

## An Examination of Teacher Approaches to Aggressive Behaviors in Preschool Children

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### Abstract

Problem behaviors that emerge in early childhood often persist into later stages of life, with a significant risk of becoming permanent for many individuals. To identify the aggressive behaviors of preschool children and to examine teachers' interventions in these situations, a case study was conducted, involving 15 preschool teachers from public kindergartens in Turkey, with varying levels of experience. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. According to the teachers' accounts, physical and verbal aggression were the most commonly observed behaviors among children. Additionally, it was found that children exhibiting aggressive behavior predominantly targeted their peers. Teachers with 10 or more years of experience reported observing physical and relational aggression more frequently than their less experienced counterparts. When responding to aggressive behaviors, teachers tended to adopt a more supportive approach. The study also found that teachers' intervention strategies varied according to their years of experience. Teachers with 0-5 years of experience generally intervened less frequently and favored supportive approaches, while those with more than five years of experience intervened more frequently. No significant differences were observed in the attitudes of teachers with varying years of experience regarding the distribution of preventive interventions.

**Key Words:** Aggressive Behavior, Aggression, Problem Behavior, Early Childhood Education, Teacher Intervention

### Okul Öncesi Dönem Çocuklarının Saldırgan Davranışlarına Yönelik Öğretmen Yaklaşımlarının İncelenmesi

#### Öz

Erken çocukluk döneminde ortaya çıkan sorunlu davranışlar genellikle yaşamın sonraki aşamalarında devam eder ve birçok birey için önemli bir kalıcı olma riski vardır. Okul öncesi dönem çocuklarının saldırgan davranışlarını belirlemek ve öğretmenlerin bu durumlara müdahalelerini incelemek amacıyla, Türkiye'deki devlet anaokullarından farklı düzeylerde deneyime sahip 15 okul öncesi öğretmenin yer aldığı bir vaka çalışması yapılmıştır. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Öğretmenlerin anlattıklarına göre, çocuklar arasında en sık gözlenen davranışlar fiziksel ve sözlü saldırganlıktır. Ek olarak, saldırgan davranış sergileyen çocukların ağırlıklı olarak akranlarını hedef aldıkları bulunmuştur. Deneyimi 10 yıl veya daha fazla olan öğretmenlerin daha az deneyimli meslektaşlarına göre daha sık fiziksel ve ilişkisel saldırganlık gözlem bildirdi. Agresif davranışları için yanıt verirken, öğretmenler daha destekleyici bir yaklaşım benimsemeye yöneldi. Öğretmenlerin müdahale stratejileri deneyim onların yıllara göre farklı çalışmada bulundu. 0-5 yıllık deneyime sahip öğretmenler genellikle daha az sıklıkta müdahale etmiş ve destekleyici yaklaşımları tercih ederken, beş yıldan fazla deneyime sahip öğretmenler daha sık müdahale etmiştir. Değişen yıllara dayanan deneyime sahip öğretmenlerin önleyici müdahalelerin dağılımına ilişkin tutumlarında anlamlı bir farklılık gözlenmemiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Saldırgan Davranış, Saldırganlık, Problem Davranış, Okul Öncesi Eğitim, Öğretmen Müdahalesi

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## Introduction

Preschool education, encompassing the period from birth to the day an individual begins primary education, is described as the critical years of life during which a child largely completes the competencies across all developmental domains (Alisinanoğlu & Kesicioğlu, 2010; Aral et al., 2000). Therefore, instilling in children during this period the skills they will use throughout their lives—such as healthy communication, problem-solving, self-regulation, awareness and application of rules, and sensitivity to the environment, events, situations, and objects—will ensure that these skills become more permanent in their lives (Uysal & Dinçer, 2013). Moreover, the reactions of the child's parents, teachers, peers, and other individuals in the child's environment to the behaviors exhibited by the child are also crucial in shaping the child's behaviors.

Children whose developmental needs are not sufficiently met during the preschool period may exhibit problem behaviors (Özbey & Alisinanoğlu, 2009). One such problem behavior is aggressive behavior. Aggression is defined as behavior carried out with the intent to cause psychological or physical harm (Kadan, 2010). The classification of aggressive behaviors can vary in the literature. According to İnanç, Bilgin, and Atıcı (2004), aggression can be manifested verbally or physically. Behaviors such as yelling, name-calling, and mocking are examples of verbal aggression, while hitting, pushing, and breaking are examples of physical aggression. Buss (1961), on the other hand, categorizes aggression into three forms: (a) physical or verbal aggression, (b) active or passive aggression, and (c) direct or indirect aggression. In active aggression, intentional pain is inflicted on the target individual, while in passive aggression, the target individual is prevented from achieving their goal. Direct aggression involves overt and visible intervention with the target individual, whereas indirect aggression includes covert actions that cause harm (Gönültaş, 2013). Additionally, many sources in the literature discuss the concept of relational aggression. Relational aggression is described as behaviors that damage the target individual's relationships with others through actions such as social exclusion or spreading rumors (Berk, 2012; Crick, 1996).

