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# Early Childhood Professional's Interpretations of Preschool Children's Acting Out Behaviors in the Classroom

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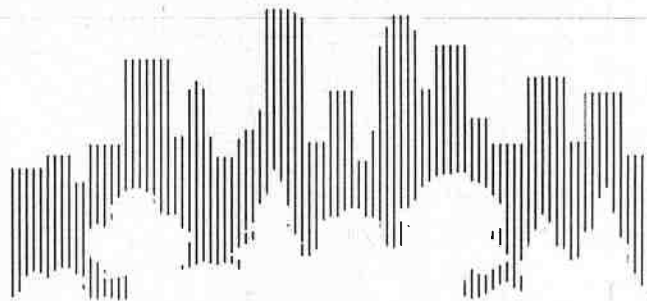
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## MASTERS IN SOCIAL WORK THESIS

Stacey L. D'amico

Early Childhood Professionals' Interpretations  
of Preschool Children's Acting Out Behaviors  
in the Classroom

2000

**MSW**  
**Thesis**

Thesis  
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EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS' INTERPRETATIONS OF PRESCHOOL  
CHILDREN'S ACTING OUT BEHAVIORS IN THE CLASSROOM

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

STACEY L. D'AMICO

Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Social Work

AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

2000

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK  
AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

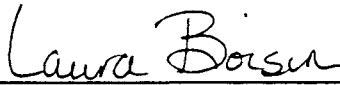
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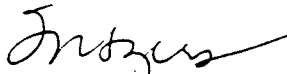
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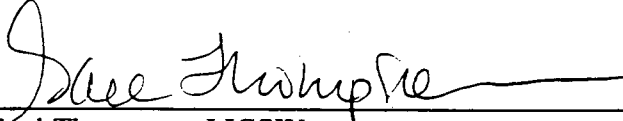
has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for  
the Master of Social Work Degree.

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## ABSTRACT

# EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS' INTERPRETATIONS OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S ACTING OUT BEHAVIORS

## A QUALITATIVE STUDY

STACEY L. D'AMICO

MARCH 27, 2000

This exploratory qualitative study asks early childhood professionals for their interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom setting. A non-probability convenience sample was selected. Six early childhood professionals were interviewed using a face-to-face semi-structured guide. All six participants currently hold teaching positions in early childhood classrooms. Interview questions focused on interpreting children's acting out behaviors as well as intervention methods used in response to this behavior. Responses from participants varied based on their experiences with children who may act out aggressively. Level of training and education as an indicator for varied responses is examined. How teachers interpreted a child's motivation for acting out is discussed. Further implications for social work practice and research within the early childhood field are discussed.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The Introduction chapter begins with a description of the problem including its background, followed by a description of the purpose of the proposed research. The chapter continues on to identify the research question and discuss the significance of the study.

### **Background of the Problem**

If you walk into any child care center today, you will observe children of a variety of ages engaged in play activities that are created by a staff of dedicated individuals with the goal of enhancing the children's ongoing development. You will observe children in an environment that was created with their physical and emotional needs in mind. At first glance, this may all look very normal. There may be much you cannot see.

Is there a preschool anywhere that does not include those who at times feel sad, angry and helpless? Young as children are when they enter school, few can escape the sudden fear of abandonment and the inability to make their feelings known.

There is the frightened or aggressive child we are unable to calm, the isolate who refuses to emerge from hiding, the child too worried to play: We see them in all our classrooms (Paley, 1996, p.vii ).

Preschoolers are changing. They are arriving at preschool carrying not only their small backpacks, holding a special toy or stuffed animal, but also with alarming knowledge of the hardships of life that they, too, are experiencing on a daily basis. "Each child carries

his/her history into the building, and although the children are only 3 and 4 years old, some of their stories are no less frightening than Grimms' Tales" (Koplow, 1996, p. ix). Children are also arriving at preschools with a "precocious knowledge of life issues and experiences that they lack the emotional and cognitive ability to understand and integrate" (Edlefsen & Baird, 1994). It is the job of the preschool teacher to help these children understand and deal with such overwhelming feelings in a way that will help them grow and develop without harming themselves or others.

Sometimes a teacher knows and understands a child because he can tell his teacher about an event in his life - happy or sad or scary - with simple words and straightforward emotions. Sometimes a child has no adequate words, or not enough words, to tell the story and the only clues a teacher has are in his behavior. Sometimes, the event is so far beyond the child's ability to identify or express his feelings that he is rendered emotionally mute. But even though the child is not speaking words, he is speaking volumes.

Koplow defines the noun, *affect*, as "the outward facial and postural expression of one's feeling state. In essence, affects communicate feeling states to others and provide them with a nonverbal means of assessing our emotional needs and responding to them accordingly" (1996). The pre-verbal infant and toddler depend on positive and negative affects to express their needs, for they have no alternative form of communication. As children grow and mature, so does their understanding of emotions. The developmental stage of the preschool age child marks the beginning of this understanding. While preschool children continue to use affects to communicate, they

are also learning verbal skills and they communicate with words regularly. While a preschool age child may be able to identify some feelings verbally, such as happy, sad or angry, for many children today, the depth of their experience and pain may move them beyond their capability of using these words.

### **Problem Statement**

Children often “speak” about feelings through their behavior. Aggressive acts such as hitting, biting, throwing toys, or knocking down chairs or tables are just a few of the ways children may communicate their fear, frustration, anger and/or pain. “The interactive and affective ‘language’ of young children is a worthy language, deserving of our attention and respect” (Trout, 1997). It is this affective language that early childhood professionals must strive to understand and help children to interpret and define. It is through this understanding, interpretation, and definition that early childhood professionals will be able to help and guide these children into successful futures.

### **Purpose of Proposed Research**

As the number of children who exhibit emotional and behavioral difficulties enter the classroom setting, there is an increased need for early childhood professionals to understand and effectively interpret significant behaviors. While the current literature addresses multiple perspectives, those of the early childhood teacher and others working in the direct care field have been underrepresented. The purpose of this research is to examine the perspective of the early childhood professional, in particular, the preschool

teacher, in regard to how she interprets preschool children's acting out behaviors and the factors used for determining interventions.

### **Research Question**

The research question addressed in this study will be as follows: What are early childhood professionals' interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom?

### **Significance of Research**

The significance of this study relates to the importance of helping children who are unable to express their feelings through verbal language, due to extreme emotional stress or trauma, become more successful at this task for their futures. Researching teachers' interpretations of preschool children's affective language will bring a new source of information to the professional literature. This study has the potential to provide additional information that will enhance the value of early intervention, and guide the intervention strategies used with preschoolers who are exhibiting emotional and behavioral difficulties in the classroom. The more sophisticated the professionals' ability to interpret negative affective language, the better that professional will be able to appropriately respond to the child who is experiencing such difficulties. The answer to the question: How do early childhood professionals interpret preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom, will provide important information on preschool children's emotional and behavioral difficulties. This information will come from the

perspective of the child care professional, who is in a primary position to effect both change and growth in children's understanding and ability to express difficult emotions. Research of this question will be conducted with current child care professionals. By comparing and contrasting their responses to the current professional literature that provides a guide to some of the causes and known meanings of preschoolers' antisocial behaviors, a better understanding of this complex issue can be gained.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided a background and overview of the problem examined in this research study. The research question was presented as well as an overview of the purpose and significance this research question holds. The next chapter will provide a review of the literature significant to the emotional and behavioral difficulties of preschool children, and present the theoretical and conceptual framework upon which the study is based. The third chapter will outline the methodology for the study followed by a chapter which will present the findings and outcomes of the study. And finally, a chapter discussing the findings, the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as the implications for practice, policy, and research will complete the thesis.



## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW INCLUDING THEORETICAL CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Overview**

As we look to answer the question of how preschool teachers interpret children's negative affective language, we must first examine the literature discussing the issue of preschool children who exhibit signs of persistent emotional behavioral difficulties. Relevant literature focuses on the size and scope of the issue, characteristics and risk factors that contribute to the development of emotional and behavioral difficulties in preschoolers, and how current professionals in the field of early intervention are responding. Also included in this chapter are the theoretical conceptual frameworks that will be used when analyzing the data received through interviews with early childhood professionals, regarding their interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom.

### **History of the Problem**

"For adults to listen to children or view the world through the eyes of children departs radically from the dominant paradigm" (Andrews & Ben Arie, 1999, p.105). While there has been an international push during the late twentieth century into the dawn of the twenty first century to take a closer look at the lives of our world's children, they remain, largely, a voiceless section of the human element. In 1994, statistics from the New York Times indicated that 21% of U.S. children under the age of 18 lived below the

poverty line. In 1990, 25% of children lived in a single parent household - an increase of 15% since 1960. (Webb, 1996). The demand for our nation to address the specific needs of children at risk is intensifying. Agencies such as the Children's Defense Fund and the National Commission on Children have issued reports which target the well-being of children and families. (Webb, 1996). Political pressure is increasing, but change will come slowly. "Meanwhile, children are responding with self destructive and anti-social behaviors that echo their inner frustrations and conflicts" (Webb, 1996, p.4). The children's problems are getting worse (Koplow, 1996; Andrews & Ben Arie, 1999; Edlefsen & Baird, 1994; Schmitz & Hilton, 1996).

### **Size and Scope of the Issue**

Almost all children, at some time during their development, will present parents and/or caregivers with behaviors that challenge authority. This is a very natural and necessary part of the development process. Children, in the process of defining themselves as unique individuals, will begin exploring the limits of authority in order to feel safe within themselves (Campbell, 1997; Feil, Severs & Walker, 1995; Pattern, Rid, & Disjoin, 1992; Koplow, 1996). While early acts of aggressive behavior can be a part of this natural development, they can also have significantly different implications.

