers' year of experience included in the form developed by the researchers.

*Student-Teacher Relationship Scale-Short Form* (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta 2009; Pianta, 2001) STRS-SF is a Likert scale consisting of 15 self-report items. Each item in the scale is coded between 1 (never applies) and 5 (always applies) (Pianta, 2001). The scale examines how the teacher perceives the student's behaviours and the student's thoughts about himself/herself, by taking into consideration the relationship formed with each student. It consists of two subscales which include closeness and conflict dimensions. Closeness subscale includes attending to needs of the child and being responsive, being involved in positive emotional interactions with the child as much as possible (e.g., "I share an

affectionate, warm relationship with this child”). The conflict subscale includes negative behaviours the teacher perceives concerning the child and negative emotional interactions (e.g., “This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other”). It is stated that, while evaluating the student–teacher relationship effectively, it also provides support for the identification of teachers who are experiencing problems in communication or interaction and who are going through occupational burnout (Pianta 2001). The adaptation of the short form used within the current study into Turkish has been completed by Şahin Ası and Ocak Karabay (2018). Its Cronbach's alpha values were .82 for the total score, .84 for the conflict subscale, and .76 for the closeness subscale. For the current study, Cronbach's alpha values of were .76 for the closeness subscale and .90 for the conflict subscale.

*The Social Competence and Behaviour Evaluation Scale, short form* (SCBE-30) (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). This 30-item scale for children in the 30-78 months age range is composed of three subscales: two distinct patterns of maladaptive behaviour (the Anger-Aggression or AA and Anxiety-Withdrawal, or AW subscales) and one adaptive pattern (the Social Competence, or SC, subscale). The scale was completed by the children's teacher. The AA subscale reflects children's angry, aggressive, and irritable behaviours. Children were evaluated as angry and aggressive who showed negative effects and was unable to regulate their negative emotions. The AW sub-scale is composed of items that measure dependent, anxious, and isolated behaviours. These children spend much of their time alone and unoccupied and demonstrate little interest in group activities. Finally, the SC subscale includes items used to assess positive social interaction (e.g., can negotiate solutions, works easily in groups) as well as prosocial behaviour/empathy toward their peers at school (e.g., cooperates, shares toys, comforts others). Socially competent children show positive affect in their interactions and are well appreciated by their peers and teachers. Responses were given on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 6 (always). Çorapçı, Aksan, Arslan-Yalçın and Yağmurlu adapted the scale into Turkish in 2010. The Cronbach's alpha value averages for the original version of the scale were .87 for the SC, .84 for the AW, and .88 for the AA respectively (LaFreniere et al., 2002). The Cronbach's alpha for the current study were .93 for the SC, and .86 for the AW, .91 for the AA.

*Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment* for 5-6 years of developed by Ladd, Kochenderfer, and Coleman in 1996 designed to evaluate preschool children's school adjustment. Scale included 25 items and four subscales: school avoidance, school liking, cooperative participation, self-directiveness. Teachers completed the items using a three-point scale: doesn't apply, applies sometimes, and certainly applies (Birch & Ladd, 1997). The internal consistency scores for the original version of the scale across measurement occasions exceed .75 (Birch & Ladd, 1997). The Turkish version of the TRSSA was adapted by Önder and Gülay (2010). The internal consistency, as reported by Önder and Gülay (2010), for the whole scale was .70. In the current study, the internal reliability of the whole scale was found at .71. and the internal consistency coefficient of the subscale school liking was .85, the internal consistency coefficient of the subscale cooperative



participation was .92, the internal consistency coefficient of the subscale school avoidance was .83, and the internal consistency coefficient of the subscale self-directiveness was .81.

#### *Data Collection Process*

School administrations were contacted to find out whether there were children who attended school when their schools were closed due to the pandemic and who continued to attend the same school and teacher after the schools opened, and these children and their teachers were included in the study. Therefore, it took longer than expected to determine the sample.

The study was initiated after the approval of the institutional ethics committee at IDU and the Ministry of National Education in Turkey. After obtaining ethical approval, the researchers explained the purpose of the study to the school principals who agreed to participate in the study. For schools that agreed to participate, the aim and confidentiality of the study were explained to parents and children and informed consent was obtained from parents and children for their participation in the study. Parents and children were informed that participation was voluntary and that they would not encounter any disadvantages in case of non-participation. Children were included in the study only after their parents gave written informed consent and the children themselves gave their consent to participate in the study. The measurement tools were completed by preschool teachers. Preschool teachers were informed about the research and data collection tools by the researchers before the implementation. The measurement tools were completed by the teachers for each child. Teachers were asked to fill out the scales by considering children's behaviors before and after the pandemic. Despite all efforts, 414 surveys were found to be filled out completely and accurately, and data analysis was conducted based on this number.

#### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of the data was statistically conducted with SPSS 25 programme. Correlations were tested using the Pearson correlation coefficient. A simple Linear Regression Analysis Technique was performed to determine the predictive effect of the teacher-child relationship on school adjustment and the social competence children'.

### **Findings**

Pearson's correlations were calculated for all study variables (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that there was a significant negative relationship between the teacher-child relationships scale conflict sub-dimension and the social competency ( $r = -.68$ ), school liking ( $r = -.50$ ), classroom participation ( $r = -.74$ ), school avoidance ( $r = -.39$ ), and self-directiveness ( $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ) scores. The significantly positive relationship between teacher-child relationships scale conflict sub-dimension and anger-aggression ( $r = .80$ ) and anxiety/introversion ( $r =$

.39) scores. On the other hand, there was a significantly positive correlation between the teacher-child relationships scale closeness sub-dimension and social competency ( $r = .66$ ), school liking ( $r = .38$ ), classroom participation ( $r = .45$ ), and self-directiveness ( $r = .54$ ), scores. In contrast, there was a statistically significant negative correlation between the teacher-child relationships scale closeness sub-dimension and anger/aggression ( $r = -.29$ ), anxiety/introversion ( $r = -.47$ ), and school avoidance ( $r = -.16$ ) scores.

In Table 2, levels of teacher-child conflict significantly predicted levels of anger/aggression ( $R = .802$ ,  $R^2 = .642$ ,  $F = 744.965$ ), anxiety/introversion ( $R = .389$ ,  $R^2 = .149$ ,  $F = 73.584$ ) and school avoidance ( $R = .388$ ,  $R^2 = .149$ ,  $F = 73.050$ ) levels for children. According to this result, it can be stated that the teacher-child conflict level account for 64% of anger/aggression, 39% of anxiety/introversion, and 15% of school avoidance levels for children.

Table 2 shows that teacher-child closeness levels had a predictive effect on social competency ( $R = .656$ ,  $R^2 = .429$ ,  $F = 311.554$ ), school liking ( $R = .381$ ,  $R^2 = .143$ ,  $F = 70.181$ ), classroom participation ( $R = .451$ ,  $R^2 = .203$ ,  $F = 105.438$ ), and self-directiveness ( $R = .540$ ,  $R^2 = .290$ ,  $F = 169.806$ ) levels for children. According to the result, teacher-child closeness levels predicted 43% of social competency, 14% of school liking, 20% of classroom participation, and 29% of self-directiveness levels for children.

## Discussion

As a result of the study, it was determined that there was a significant relationship between both the conflict and closeness sub-dimensions of the teacher-child relationship and the variables of social competence, anger, anxiety/introversion, classroom participation, school avoidance, self-directiveness, and school liking in children.

As a result of the research, it was determined that there was a significant negative relationship between the conflict sub-dimension of the teacher-child relationship scale and social competence, school liking, classroom participation, school avoidance, and self-directiveness. According to this result, as young children are in conflict with their teachers, the level of decreased social competency, school liking, classroom participation, school avoidance, and self-directiveness. A significant positive relationship was determined between the conflict sub-dimension and the anger-aggression, anxiety/introversion. As the teacher-child relationships scale conflict scores increase, the anger-aggression and anxiety/introversion scores increase. On the other hand, it was determined that there was a significant positive relationship between the closeness sub-dimension of the teacher-child relationship and social competence, school liking, classroom participation, and self-directiveness, and a significant negative relationship between, anger-aggression, anxiety/introversion, and school avoidance. The level of social competency, school liking, classroom participation, and self-directiveness together with an increase in the level of teacher-child relationship closeness increases. The level of the teacher-child relationships scales closeness sub-

dimension decrease together with an increase in the level of anger/aggression, anxiety/introversion, and school avoidance scores. These results show that children's school adjustment levels and social development are affected by whether the teacher-child relationship is conflictual or close.

The anxiety-introversion assessed in the present study is related to problems such as anxiety, depression, withdrawal and low self-esteem. Shy and withdrawn children are often reluctant to interact with teachers (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Based on a systematic review of seven studies focusing on children and adolescents aged 3-18 years, Nearchou et al. (2020) suggested that COVID-19-related conditions such as depression, anxiety, symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder and intense behavioral problems were seen among children in their sample.