Aggressive behaviors are commonly observed as physical aggression in preschool-aged children (Kadan, 2010). Aggressive behaviors that arise in situations such as not sharing toys (Gülay, 2008) typically manifest in contexts of insecurity and discomfort (Ergin & Köse, 2008) and can be exhibited through actions like yelling, hitting, and breaking. Furthermore, studies have examined the aggressive behaviors of preschool-aged children in various contexts and with different variables. According to these studies, the frequency of aggressive behaviors in children varies depending on factors such as whether or not they attend a preschool institution (Kadan, 2010) and gender (Ostrov & Keating, 2004; Peren & Alsaker, 2006; Yeh, 2006; Walker, 2004, 2005), among many others (Alisinanoğlu & Kesicioğlu, 2010; Baldwin & Watson; Connolly & O'Moore; Gülay, 2011; Gülay Ogelman & Çiftci Topaloğlu, 2013; Kadan, 2010; Karaca et al., 2011; McKinney, 2008; Peren & Alsaker, 2006; Smith, 2004).

Problem behaviors observed in early childhood often persist into later life, with a significant number of children being at high risk for these problems becoming permanent (Taner Derman & Başal, 2013). Aggressive and destructive behaviors, which can become chronic, may begin in the preschool period and lead to lifelong issues (Gülay, 2008). Aggression in the preschool period has both short-term and long-term effects. Short-term effects include rejection by peers, unpopularity, academic failure, depression, anxiety, shyness, deficiencies in problem-solving skills, attention deficits, lack of self-control, and adjustment problems. Long-term effects of aggression include depression, loneliness, rejection by peers, negative self-concept (such as criminal behavior, drug use, and dropping out of school), academic failure, and anxiety (Gülay, 2008). Therefore, it is of great importance for child development and mental health to carry out necessary prevention and intervention efforts from an early age and to ensure collaboration among those responsible for the child's development and education, especially the family.

In the process of reducing and preventing aggressive behavior, educational institutions and teachers, in addition to the family, play a significant role. According to teachers' perspectives,

aggression is the most frequently observed behavior problem among children in schools (Kanlıkılıçer, 2005). Specifically, behaviors such as tantrums, crying (Güder et al., 2018), sulking, exclusion, threats, yelling, and mocking (Ay, 2017) are commonly observed. Teachers have been found to use various methods in these situations, such as verbal praise and social reinforcements for desired behaviors, providing explanations (Ay, 2017; Kanlıkılıçer, 2005; Öngören Özdemir & Tepeli, 2016), giving rewards and punishments (Güder et al., 2018; Özdemir & Tepeli, 2016), ignoring, cognitive persuasion (Özdemir & Tepeli, 2016), waiting for the child to calm down, organizing activities aimed at correcting the behavior, holding meetings with parents (Ay, 2017), and making eye contact (Güder et al., 2018). Additionally, in their study, Akyol and colleagues (2011) found that teachers interpret and define the problems experienced according to the child (Akyol et al., 2011).

In the literature, the number of studies that identify aggressive behaviors exhibited by children in preschool education institutions and specifically examine teacher interventions in response to these behaviors has been notably low in recent years (Akyol et al., 2011; Ay, 2017; Güder et al., 2018; Kanlıkılıçer, 2005; Öngören Özdemir & Tepeli, 2016). Furthermore, no study has been found that examines the impact of teaching experience, which is considered effective in classroom management and behavior education, on the prevention of aggressive behavior. For this reason, the current study is expected to contribute to the field. Based on this gap in the literature, the current study aims to identify aggressive behaviors in preschool children and examine teachers' intervention approaches to these behaviors. In line with this objective, the following questions are sought to be answered:

1. What types of aggressive behaviors do preschool children exhibit in the classroom environment?
2. During which time periods in the daily educational flow do preschool children most frequently display aggressive behaviors?
3. How do teachers intervene in children's aggressive behaviors?
4. What types of preventive interventions do teachers implement to prevent children's aggressive behaviors?

## **Method**

### **Research design**

In this study, which aims to identify aggressive behaviors in preschool children and examine teacher approaches to these behaviors, a qualitative research method was employed. Creswell (2013) states that qualitative research provides detailed information about describing, examining, and depicting individuals' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes. In qualitative research, techniques such as observation, interviews, and document analysis are used to gather qualitative data, allowing events and situations to be presented as they naturally occur in their real settings, thereby following a qualitative process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

The study utilized a case study design, which enables the researcher to explore one or more situations in detail (Christensen et al., 2015). The decision to use this design was influenced by the characteristic of case studies that allows for an in-depth examination of a phenomenon or situation within its natural context.