Recently, research has focused more effort toward understanding these early acts of aggressive behavior. Much of the literature examined has focused, in part, on the extent to which these acts of aggression signify a particular stage of development and will decline and disappear as the child matures - or whether these aggressive acts continue

into a child's future, displaying early signs of a serious behavior disorder.

Approximately one in five children will exhibit behavior difficulties beyond what is considered the normal scope (Pavuluri, Luk & McGee, 1996). Approximately half of these children will continue to exhibit these persistent aggressive behaviors into their primary grade school and adolescent years (Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Ewing, 1991; Baker et al., 1983; Egeland et al., 1991; Lerner et al., 1985; Richman et al., 1982; Pavuluri, Luk & McGee, 1996).

### **Characteristics of Children that Contribute to the Development of Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties in Preschool Children**

There are multiple characteristics cited in literature as common among children who are showing early signs of emotional behavioral difficulties. While it may be impossible for any researcher to come up with an exhaustive list, the most commonly referred to include:

- poor social control and deficits in age appropriate social skills
- high levels of concrete thinking, including perceptions of their own emotions
- narrow affective expressions and difficulty interpreting the affective expressions of others
- inappropriate responses to emotional stimulus and inability to regulate emotions
- high levels of cognitive arousal and the need to seek stimulation

- difficulty with peers
- insecure attachments, usually from infancy

(Campbell, 1997; Cohen, Reinherz, & Frost, 1993; Cole et al., 1996; Davis & Boster, 1992; Denham, Renwick & Holt, 1991; Feil, Severson & Walker, 1995; Kopp, 1989; Lyons-Ruth, Alpern & Repacholi, 1993; McFadyen et al., 1996; Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989; Turner, 1991). These characteristics will be examined in a more detailed fashion.

#### Poor Social Control and Deficits in Age Appropriate Social Skills

It has been noted in research regarding children's development of prosocial behaviors that beginning in the middle stages of the toddler years, a time when language is becoming more developed, children are able to use emotion-descriptive terms in their daily interactions. As the child moves into the preschool stage, at approximately 33-36 months, he is increasing this verbal interaction to include causes and reactions to emotional states (Dunn, Brown & Beardsall, 1991; Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, & Ridgeway, 1986; Bretherton, McNew & Beeghly-Smith, 1981; Dunn, Bretherton & Munn, 1987; Ridgeway, Waters & Kuczaj, 1985; Huttenlocher & Simley, in press, Stein & Levine, in press-a, Koplow, 1996; Strayer, 1989).

#### High Levels of Concrete Thinking, Including Perceptions of Their Own Emotions

Children who exhibit emotional behavioral difficulties are showing significant signs of delay in the area of social emotional development. These children are often

unable to identify differing feeling states in themselves or others. This inability to identify feelings has left them without the language and self-awareness needed to react with social competence. The social skills of empathy, anger management, and problem solving are severely delayed, causing difficulty in peer interactions and inappropriate displays of emotional control (Cohen, Reinherz & Frost, 1993; Cole et al., 1996; Feil, Sevenson & Walker, 1995; Frankel & Bates, 1990; Kopp, 1989; Greene, 1998).

### Narrow Affective Expression

The identification of feelings is a very difficult task for children who lack the basic understanding of emotions. They tend to perceive feelings in themselves and others as established states rather than as a continuum that may increase and/or decrease, depending on the stimulus. These children seem to have a very narrow range of affective expression and, in turn, exhibit difficulty reading the affective expression of others. They will often seem to move very quickly from a happy, content state to one of extreme anger or aggression (Davis & Boster, 1992; Feil, Sevenson & Walker, 1995; Cole et al., 1996).

### Inappropriate Responses to Emotional Stimuli

Children who suffer from emotional behavioral difficulties are also unable to anticipate or read their own internal indicators of emotions. Lacking the skills of emotion regulation, “the processes and characteristics involved in coping with heightened levels of both positive and negative emotions”(Kopp, 1989), they are easily overtaken when an emotional reaction occurs. In studies of responses to emotion regulation, it was found

that preschoolers at risk of emotional behavioral difficulties were more often rated as one of two extremes: over-responsive to emotional situations, indicating impulsive behavioral reactions such as aggression - or under-responsive, indicating more of an internal response, such as withdrawal from the situation. (Kopp, 1989 ; Cole et al., 1996; Greene, 1998; Feil, Severson & Walker, 1995).

### High Levels of Cognitive Arousal

While most of these characteristic traits are in the form of a deficit regarding the social emotional development expected in young children, there is some indication that children with emotional behavioral difficulties possess a heightened level of need for cognitive stimulation. This suggests that while they may be lacking in the skills to appropriately respond to the emotion, they seek the stimulation that accompanies the event. Following this line of thinking, the child at risk for developing persistent anti-social behavior will move through a progression of anti-social acts, increasing in number and level of seriousness, as they move into the middle stages of childhood and adolescence (Davis & Boster, 1992; Turner, 1991; Feil, Severson & Walker, 1995; Patterson et al., 1992).

### Difficulty with Peers

Low levels of peer integration and acceptance are significant to children with emotional behavioral difficulties and have been documented in the research as both a cause and an effect of such difficulties. It is known that peer relationships represent a

mutual understanding between children and are based on the mutual exchange of feelings.

The child who is unskilled in these areas of socialization, including positive peer group entry, peer group norms, and interpretation of prosocial interactions, is more likely to be left to either play alone, or with other children who also exhibit these difficulties.

Research has recognized that children who are prone to frequent over-responsive reactions to emotional situations, such as aggression, and are unable to regulate their emotions, will be looked at by their peers as a risk for friendship (Cohen, Reinherz & Frost, 1993; Turner, 1991; Davis & Boster, 1992).

### Insecure Attachments

The security of the mother-child (or primary caregiver) attachment, based in early infancy, has been a primary area of investigation regarding the development of emotional and behavioral difficulties in early childhood. Researchers note that the infants whose earliest needs are inconsistently met, or not met at all, develop insecure attachments to their primary caregiver(s), and have a much greater chance of later developing severe emotional behavioral difficulties. The primary caregiver relationship that a child experiences in the first two years of life is his/her initial base of understanding from which to develop all other relationships. When this first experience is inadequate or completely lacking, there are significant losses in the areas of internalized self awareness and well-being for the child. These children have no experiences of early satisfying relationships, and therefore, are emotionally and cognitively inexperienced in the skills needed for social competence. The anxious and avoidant behaviors that developed and

were exhibited toward the primary caregiver - as a response to the caregiver's haphazard responses to the infant's most basic needs - are re-created time and again in social interactions with others (Campbell, 1997; Koplow, 1996; Crockenberg, 1981; Denham, Renwick & Holt, 1991; Frankel & Bates, 1990; Lyons-Ruth, Alpern & Repacholi, 1993; McFayden et al., 1996; Spieker et al., 1999; Turner, 1991; Magid & McKelvey, 1987).

### **Risk Factors Associated with the Development of Emotional Behavioral Difficulties in Preschool Children**

Research has indicated several risk factors that may contribute to, or have an impact on, the development of a childhood emotional behavioral difficulty. While there has been a great deal of study dedicated to this area, it is important to note that, as with the characteristics from the previous section, not every child with an emotional behavioral difficulty can be associated with every one of these factors. While the research is strong, it is not yet conclusive. The significant risk factors identified in the research include:

- insecure attachments in infancy, usually associated with the mother or primary caregiver, as well as this primary caregiver's responsiveness to the infant's early efforts at communication of distress
- parental actions, reactions, and emotional expressiveness
- family variables apart from the parent-child relationship, such as parental stress, depression, socio-economic status, relationships with significant others, as well as the presence of adequate support systems.



(Bowlby, 1980; Campbell, 1997; Crockenberg, 1981; Denham, Renwick & Holt, 1991; Feil, Severson & Walker, 1995; Koplow, 1996; Frankel & Bates, 1990; Kopp, 1989; Lyons-Ruth, Alpern & Repacholi, 1993; McFayden et al., 1996; Pavuluri, Luk & McGee, 1996; Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989; Spieker et al., 1999; Turner, 1991).

### Insecure Attachments

Beginning with the infant's earliest interactions with his caregivers, there is a need for nurturance, understanding and social acceptance. Every child is dependent upon this relationship in order to grow, move toward, and master the next levels of development and to possess the necessary skills for further growth and development. This necessary relationship is what is known as a secure attachment. Secure attachments provide the fundamental base for all future social and emotional development. A healthy attachment occurs when an infant is nurtured in an appropriate, ongoing manner by a consistent, loving caregiver. If the caregiver lacks the ability, knowledge, or desire to provide this nurturing, and/or is unresponsive to the infants attempts at communicating their basic needs of warmth and nurturance - both physical and emotional, as well as their attempts at early social interaction- through crying, and other affective language - the infant may develop an insecure attachment, or be completely unattached. The lack of a secure attachment leaves the infant without the necessary assurance that the world is a safe place (Bowlby, 1980; Crockenberg, 1981; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Koplow, 1996; Campbell, 1997). As insecurely attached - or unattached - infants become toddlers, they are unable to explore their surroundings with confidence and the assurance of safety. The skills of

self-awareness and well-being required for successful social interaction are severely under-developed. As these children reach preschool age, their patterns of social interaction reflect their earliest relationship experience: an expectation of unpredictability, insensitivity, and rejection. This represents a high risk for the development of emotional behavioral difficulties. (Turner, 1991; Crockenberg, 1981; Campbell, 1997; Lyons -Ruth, Alpern & Repacholi, 1993; McFayden et al., 1996; Spieker et al., 1999).

