



Volume 37
Number 3
November 2017

Early Years

An International Research Journal



ISSN: 0957-5146 (Print) 1472-4421 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceye20>

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To cite this article: Kendra M. Hall-Kenyon & Alessandro A. Rosborough (2017) Exploring pedagogical relationships in the context of free play, *Early Years*, 37:3, 326-337, DOI: [10.1080/09575146.2016.1183190](https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2016.1183190)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2016.1183190>



Published online: 12 Aug 2016.



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Exploring pedagogical relationships in the context of free play

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood advocates agree that positive teacher–child relationships are critical to classroom quality. Much research has emphasized quantifiable teacher characteristics and child outcomes without fully capturing the complexity of these relationships. Drawing on extensive classroom observations, two video-recorded free play sessions and teacher interviews, this study explored some of the ways that preschool teachers create and maintain positive relationships, with emphasis on how they care for the children: their ways of *being with* and *for* them. The results of this study provide practical examples for building and sustaining teacher–child relationships, help delineate the complexity of the relationships that exist in preschool classrooms and demonstrate the everyday ways in which those relationships are foundational for children’s learning and development.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 October 2015

Accepted 24 April 2016

KEYWORDS

Teacher–child relationships;
free play; preschool

Many scholars have studied the correlation between teacher–child relationships, including interactions and attachment, and child development and learning (see Burchinal et al. 2008, 2010; Hamre and Pianta 2005; Howes et al. 2008). Although these studies may not focus specifically on play, results generally agree on the importance of positive relationships, regardless of instructional context, in early childhood classrooms. Different facets of teacher–child relationships have been explored, including the form and characteristics of those that best support child development (Hamre and Pianta 2001; Pianta 1994; Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman 2003); consistency of teachers’ emotional support (Curby, Brock, and Hamre 2013); relationship between attachment and school readiness (Commodari 2013); and role of relationships in early school adjustment (e.g. academic performance, self-directedness, positive engagement with school environments; Birch and Ladd 1997). In addition, teacher characteristics (e.g. level of education, years of experience, job satisfaction) have been associated with teacher–child classroom interactions (Bowman, Donovan, and Burns 2000; Mill and Romano-White 1999; Pianta et al. 2005; Thomason and La Paro 2012; Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot 2010).

Typically, studies of teacher–child relationships have been driven by questions of their impact on specific child outcomes. Reviewing this work reveals the difficulty of adequately capturing the complexity and richness of teacher–student relationships, especially through

quantification and set learning outcomes. The challenge is illustrated in van Manen's (1994) description of the pedagogical relation:

[A pedagogical] relation is a life experience that has significance in and of itself. Our relation to a real teacher – someone in whose presence we experience a heightened sense of self and real growth and personal development – is possibly more profound and more consequential than the experience of relations of friendship, love, and so forth. (143)

Such relationships are difficult to codify and measure, yet they undergird all that teachers do in supporting individual children's growth, development and well-being (CSEFEL 2008). Our intent is to explore the complexities of teacher–child relationships, with specific emphasis on the ways in which teachers care for, support and teach young children. We believe a deeper, more exploratory look at the various interactions during free play time that naturally occur in preschool settings, in this case a pre-k (prekindergarten) classroom for 4- and 5-year olds in the USA, will help illuminate the complexities of pedagogical relationships. Ultimately, it is our hope that we can help broaden the view of what pre-k teachers actually *do* as they build and maintain positive, supportive relationships with children.

Teacher–child interactions during free play

During free play children have numerous opportunities to learn new cognitive skills as well as to practice and develop social and emotional skills such as problem-solving, cooperation, empathy and self-regulation (Ashiabi 2007; UNICEF 2012). The type and quality of teacher–child interactions are considered critical to the quality of children's play experiences (McWilliam, Scarborough, and Kim 2003; Test and Cornelius-White 2013). However, debate persists regarding the level of teacher involvement (teacher-directed vs. child-directed; see Trawick-Smith 2012), including some concern about teachers acting too 'teacherly' in play and/or misusing 'children's play to attain their own educational goals' (Singer 2015, 28).