### **Participants**

In determining the study group, the maximum variation sampling method, one of the purposive sampling techniques, was used. The primary aim of this sampling method is to create a relatively small sample that maximally reflects the diversity of individuals who might be involved in the situation being studied (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

In this research, when examining the aggressive behaviors of preschool children and the corresponding teacher approaches, particular attention was paid to varying levels of professional seniority among the teachers in the study group, in order to comprehensively address the

research questions. In this context, 15 preschool teachers from public kindergartens in Türkiye (five teachers with 0-5 years of seniority, five teachers with 5-10 years of seniority, and five teachers with over 10 years of seniority) voluntarily formed the study group. All the teachers in the study group are female. The study included six teachers from Kütahya, three from Manisa, three from Istanbul, one from Ankara, one from Afyon, and one from Hatay. Seven of the teachers work with children aged 48-60 months, while eight work with children aged 60-72 months. The average age of the teachers is 32 years.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

In this study, data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers, consisting of open-ended questions. When preparing the questions included in the semi-structured interview form, information obtained from the literature review, findings from previous similar studies, and the recommendations provided in those studies were taken into consideration. The draft version of the semi-structured interview form was evaluated for its scope and content by two experts in early childhood education and child development, reviewed for language and writing by a Turkish language teacher, and assessed for the appropriateness of question wording in relation to the research design and research questions by an expert in educational measurement and evaluation. Following the necessary revisions based on expert feedback, pilot studies were conducted with two preschool teachers to ensure that the semi-structured interview form was ready for actual implementation.

The semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers includes questions designed to gather information about the types of aggressive behaviors exhibited by children, the time periods during the daily educational flow when these behaviors are most frequently observed, how teachers intervene in children's aggressive behaviors, and what types of preventive measures teachers implement to address these behaviors

### **Data Collection Process**

Before the implementation phase of the research, the research proposal, including the relevant data collection instrument, was submitted to the Ethics Committee of Kocaeli University, and data collection began upon receiving ethical approval. Initially, teachers within a specified range of experience were contacted, and they were informed about the purpose and process of the research.. They were then provided with an "Informed Consent Form" to confirm their participation in the study.

Teachers who voluntarily agreed to participate were included in the study. Due to the teachers being located in different provinces and to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission, the interviews were conducted online using the Google Meet platform. Throughout the interviews, the researchers chose a communication style that made participants feel comfortable and secure, avoiding any form of leading or suggestive questioning.

Before the interviews, participants were informed about the use of an audio recording device to prevent data loss in the information they would provide. They were assured that the recordings would only be used for documentation purposes and would not be shared with others. With the participants' consent, approximately 30-minute interviews were conducted using the audio recording device to ensure that no important details were missed.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

In this study, content analysis was employed to analyze the data obtained from the interview forms, and the analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA 2022 software. Firstly, in-depth interviews with participants were transcribed to create a data set. To prevent ethical issues, teachers with 0-5 years of seniority were coded as "1PT1, 1PT2, ... 1PT5"; teachers with 5-10 years of seniority as "2PT1, 2PT2, ... 2PT5"; and teachers with over 10 years of seniority as "3PT1, 3PT2, ... 3PT5." After the data set was created through transcription, the coding phase began, during which a code list was developed based on the relevant literature and meaningful data units extracted from the data set. The meaningful data units were then coded according to the research



questions using the created code list. During the process of identifying themes, related codes were grouped together to form themes and sub-themes. In the final stage, the findings were reported with detailed descriptions and interpretations, using direct quotations from the interviews where appropriate.

### **Credibility, Transferability, Consistency, and Confirmability of the Research**

In qualitative research, the concepts of credibility, transferability, consistency, and confirmability are accepted as indicators of validity and reliability (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). In alignment with these concepts, the following strategies were implemented to ensure that this study, conducted using a qualitative method, adhered to the nature of qualitative research:

*Credibility:* During the in-depth interviews with participants, to avoid any misunderstandings, the researcher summarized the participants' responses after the interview and obtained verbal confirmation from the participants (member checking). Additionally, all data obtained in the research (e.g., audio recordings) were backed up in multiple locations (e.g., memory storage, email).

*Transferability:* A purposive sampling method was chosen when determining the study group. Additionally, detailed descriptions were provided in the report to ensure the process was clear and understandable for the reader. In this context, direct quotations from participants' statements were frequently included.

*Consistency:* Throughout the entire research process, particularly during the creation of the data collection instrument, data collection, and data analysis stages, the researcher reached a consensus with an expert who could view the process impartially and objectively from an external perspective, ensuring consistency in the researcher's approach.

*Confirmability:* Expert opinions were sought during the data analysis phase. At this stage, a confirmability audit was conducted by comparing the study's findings with the raw data. The researcher consistently validated each finding with the collected data within this framework.