#### Parental Actions, Reactions, and Emotional Expressiveness

Attachment, while significantly identified in the literature, is not the only influence a caretaker may have on a child's social-emotional development. The caretaker's own emotional expressiveness, actions, and reactions are also identified as possible risk factors. Understanding that children learn from what is modeled for them, caretakers who show only a narrow range of affective language in everyday interactions, exhibit consistent patterns of negative control, and choose harsh methods of discipline may influence the way in which their child will interact socially (Campbell, 1997; Davis & Boster, 1992; Denham, Renwick & Holt, 1991; Dunn, Brown & Beardsall, 1991; Frankel & Bates, 1990; Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989; Spieker et al., 1999; Greene, 1998). Research has shown that children who exhibit emotional behavioral difficulties such as aggressive and impulsive acts have a relatively high likelihood of being raised in an environment consisting of more negative parenting patterns. Children who were raised in controlling and overly critical environments have been associated with

a lowered ability to self-regulate emotions and higher levels of difficulty entering into peer relations (Campbell, 1997; Dunn, Brown & Beardsall, 1991; Frankel & Bates, 1990; Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989; Spieker et al., 1999).

### Family Variables

Family variables outside of the caregiver-child relationship have also been a consistent focus throughout the research. Stressful family experiences, depression in one or more of the caregivers, unstable economic situations, relationship conflicts, and lack of support systems have all been associated with higher incidences of emotional behavioral difficulties in children (Campbell, 1997; Pavuluri, Luk & McGee, 1996; Spieker et al., 1999; Koplow, 1996; Magid & McKelvey, 1987). While the direct caregiver- child relationship may not be the causal stress factor, difficult life situations greatly influence the quality and degree of support and nurture that a child receives from the caregiver, and this inconsistency can result in a higher incidence of children's behavior problems (Campbell, 1997; Belsky et al. 1995; Miller et al., 1993; Snyder 1991, Koplow, 1996).

### **Professional Responses to Children's Negative Affective Language**

While the professional responses to children's negative affective language and acting out behaviors vary with each individual's therapeutic method, values, and experience, there appear to be some fundamental principles that provide guidance and encouragement for working with this difficult population of young children. These basic guiding principles include:

- Respecting the child and the experiences that a child holds as a part of his identity as an individual
- Recognizing that all behaviors have meaning, and that it is our understanding of these meanings that will enable us to help children to find new ways of meeting their own needs
- Accepting that patterns of behavior are not changed through reasoning, explaining, criticizing or questioning a child's behavior or motive(s) for behavior, but rather, they are changed through nurturing and the consistent offer of new experiences.

(Koplow, 1996; Greene, 1998; Caughey, 1991; Hipple, 1978; Divinyi, 1997).

### Respecting the Child

Children are judged everyday in a variety of ways by a variety of individuals. Teachers, parents, caregivers, peers, and mental health professionals all interact with children and assess actions, reactions and entire situations through their own eyes, and with their own experiences influencing their thoughts and decisions. What they are seeing when they look at a child through this personal window may, or may not, paint an accurate picture. For a professional to clearly see a child, he must first let go of his pre-conceived ideas. Children who are experiencing emotional behavioral difficulties need tolerance and understanding. Judgments will only impede the professional in gaining a clear understanding of how these children perceive their own environments, their emotions, and themselves (Koplow 1996; Divinyi, 1997; Greene, 1998).

### Recognizing All Behaviors Have Meaning

Understanding children's behavior is a complex issue. Individual children will express themselves through any number of vehicles. They will use whatever method is available whenever the need arises. Understanding the meaning of each child's individual language - verbal, physical, or affective - requires an understanding of each unique child and all that that specific child holds within himself. General rules do not always apply here. One child's behavior may take on a significantly different meaning when the same affective message is expressed by another child, and treating a behavior in isolation ignores the child expressing it (Hipple, 1978; Caughey, 1991, Koplow, 1996, Greene, 1998).

### Change through Nurture and New Experience

In order to help children who are exhibiting emotional behavioral difficulties, professionals must look at the whole child, the physical body and its actions, as well as the developing mind and all the information it holds - from past to present. Teachers and therapists must create with this child a new pattern to add to their experiences, and provide consistent opportunities for this new information to be tested and used (Greene, 1998; Caughey, 1991; Koplow, 1996).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Throughout the literature examined for this review, only one study was found

that included the perceptions of preschool teachers as a relevant source of information regarding children's acting out behaviors. Considering the fact that the current literature determines that behavior difficulties are observable in children by the preschool years (Maselli, Brown, & Veaco, 1990; Campbell, 1997; Cole et al., 1996; Edlefsen & Baird, 1994; Feil, Severson & Walker, 1995; Peters, McMahon, & Quinsey, 1992; McFadyen, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1996; Pavuluri, Luk, & McGee, 1996; Schmitz & Hilton, 1996), the early childhood professional is a resource that holds valuable information yet uncovered.

### **Considerations for a Theoretical Conceptual Framework**

There are several possible theoretical/ conceptual frameworks presented throughout the area of early childhood development, relating to the topic of teacher's interpretations of the affective language of children with emotional behavioral difficulties.

Throughout the literature, Attachment Theory, based largely on the work of John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, and Alan Sroufe, reoccurred as the most commonly used theory within current research. Therefore, Attachment Theory will be the primary theory used in analyzing data from study participants regarding preschool children's negative affective language. Social Work's Family Systems Theory and the Theory of Social Ecology are also evident throughout the literature, incorporating the importance of the family's relational dynamics and environmental impacts on preschool children's negative affective language.

“Empirical research shows that serious antisocial behavior is multidetermined by the reciprocal interplay of characteristics of the individual youth and the key social systems in which youths are embedded” (Henggeler, Schoenwald, Bourduin, Rowland, Cunningham, 1998, p. 6).

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment Theory is well recognized in the fields of social work, psychology, and early childhood development. Proposed as a universal theory in human development, it is epigenetic in that each stage builds upon the occurrences in the previous stage. Attachment Theory offers, in its most pure form, a method by which infants develop a lasting concept of security and bond to a primary caregiver. All children are born predisposed to form an attachment (Bowlby), however, not all children form a secure attachment. The quality and type of attachment, that a child will develop is determined by the events and interactions between the infant and his/her primary caregiver over the first year of life. (Sroufe) “Attachment happens for the infant independent of personal qualities of the caregiver. An infant will attach to an aggressive or depressed person as easily as a nurturing individual” (Boisen, 2000, p.2). The importance of this fact is not that the infant will form an attachment to a non-nurturing caregiver, but that the nature and quality of this attachment has a fundamental and profound impact on the infant’s ability to successfully navigate the world around him, as well as on all of the infant’s future relationships.

“Attachment grows out the sensorimotor relationship between the mother or primary caregiver and infant, over the first months of life” ( Breger, 1974). Bowlby lists

“five behavioral patterns central to the human attachment: sucking, clinging, following, crying, and smiling” (1969). For these components to occur, the mother or primary caregiver must show initiative in recognition of the child’s needs, as he/she relies on crying and other affective language, such as facial expressions and body posturing, to express him/herself, as well as in responding to these expressed needs. “ The context and quality of that first early relationship helps to form an inner working model (Bowlby), or an internalized belief system about what can be expected from one’s self and others” (Boisen, 2000, p.3). It is stated that if this initial attachment between infant and mother or primary caregiver is secure, then the child is in the position to explore other relationships safely. If the infant-mother attachment is disrupted, “where the infant cannot depend on the primary caregiver or comes to fear the primary caregiver as a source of pain or frustration, then the infant will expect the same from future relationships” (Breger, 1974).

Attachment categories include: secure attachment, anxious/ resistant attachment, anxious/ avoidant attachment, and disorganized/ disoriented attachment. Children who form secure attachments in infancy have experienced caregivers that are sensitive to their needs and consistently respond with appropriate emotional and physical care. The caregiver becomes a secure base from which the infant can explore their environment. When distressed, the securely attached infant will immediately seek and maintain sufficient contact with the primary caregiver to effectively result in ending the distress.

Children who form anxious attachments are less likely to believe that their needs will be met on a consistent basis. Anxious/ resistant attachment will produce a child that



has difficulty separating from the primary caregiver in order to explore their environment, and then has difficulty settling, upon being reunited with this caregiver. Children who form anxious/avoidant attachments have learned through their experiences with primary caregivers that seeking emotional nurturance will be unsuccessful. Avoidant children will readily separate to explore their environment, affiliate readily to strangers, and show signs of active avoidance upon reuniting with their primary caregiver. Children who develop disorganized/disoriented attachments exhibit behaviors that indicate conflicted or disoriented behaviors. Children with emotional and behavioral difficulties are thought to have a higher incidence of this type of insecure or disrupted attachment. (Source: Patterns of Attachment, Sroufe, p.51 Adapted from Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978).

### **Family Systems Theory and Social Ecology Theory**

Family Systems Theory shifts the perspective from the linear focus of Attachment Theory to a more holistic theoretical focus. Within the Family Systems Theory perspective, behavior is viewed as a “function of dynamic interactions of elements of the whole system and the system’s transactions with the surrounding ecology” (Heneggeler, S., Schoenwald, S., Borduin, C., Rowland, M., & Cunningham, P., 1998, p. 12). “Behavior is looked at as having multiple causes, and working from this theoretical base, someone interested in interpreting the causes of this behavior would look to “the context of the individual’s close interpersonal relationships - emphasizing the reciprocal and circular nature of these relationships” (Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, &

Cunningham, 1998, p.12). Attachments formed by a child during infancy and early childhood would be considered a large part of this system. How these initial attachments impact a child's future relationships and his/her ability to interact with the world would be considered when looking to interpret behaviors.