In informal play interactions, teachers make important decisions about when and how to support or intervene as children negotiate peer relationships (see Stanton-Chapman 2015). This requires more than playing side by side, but purposefully and appropriately making decisions about how and when to support the child who is working toward greater independence. Teachers must be able to draw from a wide variety of teaching strategies in order to effectively support children's play interactions. However, as Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2010) have noted, 'what is critical is not the specific type of interaction that is selected, but whether there is a good fit between this interaction and the amount and type of support children need' (108). This requires much more than 'just technical skill' (ibid., 108).

We strongly agree that supporting children in free play is more than 'just technical skill'. We believe teacher dispositions are heavily involved. Providing support includes forms of knowledge though, as van Manen (1991) argues, it is more about ways of acting and being. Increasing evidence suggests that teachers' own social and emotional competencies also impact classroom quality and students' behaviors (Brown et al. 2010; Hamre et al. 2008). Thus, in addition to thinking of teachers as having the necessary training or skills to build and support relationships in ECE classrooms, we need to consider how teachers as growing and changing human beings are central in the classroom ecology (Farmer, Lines, and Hamm 2011).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this article is to describe the ways in which two preschool teachers created and maintained positive relationships in their classroom. Differing from much of the research base focused on quantifiable characteristics and/or child outcomes, our goal is to focus on relationships as life experience (van Manen 1991). Thus, we describe both the forms of teacher knowledge *and* the teacher's ways of *being with* and *for* children that proved to be supportive and sustaining.

Method

Setting

Data for this study were collected in one classroom of a large multi-county program of Head Start, the largest early childhood education program in the USA. Preschool sessions were held Monday–Thursday in morning and afternoon half-day blocks, with Friday reserved for teacher planning and professional development. Each session included 17 children, who participated in small and large group activities, outdoor time and free choice time, as well as a meal (breakfast or lunch) and a snack. Program content was structured by 'The Creative Curriculum' (Dodge, Colker, and Heroman 2002), but included elements of other common early childhood education programs.

Following the Teaching Pyramid (CSEFEL 2008), the program was built on the assumption that success depended wholly on 'positive relationships with children, families and colleagues' (Fox et al. 2003). Such relationships support all program learning and development aims. The teachers in this study explicitly taught social–emotional skills using Second Step, the adopted social-emotional curriculum. Second Step consists of five units – emphasizing skills such as empathy, emotion management, friendship and problem-solving. Each unit is organized into weekly concepts: For example, the unit on emotion management includes naming feelings, managing anger and managing waiting.

As outlined by the Second Step curriculum, weekly concepts were taught explicitly during large group sessions in short 5–7 min lessons, most including scenarios featuring pictures or puppets. Target skills were then practised and revisited throughout the day, particularly during free play and outdoor time, using a solution box with ideas for solving problems (e.g. share, set a timer, ask them to stop), that children could use when interacting with peers and negotiating relationships.

The teachers

Melissa and Brenda are both experienced teachers. Melissa, the lead teacher, was unmarried and in her thirties during the study; she had been teaching at Head Start for 13 years. With no initial plans to be a teacher, she had a degree in English literature, a minor in interior design, and a desire to be a writer. While in school she had worked in a preschool and as a buyer/merchandizer. Dissatisfied with merchandizing, she arranged for more hours at the preschool; after about a year, Melissa began taking classes toward her entry level credential (Child Development Associate – CDA) and moved to Head Start at a friend's suggestion.

Over the years, Melissa, for various reasons, has seriously considered leaving teaching but has been drawn back by the children. When interviewed, Melissa said she loves her work

at Head Start, but would like to get married and have a family of her own. She foresees herself doing something else in the future: raising her own children, writing and volunteering with a preschool program.

Brenda, the assistant teacher, was married and in her late twenties during the study. Brenda immigrated to the US with her family as a young child and attended Head Start, which she loved. Living nearby, Brenda went often to her teacher's house, to read and learn English. Brenda said she has always wanted to teach in Head Start, although previously she worked in an infant/toddler classroom. She has a CDA qualification, but no college experience. Looking ahead, Brenda would like to go back to school but is not sure what she wants to do in the future.