According to the result, the conflict sub-dimension of the teacher-child relationship scale significantly predicts the anger/aggression, anxiety/introversion, and school avoidance variables. The results of the study are consistent with existing evidence that problematic behavior in the classroom is one of the strongest predictors of the quality of children's relationships with their teachers (Buyse et al., 2008; Hu et al., 2021). Doumen et al. (2008) found bidirectional relationships between children's aggressive behavior and teacher-child conflict in preschool. Specifically, children who exhibited high levels of aggressive behavior at the beginning of preschool had more conflict with their teachers after 3 months, leading to even more aggressive behavior at the end of the school year. Similarly, Roorda et al. (2014) reported that both children's externalizing and internalizing problems positively predicted their potential conflict levels in their relationships with teachers, and that teacher-child conflict also predicted children's behavior problems. However, Zatto and Høglund (2019) found that children with more externalizing problems experienced more conflict in their relationships with their teachers. Zhang and Nurmi (2012) examined the relationship between teacher-child relationships and the social competence of Chinese preschool children and found that teacher-child closeness positively predicted teacher-rated child social competence and teacher-child conflict negatively predicted child social competence. The aim of the study by Watts and Pattnaik (2022) was to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the social development of 4- and 5-year-old children from the perspectives of teachers and parents. In the study, preschool teachers were asked to describe the impact of school closure on their students' social skills and compare their students' social-emotional skills before and after school closure. In terms of social skills, teachers mentioned "lack of friendships", "lack of peer learning and peer communication", "loss of playtime" and "lack of opportunities to socialize with peers". On the other hand, regarding the impact of school closure on children's emotional skills, teachers reported that children were more fearful and anxious after the pandemic. Teachers pointed out that children exhibited more extroverted behaviors and were more likely to act out, throw tantrums, show aggression and disrespect, and lie. Similarly, according to data from the COPS study, a longitudinal study conducted in Germany, in the second year of the pandemic, general mental health problems, anxiety and depressive symptoms in children and adolescents were still higher than before the pandemic. According to

another comprehensive study examining behavioral problems of children aged 3-13 years at four different time points during Covid, preschoolers and school-age children in December 2021 exhibited higher levels of internalizing problems and post-traumatic stress symptoms compared to March 2020 (Panchal et al., 2021; Pizarro-Ruiz & Ordóñez-Cambor, 2021). These findings are consistent with international studies reporting the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as increased depression, anxiety, suicide, self-harm and other maladaptive behaviors (Adıbelli, & Sümen, 2020; Bignardi et al., 2020). Teachers attribute adjustment difficulties mainly to the fact that children spend too much time with their parents and often lack opportunities to socialize with others (Saraç, Ogelman, & Yıldırım, 2023; Idoiaga et al., 2020). In accordance with the literature, this study emphasizes the long-term effects of the pandemic on children.

As a result of the research, it is understood that the closeness sub-dimension of the teacher-child relationship scale significantly predicts the levels of social competence, school liking, classroom participation, and self-directiveness variables. When children have a warm, close and sincere relationship with their teachers, they will be more positive about liking school and developing positive perceptions about school, and they will feel better at school. On the contrary, children may not want to go to school and may not want to actively participate in the educational process as long as conflict-based, negative relationships develop between teachers and children and closeness is not ensured. A warm and close teacher-child relationship also means that children exhibit fewer behavioral problems and have closer relationships with their peers (Reimers, 2021). As a result of the study conducted by Longobardi et al. (2016), it was determined that the teacher-child relationship is a supportive factor in children's school adjustment. Birch and Ladd (1997) found a negative relationship between a conflicted teacher-child relationship and liking school, while a close teacher-child relationship had a positive relationship with liking school and academic achievement. In a study conducted by Gülay Ogelman, Güngör, and Göktaş (2021) with preschool teachers, the majority of teachers stated that the COVID-19 process would have negative effects on children's school adjustment and social relationships. In addition, teachers stated that behavioral problems may be seen in children during the school adjustment process upon returning to school. The first three problems that were thought to be the most common by the teachers were "Peer relationship problems (aggression, refusal to play, grouping, rejection of peers, etc.)", "Not following the rules", "Constantly talking about COVID-19 or illness".

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

This study, which investigates the effects of lockdown and school closure on preschool children's relationships with their teachers, school adjustment and social competencies, is limited to the observations of preschool teachers. Therefore, the findings reflect the subjective views of the teachers. Future studies must try to include other sources such as children's perspectives and observational data on teacher-child relationships. In this respect, it is important to conduct research that

examines children's school adjustment and social competencies with objective tests. In addition, quantitative studies with larger samples across Türkiye may provide a larger picture of the effects of the lockdown and school closures on teacher-child relationships, school adjustment and social competencies in preschool children in Türkiye. Researchers must use more representative and larger samples in future studies to expand the generalizability of the findings. In addition, longitudinal studies will provide important contributions to the literature in terms of evaluating whether this effect is permanent or not.

It is seen that these children, who stay at home for long periods of time due to lockdowns and isolation, and who are away from the social and emotional support environment offered by preschool education institutions, peers and teachers for a long time, experience trauma from different perspectives. For this reason, it is also important to determine whether teachers carry out compensatory activities for children and whether there are activities to enrich the educational environment to support children more. This study did not take into account variables such as teachers' personality characteristics and children's temperament that may affect teacher-child relationship, children's school adjustment and social competence. In future research, other important aspects such as bonding, teacher and child characteristics must be included.

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