Social Ecology Theory builds on the Systems Theory by extending those systems that may influence behavior beyond close interpersonal relationships. Systems Theory includes family, home and school; Social Ecology extends the circle of influences to include those of a broader and more numerous nature. "A social ecologist would also propose that behavior is influenced by settings and persons that do not come into direct contact with the individual" (Henegeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland & Cunningham, 1998, p. 13). It is within this theoretical perspective that emphasis is placed on issues outside their actual relationships. Living in poverty, lack of economic or social resources, levels of parental stress, as well as exposure to outside violence would be important factors when attempting to understand the development and behavior of an individual.

Risk is "traditionally thought of as a stressor, such as poverty or child abuse, that could predict undesirable outcomes" (Boisen, 2000). In the view of Social Ecology Theory, the risk factors that occur in an individual's life are thought to be as important as the interactions between individuals and family, when assessing an individual's behavior. Similar to the notion that Attachment is epigenetic, with each phase building on the previous phase, risk is considered to be additive. The impact of previous risk cannot be

erased. Individuals are able to move in and out of risk status, but the impact of previous risk will always be a part of that individual (Boisen, 2000).

When reviewing the literature around the areas of risk factors that may influence a preschooler's acting out behaviors, poverty, lack of resources and high levels of parental stress, along with categories of anxious and disrupted attachment, were frequently recognized.

### **Summary**

This chapter contained information obtained while reviewing the literature regarding preschool children's emotional behavioral difficulties, as well as the theoretical conceptual framework that will be used when analyzing data received through interviews with early childhood professionals regarding their interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom.

The literature regarding children with emotional behavioral difficulties has concentrated on four main areas of study: the size and scope of the issue, characteristics of children that may contribute to the development of emotional behavioral difficulties, the risk factors associated with the development of emotional behavioral difficulties in children, and the responses of professionals working with this difficult population. The question that has yet to be addressed is: How do teachers interpret the negative affective language of children with emotional behavioral difficulties? When analyzing data in response to this research question, Attachment Theory, Family Systems Theory and Social Ecology Theory will serve as the primary theoretical frameworks.

In the following chapter information regarding the methodology of the study is provided. This chapter addresses issues including: the research design, key concepts including operational definitions, the study sample, method of data collection and analysis. This chapter also discusses the issues of validity and reliability as they relate to the study.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Overview**

This chapter applies to the method of the research being conducted regarding preschool children's negative affective language, focusing on the proposed research design, the study sample, measurement issues, the method of data collection and analysis, as well as the issues of validity and reliability.

### **Research Question**

The research question addressed by this study was as follows: What are early childhood professionals' interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom?

### **Research Design**

In order to answer the above question, an exploratory study using a qualitative research design was developed. This design included a structured one-to-one, personal and in-depth, open ended interview with early childhood professionals who have experienced children's acting out behaviors in the preschool classroom setting. Because the question being proposed in this study included professionals' interpretations, this method of research was determined to be the most appropriate. The strengths of this type of study include the opportunity for the researcher to create a positive rapport with interviewees, invoking in-depth and honest responses to questions. While traditionally,

personal interpretations or responses are thought of as a weakness of the qualitative personal interview, personal perspectives are a large part of the responses desired in this study. One of the weaknesses of this research design is the possibility that interviewees may respond to questions with answers that they feel will please the researcher. Due to the one-to-one interaction and/or any established rapport between researcher and interviewee, participants may be hesitant to answer questions truthfully in front of the researcher. Another weakness of this study is that, due to the small size of the sample, the results cannot be generalized to the greater population,.

### **Key Concepts and Operational Definitions**

The key concepts of this study include Early Childhood Professionals, Preschool Children's Tantrums, and Preschool Children's Acting Out Behaviors. *Early Childhood Professionals* and *Preschool Children's Acting Out Behaviors* act as the variables in this study. The operational definitions of these three concepts are as follows:

***Early Childhood Professionals:*** for the purposes of this study, Early Childhood Professionals are defined as individuals who have met the qualifications for Lead Teacher, as determined by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Division of Licensing, under Rule 3 guidelines for center-based child care. These individuals must also have met the qualifications of the Lead Teacher or Special Service Professional Job requirements set forth by federal guidelines for the Head Start Program.

Rule 3 guidelines for Lead Teacher include: A lead teacher must be at least 18 years of age, meet the qualifications of either a Child Development Associate credential for preschool from the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition, and have 1,560 hours of employment as an assistant teacher, aide or student intern, or hold a baccalaureate degree from an accredited college or university in any field, and have 1,040 hours of employment as assistant teacher, aide, or student intern. Head Start teacher requirements include professional training that meets the State of Minnesota requirements.

***Preschool Children's Tantrums:*** for the purposes of this study preschool children's tantrums are considered to include those behaviors that are expressed through negative emotional outbursts. These behaviors may include crying, stamping feet, throwing oneself onto the floor kicking and screaming, or a refusal to comply with a directive.

***Preschool Children's Acting Out Behaviors:*** for the purposes of this study, preschool children's acting out behaviors are considered to include those behaviors that may place the preschool children themselves, or others - both adults and children - at risk of being hurt, emotionally or physically, or becoming unsafe. These behaviors may include verbal or physical attacks (where children use themselves or other objects as weapons) , as well as withdrawn and/or isolating behaviors. Definitions of this term are included as a focus point of this study.

## **The Sample**

### Study Population

This study focused on early childhood professionals, lead teachers who were working with preschool children who may exhibit emotional behavioral difficulties in the classroom. As the population of preschool children with serious emotional behavioral difficulties increases, the number of early childhood professionals working with this population is also rising. Female Lead Teachers and Early Childhood Special Service Professionals, employed by Ramsey Action Programs, Inc. Head Start, who have been working in the early childhood field between two and five years, will be the potential study population. By limiting the study population to females with between two and five years experience, the study was more likely to produce a homogeneous sample from which to draw more in-depth conclusions.

### Sampling Criteria

The sample for this study was a non-probability convenience sample of six Lead Teachers employed by Ramsey Action Programs, Inc. Head Start. There are Head Start classrooms located throughout Ramsey County. Therefore, Lead Teachers and may be working in any number of site locations throughout St. Paul and Ramsey County.

### Ramsey Action Programs, Inc. Head Start

Project Head Start began in 1965 with the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson. The goal of the program was to provide at-risk children with a “head start” in education. The



program was thought of as a “combination effort”, which would combat the current effects of poverty in young children and reduce the number of under-educated and poverty-prone adults who would need a range of social and economic services in the future. Project Head Start proposed to achieve this goal by providing children with a greater chance at a successful education which could better secure their futures, and by providing families and communities with the resources, skills and support necessary to successfully raise these children. Overall, it has become one of Lyndon Johnson’s most successful ‘War on Poverty’ programs.

Ramsey Action Programs, Inc. Head Start delivers the federally funded Head Start program to the residents of the St. Paul area, including some surrounding suburban communities. Head Start programs are delivered according to published national performance standards and insure that all children and communities receive the same high quality program and services within. To participate in the Head Start program families must qualify by having a household income that does not exceed ten percent above the federally set poverty guidelines. Head Start commits to serving, as ten percent of their population, children with special needs.

#### Recruitment of Participants

A flyer, acting as an advertisement, was developed in order to recruit participants for the study. The advertisement included information stating the purpose of the study, the targeted population for the study, as well as the expectations of the participants. The expectations included the following specifics: providing the researcher with signed

consent of their voluntary participation in the study, participation in a face-to-face interview - approximately one hour in length - with the researcher, the benefits that individual participants would receive if they chose to participate, including a \$10.00 gift certificate to Blockbuster Video, and a phone number to contact the researcher, if interested. The flyer was distributed to all Ramsey Action Program Head Start Teachers and Special Service Professionals. For purposes of confidentiality, those interested in gathering more information about the study, or wishing to participate in the study, were instructed to contact the researcher directly.

When a potential participant made contact with the researcher and expressed interest in participating, a time was set up to obtain informed consent through a signed written consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the risks and benefits of participating in the study, as well as the rights, responsibilities, and voluntary nature of the study. Participants were informed that if at any time during the interview they felt uncomfortable, they were free to refrain from answering any questions and/or withdraw from the study without suffering any negative consequences from their employer or the researcher and Augsburg College.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Instrument Development**

Information was obtained through a structured face-to-face interview. The Interview Guide was followed during each interview. Prompts were provided for participants, if clarification or explanation was needed for the question to be answered

in the most complete manner.

The Interview Guide was developed through consultation with the thesis advisor, using themes found in the literature regarding preschool children who exhibit emotional behavioral difficulties. The open-ended questions related back to the research question in order to draw out thoughts and interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors. The questions were categorized into two sections. The first section related to the interviewee's interpretations of these acting out behaviors. The second section related to the interviewee's thoughts and opinions regarding interventions upon behaviors. A small third section, considered the demographic section, asked the interviewee about her current job position, educational background, and any specific training she may have received in the area of emotionally behaviorally disruptive preschoolers.

### Procedure

Data was collected through a one hour face-to-face structured interview with the researcher. Each participant was interviewed one time, at a time and location of her choice. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form, allowing the interview to be audio-taped. Audio tapes were transcribed only by the researcher to allow for accurate recollection of data. Participants were asked to provide the researcher with a phone number where they could be reached, in the event that any of their responses needed further clarification for the researcher. All raw data, including any notes taken by the researcher, and audio tapes of interviews were kept in a locked file.

### Data Analysis

Data was collected and analyzed for content. An exploratory inventory of the issue began as the interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The researcher looked for themes and patterns that develop through the completed interviews. These themes and patterns were used to address the study's original question of early childhood professional's interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom. Demographic information was used to provide a description of the study sample.