Melissa and Brenda had been teaching together for three years when this study began; interviewed separately, both reported they loved working together and could not imagine being at Head Start without each other. In a program of more than 120 teachers, Melissa was one of 6 master teachers; she considered this honor a recognition for the team. The classroom was located in a lab school at a community college. Thus, teachers were expected to mentor pre-service teachers enrolled in an associate degree program, and Melissa often guest-lectured in early childhood courses on campus.

Procedures

With our University Institutional Review Board (IRB), Head Start program administration and teacher approval, the first author spent the 2013–2014 school year observing in the classroom approximately once per week from October to May, a total of 75 h, taking extensive field notes during each observation. Both teachers participated in bi-monthly recorded interviews (three individual interviews each and three interviews together as a team, for a total of nine interviews), focused on questions related to the observations, personal and work lives of teachers, teaming, beliefs about teaching and family involvement with Head Start. Teachers were paid \$25 for each interview. All interviews were transcribed for analysis. The intent of the interviews and observations was to understand the teachers' perspectives, including how they understood their work, in order to make sense of their relationships with the children and each other and to see how they interacted with the children in free play/outdoor time. The focus was on opportunities for the teachers to make their thinking about teaching and their interactions in the classrooms explicit.

On two separate days the teachers were video-recorded during free play, for which they signed an additional consent form and were paid \$50 a session. They provided written permission to use their actual names in the paper because their identities could not be masked in the videos. Parents also signed consent forms to allow their children to participate in the video sessions. Children were informed of the video sessions. The researchers pointed out where the cameras were placed throughout the classroom and explained that the videos would be shown to other teachers who were interested in how children play and learn in preschool. Head Start administrative and university IRB approval allowed video recordings to include children's first names, since the children used first names during natural classroom interaction. All other names in the paper are pseudonyms.

After the video recordings, the teachers participated in a video elicitation interview (see Jewitt 2012), during which they viewed with the first author five video clips, some of

teacher–child interactions and some of children’s peer interactions. After each clip, the teachers described what was going on, identified and explained the decisions behind their actions (if relevant) and reflected on the children’s actions and behaviors in the context of what they knew about the children and their individual learning goals. As a member check, a final draft of the paper was shared with the teachers, who were asked to provide feedback, make suggestions and identify any inaccurate information. Both teachers read the paper and suggested no corrections.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed inductively (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The data were coded for evidence of relationships and social/emotional competencies. This was done for two reasons. First, because the teachers indicated that the majority of what they do during free play time focused on social/emotional learning and development and second, because strong social/emotional skills serve as the foundation for the development of all positive relationships. Thus, the interview transcripts were read and coded for statements related to classroom relationships (teacher–teacher, teacher–child, child–child, teacher–parent and child–parent), and then re-reviewed to code statements related to social and emotional competencies (CSEFEL 2008). Field notes (taken during classroom observations) were similarly reviewed and coded for evidence of classroom relationships and then for teaching, modeling or demonstration of social and emotional competencies.

Episodes and interview quotes were purposefully selected to describe evidence of the ways in which relationships were built or maintained by the teachers, although all statements or episodes related to relationships were identified. Naturally, there were challenging situations, some of which are represented in the examples below. However, as stated above, our general focus was on the ways in which relationships were built and maintained. Once all interviews and observations were coded, the episodes were discussed among the authors and selected if they were representative of the teachers’ interactions across the data-set and illustrated the ways teachers built and maintained relationships.

To deepen and expand our view of the classroom interactions, transcripts of the two video-recorded sessions were also coded for evidence of teacher–child and child–child relationships. Our intent was to illuminate the ways in which the teachers supported child–child relationships and built social-emotional competencies. It was our assumption that the teacher–child relationships would be inherent in these interactions, although not the singular focus. Five video clips were selected from the two video-recorded sessions to share with the teachers during the video elicitation interviews. Video clips were purposefully selected to exemplify incidences when objectives were impeded by some problem or challenge that required collaboration to overcome¹. This was done to help illuminate the strength of relationships, which is particularly evident when facing a challenge, thus revealing what the children knew about working together, getting along, empathy, sharing, problem-solving, etc. and then also illustrating the teachers’ response and support as children faced challenging interactions. These moments were not only identified through verbal discourse, but also manifested through the participants’ eye-gazes, gestures, use of objects and physical proximity and shared space in the activity. The emphasis was on both common and unusual patterns of interaction that were potentially enlightening. Teachers’ responses to the five video clips from the elicitation interviews were combined with the researchers’ analysis of

the video transcripts. Due to space constraints, data from only three of the five video clips are included in this paper.