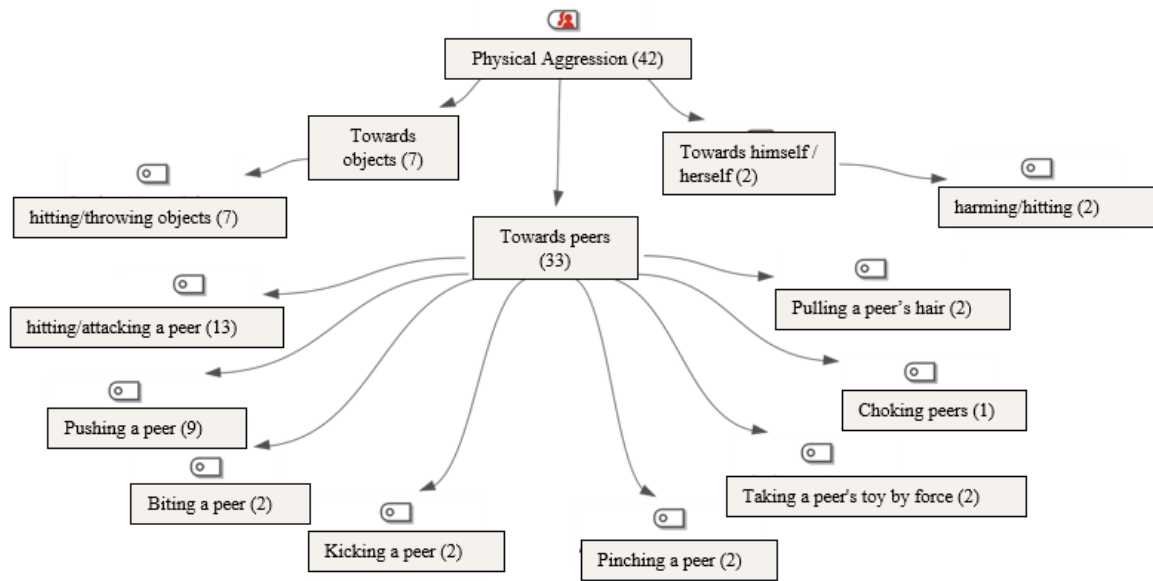
### **Findings**

This study was conducted to identify aggressive behaviors in preschool children and the interventions used by teachers in response to these behaviors. The data obtained in line with the research questions were examined by focusing on the types of physical, verbal, and relational aggressive behaviors exhibited by children, the time periods during which these behaviors were observed, teacher interventions during these behaviors, and the strategies teachers used to prevent aggressive behavior.

#### **Findings on Aggressive Behaviors Exhibited by Children**

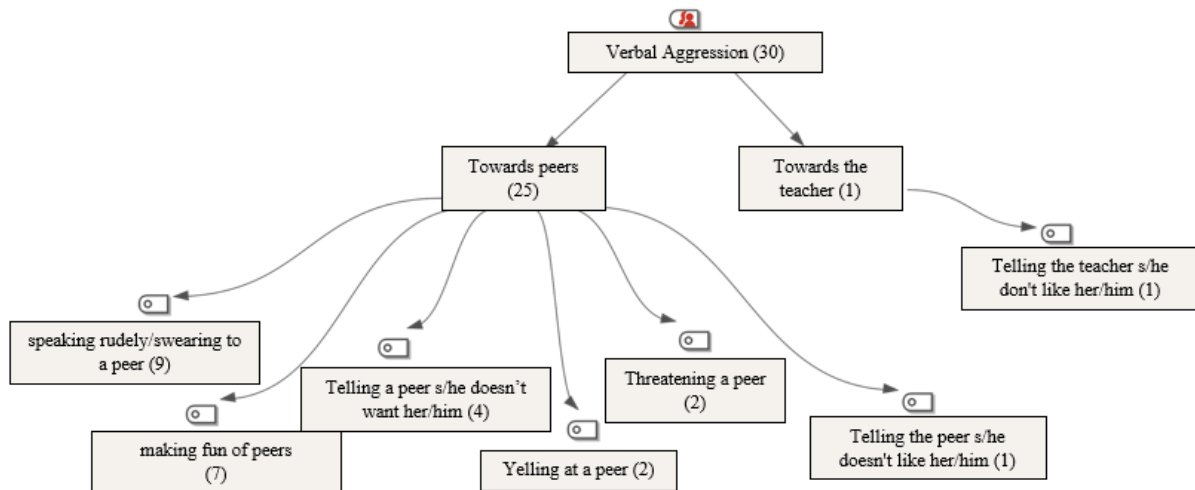
According to the teachers' views, the aggressive behaviors exhibited by children in preschool institutions were analyzed in physical, verbal, and relational contexts. The data revealed that children most frequently exhibited physical aggression ( $f=42$ ) and verbal aggression ( $f=30$ ), while relational aggression behaviors were observed the least frequently ( $f=16$ ). It was determined that these aggressive behaviors were primarily directed toward their peers. Among all the behaviors, the most common were hitting/attacking a peer ( $f=13$ ), excluding a peer from play ( $f=10$ ), pushing a peer ( $f=9$ ), and speaking rudely or using profanity toward a peer ( $f=9$ ).

The findings related to physical aggression behaviors are shown in Figure 1.