A "validity check" was incorporated into the study by asking a professional, working in the field of early childhood mental health, to act as a reviewer of the researcher's interpretations. The reviewer was asked to analyze the transcripts of the interviews and themes, developed by the researcher, to determine whether the researcher had appropriately interpreted the information and accurately ascribed themes to the participants' responses.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

The strengths of this study primarily relate to the richness of the qualitative information. Rubin and Babbie (1997) define qualitative methods as "Researcher methods the emphasize depth of understanding and the deeper meaning of the human experience..." (p. G-7). The face to face personal interview, along with the open-ended questions from the interview guide, allowed teachers to share their personal thoughts and experiences along with their interpretations of children's acting out behaviors in the

classroom. Information reaching this descriptive and rich level would not be attainable through quantitative methods.

The limitations of this study primarily relate to the small sample size, and to the fact that five of the six teachers interviewed worked in the same Head Start location, although not all worked in the same classroom. While it is not a goal of qualitative research to generalize its findings across a larger population, it is important to note that the common themes regarding preschool teachers' interpretations of children's acting out behaviors in the classroom cannot be assumed to transfer to any other group of preschool teachers.

### **Summary**

This chapter explained the method of research used in the study of teacher's interpretations of children's negative affective language. First, the research question was provided along with the research design. Following this, key concepts and operational definitions were provided. Next, a description of the study's sample and the selection process that was used for the study was outlined. Then, methods of data collection and analysis are explained. Finally, the issues of validity and reliability were addressed.

In the next chapter, the study on early childhood professional's interpretations of children's negative affective language will be reported, followed by a chapter of discussion regarding these findings, including the strengths and limitations of the study as well as the implications for practice, policy, and research.

## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

This chapter presents the findings of the study regarding early childhood professionals' interpretations of preschool children's negative affective language. These findings are in response to the research question: What are Early Childhood Professionals' interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom? The chapter begins with a description of the characteristics of the study's sample, and continues to report the responses to the research question, organized by the major themes that emerged.

### **Characteristics of the Sample**

Six early childhood professionals were interviewed regarding their interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom. All six of these professionals are females, currently working within the Early Childhood Education field. Five of the participants are employed by Ramsey Action Programs Inc., Head Start and are currently teaching in classroom settings that serve children, ages three to five, in a half-day preschool program. One participant is employed by a neighborhood Child Development Center that collaborates with the Ramsey Action Programs Inc., Head Start and is a part of a full day Head Start Program. Five of the participants currently hold positions as Lead Teachers in their center, and one participant holds an Assistant Teacher position. All of the participants have experience in the early childhood field. The length of their experience ranges from three years to eighteen years. (see Table 1) One

participant holds a Bachelor's degree in another field and is pursuing a Masters of Arts in Education, and three participants hold their Child Development Associate Certificates (CDA), put out by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. These three participants, along with another two participants, reported that they are currently working toward a two year AAS degree in Child Development. All of the participants reported that they have received some in-service training in the area of children with emotional behavioral difficulties, although no participant reported having any education or training in the area of early childhood mental health.

Table 1

Years of Experience Reported by Respondents

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1-3 years	1
4-7 years	2
7-10 years	0
10-14 years	2
14-18 years	1

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n=6

**Findings Organized by Theme**

Behavior Characteristics and Motivations

One of the primary themes that surfaced from the interviews, in regard to children's negative affective language, was the specific characteristics and ascribed emotional motivations of children's tantrums, as compared to those characteristics and ascribed emotional motivations of children's serious acting out behaviors. While no two teachers described them in exactly the same manner, the behavior characteristics were similarly repeated for both tantrums and serious acting out incidents. The characteristics identified by teachers for tantrums and acting out behaviors are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Characteristics of a Tantrum vs. Characteristics of Acting Out

Tantrums	Acting Out
Hitting	Hitting
Yelling or screaming	Yelling or screaming
Stamping feet	Kicking
Throwing things	Throwing things
Biting	Biting
Crying	Running from classroom
Sitting on Ground or Throwing self down	Taking toys from peers
Loss of self control	Spitting
Pouting	Withdrawal
Anger	Anger



### Emotional Motivators of a Tantrum

Emotional motivators that teachers ascribed to behaviors determined whether teachers characterized behaviors as either a tantrum or a serious acting out incident. Similar responses from participants were found regarding the ascribed emotional motivations that differentiated tantrums from acting out behaviors. Motivators for tantrums were described by teachers as vehicles for children to get something they want, gain attention, and/or achieve a goal. Teachers identified motivators for tantruming as: “Having a fit when you can’t get your way, especially with children of the early age” (03). “When you say tantrum, the first thing that comes to mind is when you see a child in the middle of a store that wants something” (06).

It’s when a child starts to have a fit and loses site of what they are really upset about, becoming inconsolable and unable to [be] reasoned with. Nothing you can do is going to help them with their tantrum. It is something they have to work out on their own. It is a blossoming of frustration into something greater (02)

While teachers identify these as reasons behind children’s tantrums, they did recognize that for the child, the reason may or may not be known: “I think, to me, when they have a tantrum, it is just that they don’t know what they want, they don’t know how to say it in words, so they are showing you” (06).

Teachers described tantrums as being non-traumatic and lacking any serious on-going indication of trauma for the children: “Tantrums are just kind of pretty much

normal, and I think most kids have them” (06). “I think a tantrum is localized into one specific area and it is an emotional thing... A tantrum is really [their way of] dealing with their own emotions” (02).

A typical tantrum was described as lasting approximately two to five minutes by teachers, although it was noted by all of the participants that some tantrums could last much longer, depending on the stamina of the child. “Some tantrums are light and quick and some can go on and on and on” (01) “A tantrum is like a crescendo, it starts out small and then it gets really big, and then it gets small” (06).

#### Emotional Motivators of Acting Out

Acting out behaviors were considered to have an emotional motivation different from that of a tantrum. Motivators for acting out were described by teachers as events happening in a child’s life that are beyond the child’s understanding and ability to communicate: “Usually, if there is a serious acting out incident, it is usually because there is something going on in their life” (01). “Sometimes kids have so much anger in them that this is their only way of getting it out because they don’t really have the words to describe what is happening to them” (04).

Teacher’s, describing acting out behaviors, placed more vigor and emphasis on a child’s anger. They described acting out as the child making a true action statement regarding their current emotional state, using only their behavior. Teachers also commented that these action statements were usually hurtful to the children themselves or to others, and in most cases directed outward. “A serious incident is when a tantrum

turns into aggression toward self, or even whoever is dealing with that individual at that time” (03). “Acting out is a very deliberate controlled idea that the kid has. I mean, it might be impulsive, but it is something that they are aware of” (02). “Acting out is hurtful to somebody else or to themselves” (06). “The direction is different. It is not a self destructive thing, it is more of a destruct the other person thing” (02). “In serious acting out, a lot of times the child will really try to hurt the teacher, themselves, or someone else” (01).

Teachers, during their interviews, did not define specifically the duration of children’s acting out incidents.

### Affective Messages and their Meanings

Five out of six teachers affirmed during their interviews that they believed children’s acting out behaviors were a method of communication, and considered them a form of non-verbal language for children: “When you are little, you cannot articulate everything you have in your mind, so what is the other way? (02) “When they don’t know what to say or what to do, they just do whatever [act out]. They might not even know what they are doing” (06). “Yes, something is wrong, ‘I’m angry.’ ‘I’m hurting.’ but they don’t have the words. They can’t explain it to you” (04)

They’re trying to tell me [something]. That because of things that are going on in their life, and they are not allowed to verbalize it at home, it is coming out here. They’re angry, and they’re unhappy; they’re sad (01).

They are needy. They want something. It is usually attention that they are not getting from home, for example, so they come and act out here. There're issues going on...say they might have witnessed an argument with Mom and Dad or some inappropriate stuff, and it is getting to them. They will come to school and act it out. We see a lot of that (03).

All of the teachers, during their interviews, put into words what they believed to be the general messages that children were attempting to get across through their behaviors. Teachers identified general messages as:

Hold me

Care for me

Pay attention to me

Love me

Something is wrong

I'm angry

I'm hurting

I don't feel safe

Come and play with me

Please help me

Messages were described as being unique to each child by the five teachers who felt that behavior was a form of nonverbal language. These unique messages were attributed by the teachers as emotional messages from children, reflective of current difficult situations in their lives outside of preschool. "...they would be unique in the

different problems that they have” (01). “I think that each child , especially as you come to know them, you come to understand what they do [a particular child’s behaviors], and what it means” (02). “I think it is very individual, based on their backgrounds and the amount of verbal language that they have, and just how well they have been socialized” (06).

When they are having these emotional outbursts, they don't realize that they are out of control. They don't know why they are doing it. It is those hidden reasons, language problems. They might have some deep emotional problems from home, like attachment, so it is not always what you see on the surface. You have to peel that onion and see what is in the middle (06).

You have to look for the signs, and the signs come in body language and also [in] the way they say things and the way they act. Sometimes I am more concerned about the child who will come in all doubled up, like this, and doesn’t want to look either way (04).

### Lack of Verbal Language

Four of the six teachers specifically noted that children who displayed acting out behaviors may be doing so, in part, because of some delay in the area of verbal language development.

They are just venting out all that they have inside of them and this is the only way they know how to do that. One child may throw a block because they don’t

have the verbal skills or they don't have the self esteem that it takes for them to go up and say, "I want to play with you" (01).

One teacher stated that she was unsure whether acting out behavior is a non-verbal form of language. She felt that cultural differences may mitigate the language aspect of children's behavior. She stated that "I am not really sure on that one. It is hard to say on that one, especially with bilinguals, too... I would say that they might and they might not" (05).

### Teacher's Responses to Children's Affective Language

Teachers discussed their responses to children's acting out behaviors on two levels. On a practical level, teachers reported several specific methods of interventions for handling particular situations and helping children to recover from tantrums or acting out incidents. On a more philosophical level, teachers discussed the ways they viewed certain responses to children's behavior, and presented overall statements regarding the goals of intervention, the treatment of children, and the value of understanding children's lives outside of the classroom.