Findings

The findings from this study are organized into three sections. The first section characterizes the nature of the teacher–child relationships, focusing on how the teachers were *present* for the children and how their relationships provided the foundation to explore and negotiate children's emerging social and emotional skills. The second section considers ways in which teacher–teacher relationships may have impacted the overall classroom ecology, with emphasis on how the teachers' interactions with each other potentially shaped all other interactions in the classroom. The third and final section includes a link to three videos illustrating children's peer interactions and teachers' support in free play.

Relationships with the children

Both Melissa and Brenda valued the relationships they built with the children. Melissa recalled a time when she felt burned out and ready to leave Head Start. She decided to stay because of a relationship she had with one child in her class.

I decided ... I can't give up on myself. I can't give up on this child. I'm going to see this year through ... I want to be here for her and the other children. I just realized how much of an effect [teachers] have on [children] and how much effect they have on you. (Melissa, interview, 16 October 2013)

Most Head Start teachers like Melissa and Brenda are motivated by a strong service ethic, which is a common driving motivation for their work (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, and MacKay 2012).

Much of what we observed as evidence for teacher–child relationships included sincere expressions of love, concern and appreciation, but represented mutuality and respect rather than selflessness. Melissa and Brenda gained a lot of satisfaction from teaching and did not think of the children as having deficits (James 2012). Their respect was sometimes expressed with simple thanks ('Thank you for having lunch with me' [field notes, 9 October 2013]) or a hug, or a genuine compliment ('That is a great idea; we can make a list of who gets a turn next' [field notes, 4 March 2014]). Other expressions invited children to care for one another: 'Look at our friend Jackson. How is he feeling?' (field notes, 16 October 2013); 'Who will help Timothy?' (field notes, 10 April 2014). These expressions of concern, care and love were foundational to all that Melissa and Brenda did to build strong, positive, trusting relationships with the children.

In addition to expressing genuine concern, Melissa and Brenda responded to children's requests as part of building and strengthening classroom and teacher–child relations, particularly during free choice time: for example, if children wanted to get out paints that had not been a planned activity for the day or play with puppets, books or other materials that had been part of large group instruction. Whenever possible, Melissa and Brenda allowed children to choose from almost all of the classroom materials.

Melissa and Brenda's classroom was a warm, happy place, as is the case in many early childhood classrooms (La Paro et al. 2009). But they balanced responsiveness with appropriate levels of demandingness (Marion 2010), a necessary aspect of mutuality. For example,

when three boys were creating a mess at the water center, Melissa closed the center and asked the boys to clean up so that she could reopen it. Dylan hid in a small cabinet in another center. Melissa helped the other boys start cleaning up and went to find Dylan. Although it took some persistence, Dylan agreed to help. Melissa joined in with the clean up and remarked, 'Look at us! We are working together, good teamwork!' (field notes 10 December 13).

Observations showed that the teachers genuinely enjoyed the children and did all they could to help them be successful, but the children had to meet expectations as well. On a difficult day, Ryan resisted leaving the playground, 'hiding' in plain sight. Brenda played along, saying, 'I see your body! I found you!' She reached out to guide him to go inside. Ryan said, 'Melissa couldn't find me'. Brenda replied, with a knowing grin, 'But I found you!' Ryan hugged Brenda and went inside. The power in this interaction was in the simple, but genuine engagement; they truly 'saw' each other (Levinas 1969). Brenda was not trying to manipulate Ryan or use 'false tactfulness' to control the situation for her own benefit (van Manen 1991, 137), something teachers often do to maintain conformity and behavior management. She fully engaged with Ryan as a person (field notes, 19 May 2014).