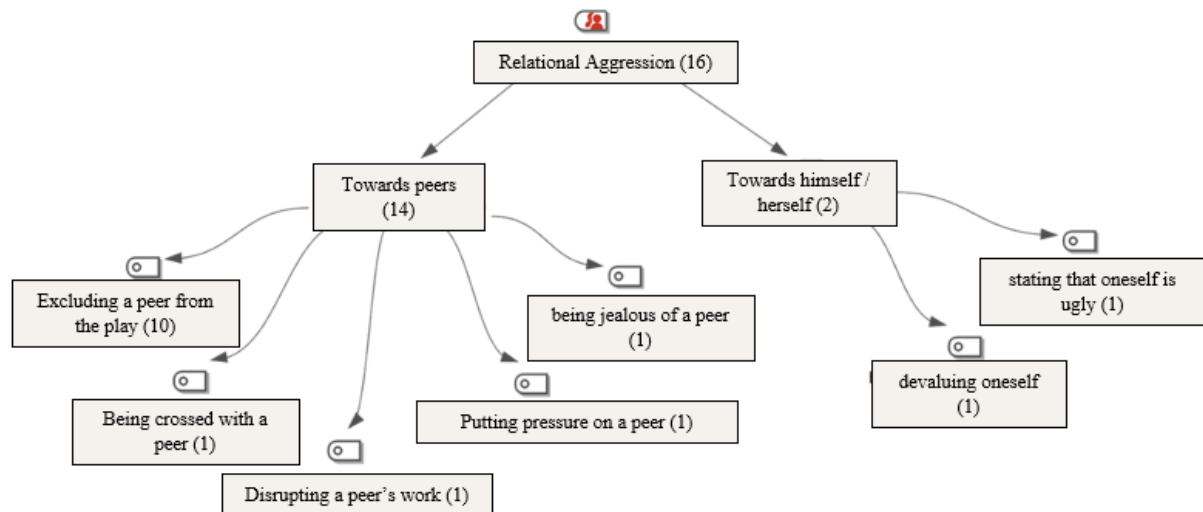
**Figure 1.** Physical aggression behaviors exhibited by children according to teachers' opinions

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequent instances of physical aggression among children are directed toward their peers ( $f=33$ ). Additionally, the frequency of behaviors directed toward objects is 7, while the frequency of behaviors directed toward the child themselves is 2. The physical aggressive behaviors exhibited by children toward their peers are primarily hitting/attacking ( $f=13$ ) and pushing ( $f=9$ ). All behaviors directed toward objects involve hitting/throwing ( $f=7$ ), and all behaviors directed toward the child themselves involve harming/hitting ( $f=2$ ). These findings highlight the different targets of children's aggressive behaviors, with a significant emphasis on peer-directed aggression.



**Figure 2.** Verbal aggression behaviors exhibited by children according to teachers' opinions

According to Figure 2, which illustrates the verbal aggressive behaviors exhibited by children, almost all of these aggressive behaviors are directed toward their peers ( $f=25$ ). Teachers reported that these behaviors primarily include speaking rudely and swearing to a peer ( $f=9$ ), making fun ( $f=7$ ), and telling a peer that they are not wanted ( $f=4$ ). The only verbal aggressive behavior directed toward a teacher was the child telling the teacher that they do not like them ( $f=1$ ). These findings emphasize that verbal aggression in children is predominantly peer-directed, with a focus on negative speech and social exclusion.



**Figure 3.** Relational aggression behaviors exhibited by children according to teachers' opinions

The findings related to relational aggressive behaviors exhibited by children in classrooms are presented in Figure 3. Similar to other types of aggression, it was found that relational aggressive behaviors are predominantly directed toward peers ( $f=14$ ). A large majority of these behaviors involve excluding a peer from play ( $f=10$ ). The relational aggressive behaviors directed toward the child themselves include self-deprecating thoughts, such as devaluing ( $f=1$ ) and stating that they are ugly ( $f=1$ ).

The data showing the distribution of these aggressive behaviors according to the teachers' years of experience are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of children's aggressive behaviors according to teachers' service duration

Kod Satırı	Teachers with 0-5 Years of Experience	Teachers with 5-10 Years of Experience	Teachers with 10 Years and Above Experience	TOTAL
Aggressive Behaviors Exhibited by Children				0
Physical Aggression				0
Towards Peers				0
Hitting/Attacking a Peer	1	1	1	3
Pushing a Peer	1	1	1	3
Kicking a Peer	1	1	1	3
Biting a Peer	1	1	1	3
Forcibly Taking a Peer's Toy	1	1	1	3
Pinching a Peer	1	1	1	3
Pulling a Peer's Hair	1	1	1	3
Strangling a Peer	1	1	1	3
Towards Objects				0
Hitting/Throwing Objects	1	1	1	3
Towards Himself/Herself				0
Harm/Hitting	1	1	1	3
Verbal Aggression				0
Towards Peers				0
Yelling at a Peer	1	1	1	3
Making Fun of/Mocking a Peer	1	1	1	3
Telling a Peer s/he doesn't Want Her/Him	1	1	1	3
Threatening a Peer	1	1	1	3
Telling a Peer s/he doesn't Like Her/Him	1	1	1	3
Using Harsh/Offensive Language Towards a Peer	1	1	1	3
Towards the Teacher				0
Telling the Teacher s/he doesn't Like Her/Him	1	1	1	3
Relational Aggression				0
Towards Peers				0
Excluding a Peer from Play	10	10	10	30
Getting Crossed with a Peer	1	1	1	3
Disrupting a Peer's Work	1	1	1	3
Exerting pressure on a peer	1	1	1	3
Being Jealous of a Peer	1	1	1	3
Towards Himself/Herself				0
Devaluing Himself/Herself	1	1	1	3
Stating that s/he is Ugly	1	1	1	3
TOTAL	19	30	35	84

As shown in Table 1, teachers with 0-5 years of experience reported observing 19 behaviors in their classrooms, those with 5-10 years of experience reported 30 behaviors, and teachers with over 10 years of experience reported observing 35 behaviors. Similarly, behaviors related to

physical aggression and relational aggression were most frequently reported by teachers with more than 10 years of experience. In the category of verbal aggression, teachers with 5-10 years of experience and those with over 10 years of experience reported identifying aggressive behaviors with the same frequency (f=11).