### Specific Methods of Intervention

#### Ignoring the behavior

Specific methods of intervention varied with each teacher. Four of the six teachers interviewed stated that at times, it would be appropriate to let a child go, ignoring the behavior as long as there was no one being hurt or no property being

destroyed. “If it is just you and that child in the room, I do believe that ‘Oh you can have your tantrum and I’ll be right over here when you are finished’[can be a useful strategy]” (03). “I just let them holler it out if they are not hurting themselves, if they are not hurting anybody else, ... you just ignore that child ...” (01).

I’ll watch real close. First I’ll watch to see what is going on and if no other child is being hurt and no equipment is being destroyed, I’ll give him a few minutes, and usually not very long, but I’ll give him a few minutes to see if he can work his way out of it (04).

I just make sure that they are safe - like, if they are tantruming on the floor or something, I make sure that they are safe and that there is nobody around them that is going to kick them, or whatever (06).

### Verbal Communication

Communicating verbally with children, including providing children with appropriate words to use when they are upset or angry, was reported by multiple teachers as being one of the most regularly used interventions. Teachers commented:

I would watch him and see that he wanted something - or that he wanted to play with somebody - and he didn’t know what to say. Then you can almost see the frustration level rising in this child, and you knew that you had to go over and help this child. You have to give him some words to kind of defuse it” (06).

The biggest thing is trying to get them to talk to you. Trying to get them to use their words, I think, is real important, rather than having a temper tantrum. Try to

get them to go over and say “I sure would like to play with that with you” rather than having that display of behavior (01).

Sometimes you have to give them the words: “I feel angry” “I feel hurt” “I don’t want to share this toy right now.” Getting them so they can use their words and they understand what I mean by saying sad, I know what angry means, happy means, I know when I am tired, I know what scared means. They have to hear it, see it, and say it. The more of their five senses they use in describing something, the more it is theirs to own (04).

### Limiting Choices

A number of teachers discussed how limiting a child’s choices could be used as an intervention tool for helping to calm a child down from a tantrum or a disruptive behavior, and be able to rejoin the group in a more appropriate activity. “For example, during a group or story time, ‘I’ll give you two choices: you can sit near me and help me finish or you can help me hold the book’... this is to get him to be a part of the group” (05). Providing a limited option of alternative activities was viewed by teachers as something that a child who was having a difficult time or acting out may be unable to identify for themselves.

I give them an out. I give them a couple of choices such as “We are going to do this; would you like to join us?” or “Would you like to play a game with me?” because that gives them an out” (06).



“I’ll ask them how they are feeling and what do they think, what would make them feel better... and then limiting their choices. For many of the children, that will work” (04).

### Distraction

Distracting activities, similar to the idea of providing a limited choice alternative, were talked about by one teacher as her primary method of intervention.

I usually see if there is anything that I can do to take their mind off of it... it is really a matter of getting their mind off whatever it is that is bothering them.

Distraction techniques, giving them a job, getting a drink of water (02).

### Cues

Participants were asked if they could identify cues that would signal a child’s upcoming emotional or behavioral outburst. Teachers stated that depending on each individual child, they may be able to identify when a child was getting ready to act out by a specific cue that child used. Four of the six teachers interviewed provided examples of cues. One teacher stated:

We had this child who, every time he took off his shoes, signaled he was going to lose it. As soon as he took off his shoes, he would go start throwing books or dumping buckets of toys. If we could catch him while he was trying to take off his shoes, and try to change it or help him move through that, it helped (06).

Another teacher explained:

One child in particular, that I have, will just sit and be quiet and just start staring at the floor. I can tell he is ready to blow about something. ...Last year I had one that would just start pulling on his ear, a nervous reaction, and I just knew that something was up with him (01).

Teachers emphasized that cues were individual to each child and that not all children gave off cues prior to acting out.

### Proactive Interventions

Other proactive interventions, including classroom structure, teacher proximity including positive attention prior to any classroom disruption, and teaching children the skills necessary to problem solve as a part of regular curriculum were all reported as successful means of intervention. When participants were asked if, in their experience, there were interventions that could prevent an outburst, two teachers responded:

“Structure, busy. Keep their minds going at all times. If you keep them busy and in a structured environment, I do believe that you will see less of a problem” (03). “Just by keeping the routine very structured. I keep the daily schedule the same and I even have up pictures up along the wall for the kids who might not get it” (06).

Being directly involved in classroom activities with children, and providing children with attention for positive behavior was talked about by all of the teachers: “I think teacher proximity, moving yourself closer to the action and kind of running interference, and I think really just your personal attention to the child [is a proactive intervention]” (02).

On an individual basis, I think that if you can catch them before [the disruption] and give them some positive attention, you can kind of shift it. You know - give them some attention when they are doing something good. Positive attention [helps] because really, I think they really want to please me. I mean deep down, they want my attention and so the more positive attention I can give them, the better (06).

“The thing is that a child would rather have fifteen minutes of you full attention than have a whole day of ‘Don’t do that!’” (04).

Helping children to learn problem solving skills and become able to think through possible solutions was specifically mentioned by three of the six teachers interviewed:

You give them a chance to try to problem solve it out. If they can’t problem solve it out, then they need help to solve it. Because they are really going to need to develop those problem solving skills, especially once you give them a few tools. If there is a situation that is a problem and you intervene too quickly, then the child will depend on you to solve all of his problems. Then he will never get that important concept of solving problems and being able to think out how can I solve this (04).

If they are gathering solutions like sharing and taking turns, playing together and stuff, I will just let it go and be problem solved. But if they are not, then you have to do what you have to do to get those solutions going (05).

### Teachers’ Philosophical Viewpoints

Along with these specific methods of intervention, teachers discussed more of their philosophical viewpoints. The themes that teachers incorporated into their philosophical viewpoints included their views regarding certain types of interventions, and how they defined the goals of interventions, the importance of understanding children's lives and what children may be going through outside of the classroom, as well as their overall opinions regarding the treatment of children.

### Views of Certain Behavior Interventions

Teachers discussed, throughout their interviews, the ways they viewed certain responses to children's behavior. Separation was mentioned by two teachers as the most disliked intervention. "Separation is the least useful [intervention]; all it does is separate that child and it doesn't help him to deal with his feelings and what is going on" (01). Three other teachers talked about reactions such as yelling at or belittling a child for certain types of behavior. "I think reacting strongly, scolding behavior, belittling behavior is least useful. Yelling is not helpful at all; it doesn't help, it just escalates it. Any of the negative language is not useful. Threats don't work" (02). "Just hollering at them for no reason. That would be the worst thing" (05). "Raising your voice... it is feeding the problem more than solving it" (03).

### The Goals of Intervention

Overall goals of interventions were important for teachers. They felt that interventions should be considered a tool from which a child can learn: "Teach them to

build, you know, on their free time; teach them to build. Instead of tearing down, building up” (02).

You have to be a little bit flexible and creative... You have to try to catch them before, take care of it, and make amends afterward. It is a three step process. I think being very flexible is the key(06).

### Understanding Children’s Lives

The value of understanding children’s lives outside the classroom was important to participants. Throughout interviews, all six teachers spoke of the many difficult things that go on in the lives of the children that they care for. One participant elaborated:

I am finding out that there are so many children that are hurting, that are going hungry, and a lot of kids don’t even get the adequate rest. They are going through hell sometimes. We are the radar that picks up on these things and follows the right channels, so to speak (03).

### The Overall Treatment of Children

Two teachers stated that the overall treatment of children was the most important thing to remember when dealing with children’s negative affective language.

The most important thing is to take them seriously because they are trying to tell you something, and this is the only way they know how to do it. To listen, to listen and try to help them through it, and to try to get the child to talk about what is really bottled up in there (01).

“Listen to what they have to say and treat them as a human being. They are just little, but they can have a mind, too, you know” (05).

### Teacher’s Identified Knowledge Base

All six of the teachers interviewed reported attending in-service trainings though their job sites as being a part of their knowledge base. Four of the six teachers interviewed stated that work experience and observation of other teachers was the primary method in which they learned how to deal with emotionally and behaviorally challenging children. Two out of six teachers reported that they had accessed support services available including early childhood mental health consultants or psychiatrists when dealing with a particularly difficult child.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings from teacher’s individual interviews regarding their interpretations of children’s acting out behaviors in the classroom. Characteristics of the sample was provided. Findings were categorized into themes, including behavior characteristics and motivations, affective messages and their ascribed meanings, and teacher’s responses to children’s affective language. The next chapter will discuss these findings as they relate to the current literature regarding the topic of preschool children’s negative affective language and the theoretical frameworks, including Attachment Theory and Social Ecological Theory. This final chapter will also discuss the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as present ideas for future research.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

### Overview

In this study, six teachers shared their interpretations, perceptions and thoughts regarding preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom. They shared openly their experiences working with children who display emotionally and behaviorally disruptive behaviors in the classroom, meeting the purpose of this research.

While the perceptions and interpretations of the preschool teachers in this study are not intended to reflect the interpretations of the total population of preschool teachers regarding preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom, much can be learned from this study. This chapter begins with a discussion of the major findings of the study, followed by the strengths and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with implications for practice, policy and research.

### Discussion

The findings of this study coincide with and support, in many instances, the major themes presented throughout the literature regarding the emotional behavioral difficulties of preschool children. While teachers did not use the same technical phrasing, and did not present any in-depth psychological causes for preschool children's negative affective language, they did present multiple anecdotal situations to describe children's behaviors and characteristics, and they related specific occurrences to support their interpretations. There are multiple connections in the areas of the characteristics of children that contribute to the development of emotional and behavioral difficulties, risk factors

associated with the development of emotional behavioral difficulties, and professional responses to children's negative affective language. Teachers' interpretations did differ from the professional literature in some areas. The most prominent difference occurred in the area of attachment. Literature discusses frequently the nature and quality of a child's initial attachment to a primary caregiver and how those attachments can significantly impact a child's tendency to develop persistent emotional behavioral difficulties. Additional differences were found between the teachers' responses to acting out behaviors and the professional responses, as cited in the literature.