Achieving positive adult-child relationships begins with respect for the children, a critical component of all effective relationships (Missildine 1962). Melissa and Brenda respected and responded willingly to the children's needs and desires, while helping them follow classroom procedures and fulfill expectations. An example deepens the point. During a study of buildings, Zachary built a block tower. At clean up time, he did not want to take it down. Assessing the situation, Melissa asked Zachary if she could help him clean up. She then waited for his permission instead of just cleaning up the blocks. Several minutes passed as he deliberated. In the meantime, Melissa complimented him on different aspects of his building and suggested that he might be an architect some day (field notes, 12 November 2013). In building pedagogical relations, Melissa and Brenda consistently focused on how the child was experiencing a situation or event, which, as van Manen (1991) argues, is 'the most important question' (11) when teaching.

Relationship between teachers

In addition to the significance of teacher-child relationships (already widely accepted), we noted the importance of the teacher-teacher relationship, a phenomenon less studied (Bullough 2015). Interactions between Melissa and Brenda significantly impacted day-to-day classroom interactions. Their relationship, which was evident to the children, was an important component of the classroom ecology.

In interviews and observations, the strong positive relationship between Melissa and Brenda was evident. They liked each other and enjoyed working together. Brenda said,

We miss each other in the summer. That's how bad it is. She'll call me ... in the summer. I'm like come over to my house and watch movies or we'll go to lunch. So we're friends and [that] makes [our team] better. (Brenda, interview, 31 March 2014)

Although they had only been teaching together for three years, neither could imagine teaching without the other. 'We both [say], 'You go, I go!' (Melissa, interview, 8 April 2014).

The power of the teachers' relationship was evident throughout the entire data-set. They referred to each other as 'my friend Melissa/Brenda', often sought each other's help and advice and always expressed appreciation for each other. Melissa, the lead teacher, was aware of Brenda's responsibilities and frequently offered assistance with set up or cleaning

tasks, something reported as rare for lead teachers when roles are sharply divided (Sosinsky and Gilliam 2011).

[We're] a team. Whatever you do, I expect myself to do ... Brenda does end up doing a lot of the cleaning, but she really does like to do that and she likes to be doing the food and stuff. I mean, I always say, 'Do you want my help, do you want me to do that today?' I really want her to know that I appreciate all that she does and that ... she could say, 'Melissa, it's your turn,' and I would do it in a second. ... I don't even like to call her my assistant; I like to say, 'This is my other teacher, my co-worker' because I respect her. (Melissa, interview, 16 December 2013)

Similarly, Brenda gave Melissa complete support. 'I'm here to make Melissa's job easier, and she's here to make mine [easier]' (Brenda, interview, 16 December 2013). Like most effective teams, each seemed to know what the other needed and when she needed it.

The teachers' strong positive relationship enabled them to better manage challenging situations. One morning Ryan, a child who evidenced extreme emotional trauma related to problems at home, clung to his mother and screamed and cried when she attempted to leave. Gently, Melissa helped separate him from his mother. When his mother left, Ryan continued screaming and began pounding his fists on the floor. Rising, he bolted to the door to follow his mother. Caught, he tried again, this time getting through the doorway with Brenda close behind. Melissa stood by the door, both watching the children in the classroom and monitoring the crisis in the hallway, ready to help. To the class, Melissa calmly said, 'It looks like one of our friends is missing his family'. For 10 min, Ryan screamed, kicked and thrashed about. Brenda took him to the library area where he gradually began to calm, sporadically screaming and tossing books. For at least 20 min, Brenda sat with him. Ryan struggled throughout the day, throwing blocks at other children, hitting and kicking. Throughout this chaotic and emotionally challenging day, Brenda and Melissa took turns attending to Ryan, sometimes working together physically when he lost control, often commenting on how a particular situation had been addressed and then discussing what to do next (field notes, 23 October 2013). They remained calm, united and consistent in their actions as they worked to stabilize the situation and direct the class. Their actions and mutual support seemed natural, fluid and sharply focused on necessary tasks. Although this day was somewhat unusual, the pattern of communication and support was evident across all observations.