### Findings Related to the Time Periods When Children Exhibit Aggressive Behaviors

Table 2 presents the time periods during the daily routine when children most frequently display aggressive behaviors.

**Table 2.** Time Periods When Children's Aggressive Behaviors Are Most Frequently Observed

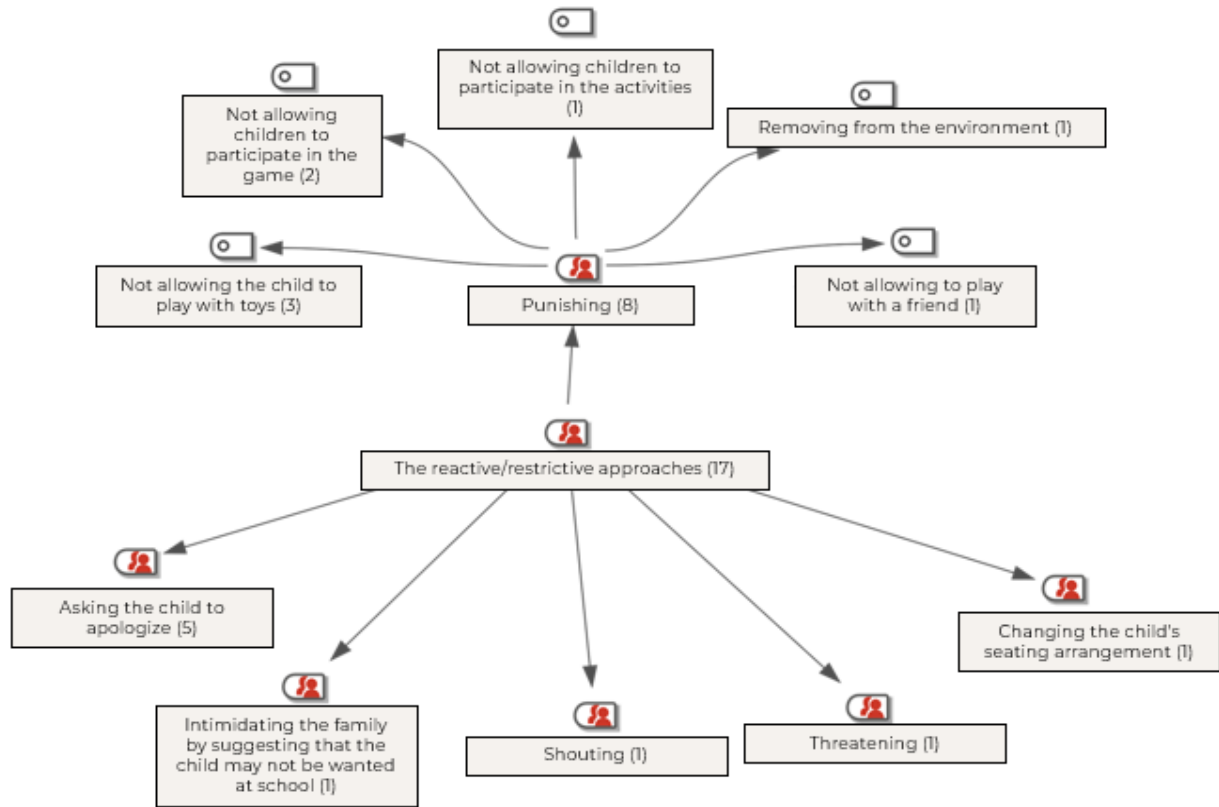
Kod Sırası	Teachers with 0-5 Years of Experience	Teachers with 5-10 Years of Experience	Teachers with 10 Years and Above Experience	TOTAL
Time Periods When Aggressive Behaviors Are Observed				0
During Playtime in Learning Centers	1	1	1	14
Physical Aggression				0
Hitting/Attacking a Peer	1	1	1	4
Pushing a Peer		1		1
Causing Damage to Objects	1			2
Forcibly Taking a Peer's Toy		1	1	3
Verbal Aggression				0
Making fun of/Mocking a Peer		1		1
Threatening a Peer		1		1
Using Harsh Language			1	1
Relational Aggression				0
Excluding a Peer from Play	1	1	1	4
Not sharing the toy		1		2
Getting crossed with a peer			1	1
During Outdoor Time	1		1	3
Relational Aggression				0
Excluding a Peer from Play	1		1	2
Physical Aggression				0
Pushing a Peer			1	1
Hitting/attacking a peer			1	1
During Activity Time	1	1		2
Relational Aggression				0
Not Allowing a Peer to Sit Nearby	1			1
TOTAL	14	18	14	46

According to the table, it has been determined that aggressive behaviors are most frequently observed during playtime in learning centers (f=14). Teachers reported that physical aggression was the most common during this time period (f=12). Aggressive behaviors occurring in learning centers were most frequently reported by teachers with 5-10 years of experience (f=6). The number of aggressive behaviors observed during outdoor time was found to be 3, while the number observed during activity time was 2. Aggressive behaviors during outdoor time were mostly reported by teachers with over 10 years of experience (f=3).