#### Characteristics of Children that Contribute to the Development of Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties in Preschool Children

Regarding the characteristics of children that contribute to the development of emotional and behavioral difficulties in preschoolers, consistencies were found in the areas of poor social control and age appropriate social skills, specifically the lack of verbal language skills, narrow affective expression, and difficulty interpreting the affective expression of others, inappropriate responses to emotional stimuli and inability to regulate emotions, high levels of cognitive arousal, as well as showing signs of difficulty within peer relationships.

#### Poor Social Control and Deficits in Age Appropriate Social Skills

Teachers, throughout their interviews, discussed the importance of helping children to engage in appropriate prosocial interactions. The need to assist children in



developing skills in the area of verbal language that will reflect a child's emotional state was a common theme presented by teachers. Teachers also discussed the importance of helping children to learn appropriate problem solving skills, in order to facilitate the development of prosocial behaviors.

#### Narrow Affective Language

There was much focus placed by teachers on the variety of feelings that children could be exhibiting through their affective language. Teachers' descriptions of tantrums and acting out behaviors were reported throughout the study. These descriptions were similar to the behaviors and characteristics representing the narrow range of affect described in the literature, yet the ascribed emotion that those behaviors represented were considered by teachers to exist on very wide continuum.

#### Inappropriate Responses to Emotional Stimuli

Teachers reflected on the aggressive and often physical reactions that children gave in response to an emotional stimulus. Throughout interviews, impulsive acts such as hitting, biting, throwing toys, and kicking were all mentioned by teachers as reactions that children, who display emotional and behavioral difficulties, may exhibit when he/she reaches a heightened emotional state. One teacher also discussed the under-responsive child who will withdraw from situations.

#### High Level of Cognitive Arousal

Throughout the interviews, teachers' comments implied the need for a high level of cognitive arousal in the classroom. Discussions regarding the importance of structure and having appropriate activities going on in the classroom setting, as a method of proactive intervention, points to the need for cognitive stimulation. Research points to the fact that children will seek out stimulation and will create stimulation - positive or negative - if there is none present to engage them. Teachers, through their structure and planning, are hoping to set up an environment for the child that will provide appropriate stimulation, and reduce the need for the child to create it through aggressive behavior.

#### Difficulty With Peers

Teachers, in their interviews, described the need for close supervision and assistance in group play, as a part of working with children who displayed acting out behaviors in the classroom. While there was little direct discussion on the development of peer relationships, it was apparent through teachers' descriptions of instances where children exhibited aggressive behaviors that this could indeed be a significant issue for children.

#### Risk Factors Associated with the Development of Emotional Behavioral

##### Difficulties in Preschoolers

Consistent with the literature regarding risk factors that are associated with the development of emotional behavioral difficulties in preschool children, teachers, throughout their interviews, discussed the effects of children's lives outside of their

preschool classroom setting. Family variables apart from the parent child relationship were the most frequently mentioned by teachers. Many of the teachers interviewed spoke of difficult situations having an effect on children's behavior and that most often, when children were experiencing difficulties, teachers would come to find that some event or crisis had occurred at home. Examples that teachers provided included such things as parents arguing throughout the night, parents separating, family violence and/or neighborhood violence. At least one teacher also identified parental actions and reactions to children as risk factors, such as the parent who uses yelling as their primary form of communication with their child.

### Professional Responses

In the area of professional responses to children's negative affective language, teachers' responses were consistent with the literature in two of three areas. Respecting the child and the experiences that a child holds as a part of his/her identity was very much a part of how teachers interpreted children's acting out behaviors in the classroom. Recognizing that all behaviors have meaning was also a significant theme for teachers. The area that is less consistent with the literature relates to methods of changing behavior patterns in these children. The literature emphasizes that professionals must accept that patterns of behavior are not changed through reasoning, explaining, criticizing, or questioning a child's behavior or motive but rather, they are changed through nurturing and the consistent offer of new experiences. While teachers affirmed throughout their interviews that belittling a child or yelling at a child is not a useful intervention, teachers

did seek out the motives for behavior and they attempted to redirect and teach children, using reasoning and explaining new methods of handling conflict. Positive attention was mentioned by teachers as one of the most significant tools they had for proactive interventions, and this would imply an effort to establish a nurturing relationship. However, no teacher spoke specifically about the positive impact of a nurturing relationship or how that nurturing relationship creates a foundation for growth in a range of areas from cognitive to social, emotional, and physical. While the teaching of prosocial interactions and problem solving skills was looked at by teachers as an offer for new experiences, from which a child can grow and learn, this may not wholly match what was meant throughout the literature as “nurturing and the consistent offer of new experiences”.

### Interpreting Acting Out Behavior

When asked about characteristics of preschoolers’ acting out and tantruming behaviors, teachers identified very similar behaviors. Descriptions for both included physically aggressive behaviors such as hitting and biting, and verbally aggressive behaviors such as yelling or screaming. Anger was mentioned as an emotional motivator that was also associated with both a tantrum and a serious acting out incident. While the characteristics were the same, teachers gave the researcher the distinct impression that there were significant differences between the two behaviors. Tantrums were characterized as more normal and tended to occur when a child had identified a specific want. Acting out was considered by participants to be more aggressive in nature, with the

intent to hurt someone, possibly even the child him/herself. While teachers recognized that this behavior may stem from something deeper that the child cannot express, there is no evidence throughout the literature that would support a child intentionally planning his/her aggressive behavior with the intended purpose of hurting themselves or others. The operational definition of preschool children's acting out behavior, for this study, includes those behaviors that may place the preschool child, himself, or others at risk of being hurt emotionally or physically or of becoming unsafe. It does not associate an intentional motivation on the part of the child to purposefully engage in aggressive behaviors with the intended goal of hurting themselves or others.

### Attachment

Attachment disruptions are presented throughout the literature as one of the major characteristics and risk factors that are associated with the development of emotional and behavioral difficulties in preschoolers. Despite this documentation, attachment issues were not reported as a significant theme by teachers. Only one of six teachers used the term "attachment" during their interview. It is unclear whether teachers are aware of the significance that attachment with a primary caregiver has for a child's future relationships and behavior. It is also unclear if teachers held any knowledge of the primary attachment relationships for the children in their care. During interviews, however, teachers provided numerous examples of children's behavior that might lead a professional to consider attachment disruptions as a part of the behavior's source. One teacher described a child who, every day for a period of two weeks or more, ran from the classroom out to the

parking lot and chased after the car when his mother dropped him off. The teacher elaborated that the mother and father had recently separated and that there may have been some domestic violence. She also stated that the child had been recently returned to the care of the mother. While this child's response to his mother's departure seems to clearly signify a disrupted attachment, there was no mention of attachment, attachment theory, or the concept of attachment theory when the teacher described the child's behavior or what the child may have been feeling during that time. The teacher was able to recognize the child's fear of abandonment and attempted to reassure the child that his mother would be there to pick him up at the end of preschool. During the interview, however, the teacher did not speak of attachment at all. Another teacher spoke of a child who tantrums just prior to leaving preschool for the day. This teacher spoke of limiting choices as a way to help the child out to the bus safely ("...you can walk or I can carry you..."), but did not speak to the possibility that this child may not want to leave preschool, or that an attachment disruption may be associated with this behavior.

Another aspect of attachment that is significant for preschoolers with emotional behavioral difficulties was not discussed by teachers during their interviews. Children who have experienced disrupted attachments with primary caregivers will attempt to re-create the same type of attachment in future relationships. Children that exhibit emotional and behavioral difficulties in the classroom may be attempting to do just that with their teachers and peers. While this behavior appears aggressive and destructive, the underlying emotional goal for the child is one of security, and what is known to them

from previous relationship experiences, unsatisfactory though it may be, is what they are striving to recreate.

### Family Systems Theory and Social Ecology Theory

While teachers did not report on attachment, or Attachment Theory as a significant theme, Family Systems Theory and Social Ecology Theory were very significant to the ways that teachers interpreted children's acting out behaviors. Teachers, throughout their responses, referred to the impact that family stress and parental relationships had on children. Teachers spoke of the many benefits that came from having some background information regarding children's lives. Possessing this knowledge provided teachers with power and confidence to better understand a child's behavior. While this knowledge was viewed as helpful to the teachers, and they were very aware that these family situations were stressful for the children, teachers did not label them as risk factors. Further, teachers expressed relief when the immediate problem was resolved, but they did not focus on the longer term or additive affects of negative family or community variables.

### **Implications for Practice**

There are multiple implications for social work practice in the area of early childhood education and specifically with preschool children exhibiting emotional behavioral difficulties. Changes in society, including increased numbers of single parents and national welfare reform, are causing larger numbers of families to depend on non-

familial forms of childcare. Child care centers must be prepared to face this increase in demand, and the classroom staff must be professionally supported in order to provide the highest quality of care to children. Implementing higher standards of education for early childhood teachers that includes curriculum in the areas of child development and developmental theories would better equip preschool teachers to understand and effectively work with children who display significant emotional and behavioral difficulties. Education for preschool teachers places a high priority on preparing teachers to work effectively with a group of children. By increasing their knowledge and understanding of both the universally accepted developmental theories and the unique nature of every child's development, preschool teachers may place greater emphasis on the value of the individual relationships that nurture and promote a child's personal growth and development. Social Workers who are interested in working in the field of early intervention, or with young children as their primary clients served, would also benefit from formal educational programs, including classes that address the specific area of early childhood mental health.