This said, Brenda and Melissa did not always agree on a course of action. In disagreement the quality of relations is particularly evident. One day Brenda was irritated that Melissa had put the beads out for the children to play with during free choice time, and reminded her of the extra time required to clean them up. Melissa explained that she had put the beads out because she felt she needed to respond to a child's request (field notes, 19 May 2014). A minor disagreement, but illustrative of how disagreements were handled, as Brenda explained:

I [just] tell her and then she [says], 'Okay,' and we fix it. ... I'll just [say], 'Melissa, that's not working,' and she [says], 'Okay, what can we do?' So we're always trying to fix [things], and I think that's what's making our relationship stronger: We don't hold back. I tell her and she tells me and we fix it. (Brenda, interview, 13 November 2013)

For Melissa and Brenda, titles and roles were unimportant; each gave priority to the needs of the other, and they communicated openly (see Bedford, Jackson, and Wilson 2008; Detert and Edmondson 2006).

While some may disagree with our view of the importance of the teachers' relationships, we agree with Farmer, Lines, and Hamm (2011) concerning the need to 'reveal the invisible hand ... [and] clarify whether and how teachers can use their capacity to lead the classroom social context in ways that promote students' positive classroom behaviors and interpersonal competencies' (252). Most preschool classrooms use a team teaching model, with a lead and assistant teacher working together to take care of children and support their learning and development. Little is researched concerning the nature of these team relationships, but we believe that the nature and quality of teacher–teacher interactions tend to establish the environment for the larger classroom social context and serve as models for children's interactions.

Examples of building social and emotional competencies in free play

The three video evaluations offered a method for the teachers to review and reflect on relationships and evidence of their students' socio-emotional competencies near the end of the school year. The video samples demonstrate the identification of challenges (see previous methodology: analysis section), providing a setting where collaboration was needed by the participants to overcome the problem. The videos also display the overarching role and importance of the *relationship building experience* as emphasized by van Manen (1994). Each video² includes a brief narrative introduction and analysis: Video 1: <https://vimeo.com/178079930>; Video 2: <https://vimeo.com/178080629>; Video 3: <https://vimeo.com/178081089>.

Conclusion

The process of building and maintaining positive teacher–child relationships involves every interaction, large or small, (Ostrosky and Jung n.d.). As this paper demonstrates, how preschool teachers develop and support relationships with children is intimately connected to how they care for and interact with children. Research has illustrated the importance of teacher characteristics in teacher–child relationships (Bowman, Donovan, and Burns 2000; Mill and Romano-White 1999; Pianta et al. 2005; Thomason and La Paro 2012; Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot 2010); however, many describe characteristics that seem to suggest that building relationships is more about teachers' skills and less about their humanity. Thus, neglecting the fact that relationships are largely based on truly *being with* the other and *acting through* challenges together.

Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) model of a prosocial classroom, which highlights the influence of the teacher's social/emotional competence and well-being on the development and maintenance of productive teacher–child relationships, helps address the issue, by broadening the view of how positive relationships are built, maintained and measured. We believe there is still much more that needs to be done in order for early childhood educators to fully recognize the power of the pedagogical relationship described by van Manen:

[T]he pedagogue is ... someone who can be relied upon, who believes in this child, who accompanies this child some distance through life, sharing what he or she knows, showing what one can be, and creating the conditions and secure spaces for young people to play an active part in their own becoming ... it can mean, or rather it should mean, that the teacher can ... affect the whole person but only in his or her particular way and only for a limited time – yet with consequences that are infinite and lifelong. (1994, 162)

Ultimately, we need to think beyond a set of desired competencies and value teacher–child relationships for what they are, life-changing, life-fulfilling experiences. Certainly, pedagogical relationships can serve as a foundation from which critical social and emotional competencies can and do grow, but the relationship is also, in and of itself, valuable and meaningful (van Manen 1991). Like Hännikäinen (1999), who explored the notion of togetherness and its impact on positive emotional relations, we believe greater attention must be given to the many ways in which teachers and children live together as part of an ever-growing and changing classroom ecology. Thus, as we have argued in this paper, it is important to further explore and describe the ways in which teachers like Melissa and Brenda can impact the lives of children because of who they are and their ways of *being with* and *for* children.

Notes

1. Collaborations that demonstrate joint-attention and shared-intentionality to overcome challenges or problems are always socio-emotionally based experiences regardless of high or low cognitively demanding tasks. Vygotsky (1998) termed such emotional experiences as *perezhivanie*.
2. IRB approval was obtained, including parental and participant consent to display video of the children shown in this video (see methodology section).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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