### Findings Related to Teachers' Responses to Aggressive Behaviors Displayed by Children

Data on how teachers intervene when confronted with aggressive behaviors displayed by children are presented in Figures 4 and 5. According to the obtained data, it was observed that teachers predominantly adopt a supportive approach (f=54). The number of behaviors exemplifying the reactive/restrictive approach is 18. Figure 4 illustrates the forms of the reactive/restrictive approach.

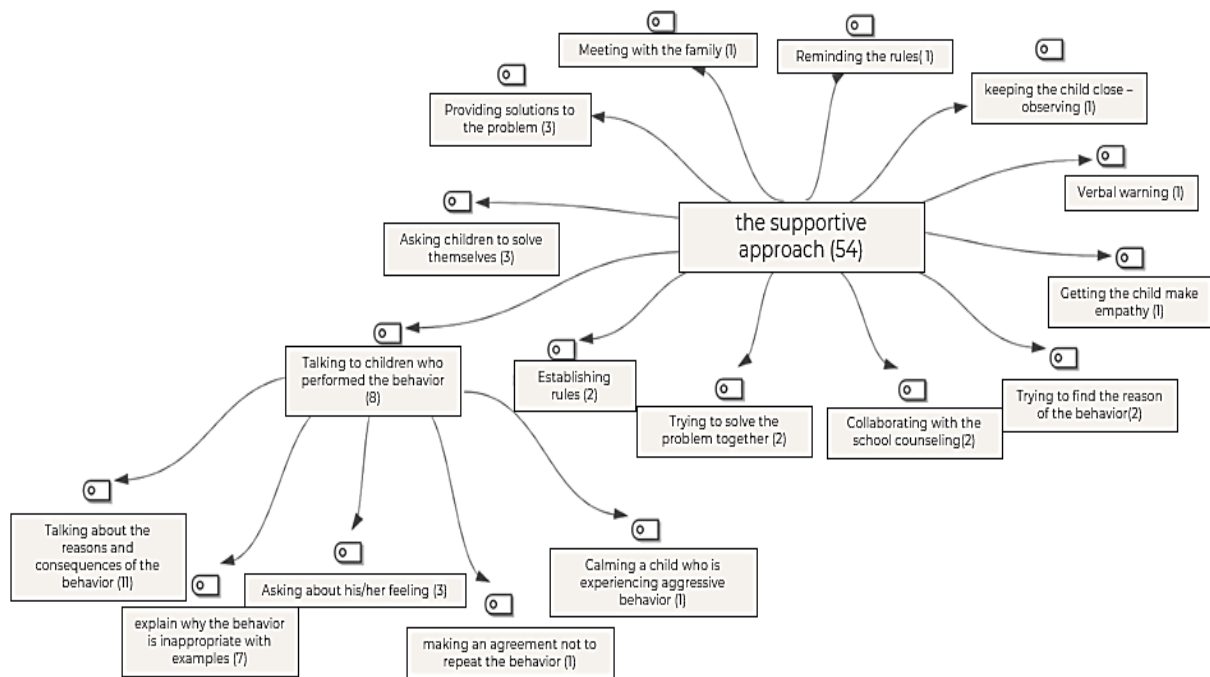




**Figure 4.** *Reactive/Restrictive Approaches Adopted by Teachers in Response to Aggressive Behaviors Displayed by Children*

As shown in Figure 4, among the reactive/restrictive approaches, punishing is notably prevalent ( $f=9$ ). Methods within the punishment approach include not allowing the child to play with toys, not allowing children to participate in the game, and removing them from the environment. Following punishment, teachers frequently ask the child to apologize ( $f=5$ ). Other methods include shouting, threatening, changing the child's seats, and intimidating the family by suggesting that the child may not be wanted at school.

Figure 5 illustrates the supportive interventions employed by teachers in response to children's aggressive behaviors. The most commonly used intervention is talking with the children who exhibited the behavior ( $f=31$ ). This conversation may involve discussing the cause and consequence of the behavior, asking about their feelings, or making an agreement not to repeat the behavior. Besides talking with the children, other common methods include talking to the family ( $f=5$ ), offering solutions to the children ( $f=3$ ), and expecting the children to solve the problem themselves ( $f=3$ ).