There are very few child care centers that employ social workers as a part of their professional staff, despite the growing number of children who could benefit from mental health services. While the teachers that participated in this study interpreted children's acting out behaviors in a manner consistent with current literature, their level of sophistication regarding specific early childhood mental health concepts such as attachment, risk factors, and the therapeutic importance of nurturing relationships may be



brought to a more effective level with the support of a social worker who specializes in the area of early childhood mental health.

### **Implications for Policy**

This study points to the need for our nation to address the specific needs of children at risk. While preschool teachers are doing their best to meet the needs of this young population, their numbers are growing and their needs are intensifying. Early childhood professionals are being called on to provide levels of diagnostic and therapeutic services for which they have limited training and support. It is time that we begin to develop both consensus and national policies that address the needs of these children and make appropriate mental health supports available for both preschool teachers and our nation's children. Currently, the early childhood field requires the lowest level of educational requirements from its teachers. Kindergarten through high school teachers must have at least a four-year degree and a successful student teaching experience before they are allowed to teach our school-age children. Early Childhood teachers need only be eighteen years of age and as have as little experience as six months as an aide or student intern. They may be required to obtain a certificate from the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition. However, despite its recognition, this organization is not an educational institution. Further, early childhood teachers are among the lowest paid professionals in our country. Despite both of these facts, we are depending on them to nurture and teach our most vulnerable children. National policies that protect and promote the welfare of these children are the best investment we can

make in our nation's future. At a time when one in five children will exhibit behavior difficulties beyond what is considered the normal scope (Pavuluri, Luk & McGee, 1996), we can give early childhood professionals the added knowledge, resources, and support they need. Our children deserve at least that much.

### **Implications for Further Research**

While teachers discussed their interpretations of children's acting out behaviors in the classroom, more emphasis should be placed on the reasons for children's disruptive behavior, with concentration placed on discovering preschool teachers' knowledge of Attachment Theory and other theories related to the issue of emotionally and behaviorally disruptive preschoolers. Further studies, designed specifically to explore the theoretical foundations that teachers use to guide their interpretations and interventions could provide much needed directives for developing critical curriculums for pre-employment education and just as importantly, for continuing education and in-service training.

Five of the six teachers who participated in this study worked in a preschool setting that served children half-days for four days each week. Future research may benefit from seeking to discover if there are differences in teacher's responses and interpretations when they are serving emotionally behaviorally disruptive children eight hours per day, five days per week. Differences in interpretations may also occur when the number of children experiencing emotional behavioral difficulties dramatically increases or decreases within the classroom. Further in-depth research that includes teachers, children, and families as participants could provide more comprehensive information into

the area of preschoolers negative affective language, and could create the necessary baseline information from which to develop consistent strategies for working with these vulnerable children.

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MEMO

December 4, 1999

TO: Ms. Stacey D'Amico

FROM: Dr. Lucie Ferrell, IRB Chair

RE: Your IRB Application

Your study, "Early Childhood Professionals' Interpretation of Preschool Children's Acting Out Behaviors in the Classroom," received full IRB review. It was approved and you are given IRB # 99-62-3. Please use this on all official correspondence and written materials relative to your study. You do need to add the area code to the phone number stated on the "WANTED" recruitment poster.

Your research should make a positive contribution to social work knowledge on an important issue. We wish you every success.

LF:lmn

C: Dr. Laura Boisen, Advisor



# WANTED:

10 children's Division Staff Teachers  
or Special Service Specialists\* to be  
Interviewed by Stacey D'Amico

*\* with two to five years of experience*

Stacey is working on her MSW thesis  
(*Masters in Social Work*) through Augsburg  
College. The topic would be "Children's  
Acting Out Behavior in the Classroom."



The interview could take place at your Head  
Start site and would be approximately one  
hour. This is a voluntary project on your own  
time. You will be asked to sign a form  
providing your informed consent to  
participate. You would be compensated with  
a \$10.00 gift certificate to Blockbuster Video.

Call Stacey if interested [642-2085].

IRB #99-62-3

Teachers Wanted



## **Appendix C**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **Early Childhood Professionals' Interpretations of Preschool Children's Acting Out Behaviors in the Classroom**

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding early childhood professionals' interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom. You were selected as a possible participant through your employment with the Ramsey Action Program's Head Start. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. I ask that you read this form carefully, and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a participant in the study.

This study is being conducted by Stacey L. D'Amico as a part of her Masters of Social Work thesis at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, MN.

#### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to gather information from teachers and other early childhood special service professionals regarding preschool children's emotional and behavioral difficulties, exhibited in the classroom setting. Interview questions will focus on early childhood professionals' interpretation of children's tantrums and disruptive behaviors, and how these professionals gain knowledge and make decisions regarding interventions.

#### **Procedure**

If you agree to be a participant in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

- 1) Sign and date two copies of this informed consent form: one copy for you to keep and one copy for me to keep with the data for the study.
- 2) Participate in one face-to-face interview with me, which will take approximately one hour and will include questions regarding your interpretations of preschool children's acting out behaviors in the classroom, as well as your thoughts on interventions.
- 3) Provide a method of contact for follow-up, if clarification regarding any of your responses is needed after the completion of the interview.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Participating in the Study**

The risk involved in participating in this study is that you may feel pressure to give correct or right responses to the interview questions. The purpose of this study is to gain honest information without judgment of right or wrong. If at any time during the interview you wish to not answer a question or to end the interview, you may do so.

## **Informed Consent page 2.**

There are no direct benefits (such as payment) to participation in this study.

You will receive a \$10.00 gift certificate to Blockbuster Video as a token for participation in the study. The gift certificate will be given to you at the conclusion of the interview.

Indirect benefits to the participant may include increased understanding of preschool children's emotional behavioral outbursts, including interventions.

## **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher and the Thesis Advisor will have access to the records.

Interviews will be tape-recorded. Only the researcher and Thesis Advisor will have access to the tape recordings. Interview recordings will only be used for the purpose of this educational thesis and will be erased at the completion of the project, estimated to be in April of 2000.

Audio recordings of the interviews will be transcribed by the researcher.

Raw data obtained for the purpose of this study will be retained, but all identifying information will be removed by April of 2000.

## **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your future relationship with either Ramsey Action Program's Head Start or Augsburg College. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. One \$10.00 gift certificate will be given to each participant who completes the face-to-face interview. Participants who withdraw prior to completing the interview will not receive this benefit.

## **Contacts and Questions**

The researcher conducting this study is Stacey L. D'Amico. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions later, you may contact me at (651) 642-2085.

You may also contact Laura Boisen, Assistant Professor at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, MN, who is the Thesis Advisor for this project at (612) 330-1439.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

**Informed Consent page 3.**

**Statement of Consent**

**I have read and understand the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. I consent to participate in this study.**

**Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_**

**Signature of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_**

**I consent to having my face-to-face interview audiotaped.**

**Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_**

**I consent for the researcher to use quotes from my face-to-face interview without identifying my name.**

**Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_**

## Appendix D

### Interview Guide

#### Early Childhood Professionals' Interpretations of Preschool Children's Acting Out Behaviors in the Classroom

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Time of the Interview \_\_\_\_\_

*The first section of questions focuses on interpreting acting-out behaviors*

1. What does tantrum mean to you?
2. What are the characteristics of a tantrum?
  - Behaviors?
  - Duration?
  - Intensity?
3. Do you distinguish between a tantrum and a serious acting out incident?
4. When you think about a tantrum and a serious acting out incident, what are the differences?
  - Behaviors?
  - Numbers of times occurring within a day or week?
  - Duration?
  - Intensity?
5. Approximately how many tantrums by children do you see throughout a week?  
(Probe: On any given day what might be an average)
6. How many children that you are currently working with display serious acting-out behaviors while in your care?
7. What do you consider the characteristics of a serious acting-out incident?  
(Probe: hitting, spitting, throwing toys, hurting self or others)
8. Think about a time when a child you were working with acted out in a physically or emotionally disruptive manner. Without identifying the child, describe the episode.
  - What did you see?
  - What did you feel?
  - How did you react?

## **Interview Guide page 2.**

How do you think the child felt?

9. Do you believe that children's emotional or behavioral outbursts are a form of non verbal language?  
Why or why not?
10. If you do believe that children's emotional behavioral outbursts are a form of non-verbal language, what are some of children's messages?  
(Probe: for example if a child threw a block, what might this action be trying to say)
11. In your experience are these messages unique to each child?
12. Without identifying the child can you provide an example of a child's acting out behavior and your interpretation it's perceived message(s).

### ***The next section of questions focuses on interventions***

13. Are there cues that signal an upcoming emotional or behavioral outbursts?  
If yes, what might some of those cues be?
14. In your experience, are there interventions that will prevent an outburst?  
If yes, what are some of these prevention techniques?
15. Once a child is tantruming, do you intervene?  
If yes, what are some of these intervention techniques?
16. When a child is tantruming, at what point do you decide to intervene or not to intervene?
17. What experiences have helped you to structure your decisions?
18. What are the most useful interventions you have discovered to deal with an emotional behavioral outburst from a child?
19. What are the least useful interventions you have discovered?
20. How did you learn these interventions?
21. If someone asked you to talk about children's emotional behavioral outburst, what would you think were the most important things to tell them?

**Interview Guide page 3.**

***Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences with me. There are just a few questions left, for statistical purposes, regarding your background.***

- 22. What is your current position?
- 23. How long have you worked in the field of early childhood education?
- 24. What is your educational background?
- 25. Have you ever received any specific training on emotionally behaviorally disruptive preschoolers?  
If yes, where did you receive this training?
- 26. Is there a number where I can contact you if I have any need for further clarification of your answers from today's interview?

***Thank you again, I really appreciate your time and help.***