**Figure 5.** Supportive Approaches Adopted by Teachers in Response to Aggressive Behaviors Displayed by Children

The distribution of teachers' intervention approaches to aggressive behaviors according to their years of experience is presented in Table 3. According to the table, the intervention approaches vary based on the teachers' seniority. It was observed that teachers with 0-5 years of experience generally intervened less frequently ( $f=16$ ) and mostly adopted a supportive approach ( $f=13$ ). Teachers with 5-10 years of experience were found to intervene more frequently than those in other experience groups ( $f=30$ ).

**Table 3.** Distribution of Teachers' Intervention Approaches to Aggressive Behaviors According to Their Years of Experience

Kind System	Teachers with 0-5 Years of Experience	Teachers with 5-10 Years of Experience	Teachers with 10 Years and Above Experience	TOTAL
Teachers' Intervention Approaches to Aggressive Behaviors				0
Reactive/Restrictive Approaches				0
Punishing				0
Not Allowing the Child to Participate in Activities	1	1	0	2
Not Allowing the Child to Participate in Play	1	1	0	2
Removing the Child from the Environment	1	1	0	2
Not Allowing the Child to Play with Toys	1	1	0	2
Not Allowing the Child to Play with Friends	1	1	0	2
Intimidating the Family by Sugg. the Child is Not Wanted at School	1	1	0	2
Asking the Child to Apologize	1	1	0	2
Yelling	1	1	0	2
Threatening	1	1	0	2
Changing the Child's Seat	1	1	0	2
Supportive Approaches				0
Talking to the Child Who Exhibited the Behavior	1	1	1	3
Making an Agreement to Prevent Repetition of the Behavior	1	1	1	3
Calming the Child Who Was Harmed by the Aggression	1	1	1	3
Explaining the Behavior's Reasoning Using Examples	1	1	1	3
Asking About Emotions	1	1	1	3
Discussing the Reason and Consequence of the Behavior	1	1	1	3
Solving Problems Together	1	1	1	3
Verbal Warning	1	1	1	3
Offering Solutions to the Child	1	1	1	3
Setting Rules	1	1	1	3
Talking to the Family	1	1	1	3
Providing an Empathy Opportunity	1	1	1	3
Reminding Rules	1	1	1	3
Observing the Child for a Certain Time	1	1	1	3
Asking the Child to Resolve the Problem	1	1	1	3
Investigating the Reason for the Behavior	1	1	1	3
Collaborating with the School Counselling Service	1	1	1	3
TOTAL	16	30	25	72

The frequency of reactive/restrictive approaches among teachers with 0-5 years of experience is 3. An example of a statement reflecting the adoption of a reactive/restrictive approach is as follows:

1PT2: *"If it happens again, I tell them they won't be allowed to play with that friend anymore, and I won't let them approach."*

However, it has been determined that these teachers predominantly adopt a supportive approach (f=13). Within this approach, they primarily engage in talking with the children who exhibited the behavior (f=12), as evidenced by the following statement:

1PT1: *"First, I approach the students and identify both the student who exhibited the behavior and the one who was affected by it. Then, I conduct separate meetings with each of these students, followed by a joint discussion where we explore the reasons and consequences together, also questioning their feelings. I try to make the harmful and destructive nature of such behaviors concrete by explaining it with examples."*

Teachers with 5-10 years of experience similarly employ reactive/restrictive approaches (f=9), with the most common methods being instructing the child to apologize (f=3) and administering punishment (f=3). The following are some statements from teachers regarding these methods:

2PT1: *"Honestly, I don't believe it when a teacher says these things don't happen in their classroom. As I mentioned, I have the student who hit make an apology drawing, and I tell the other student to protect themselves."*

2PT2: *"If the rules don't work, we ultimately meet with the families of those who continue to be violent, or I give a punishment. It progresses step by step, so to speak."*

Similar to teachers with 0-5 years of experience, it has been observed that teachers with 5-10 years of experience also predominantly adopt supportive approaches (f=21). Within this approach, they frequently resort to talking with the children who exhibited the behavior (f=11). One of the teacher's statements is as follows:

2PT3: *"I approach, get down to their eye level, and try to explain that what they did was wrong without frightening or intimidating them."*

Another common method is offering solutions to the children (f=3). A teacher's statement regarding this approach is as follows:

2PT3: *"I say, 'If you're going to play for 5 minutes, then your friend will play for 5 minutes because this is a toy for our classroom, not just yours. And you need to apologize for hitting them.'"*

Finally, it has been found that teachers with over 10 years of experience most frequently resort to punishing (f=4) within the reactive/restrictive approaches (f=6). As illustrated in the following teacher statement, the punitive method is often in the form of deprivation:

3PT2: *"I seat them separately, don't allow them to participate in the game, and don't let either of them play. If they are fighting over a toy, I take it away from both of them."*

Similarly, teachers with over 10 years of experience, like those with less seniority, predominantly adopt supportive approaches (f=20). The most frequently chosen method within this approach is talking to the children who exhibited the behavior (f=8). This finding is exemplified by the following teacher statement:

3PT3: *"I never postpone or ignore it; I talk to them immediately to understand the reason and then address it with the children accordingly."*

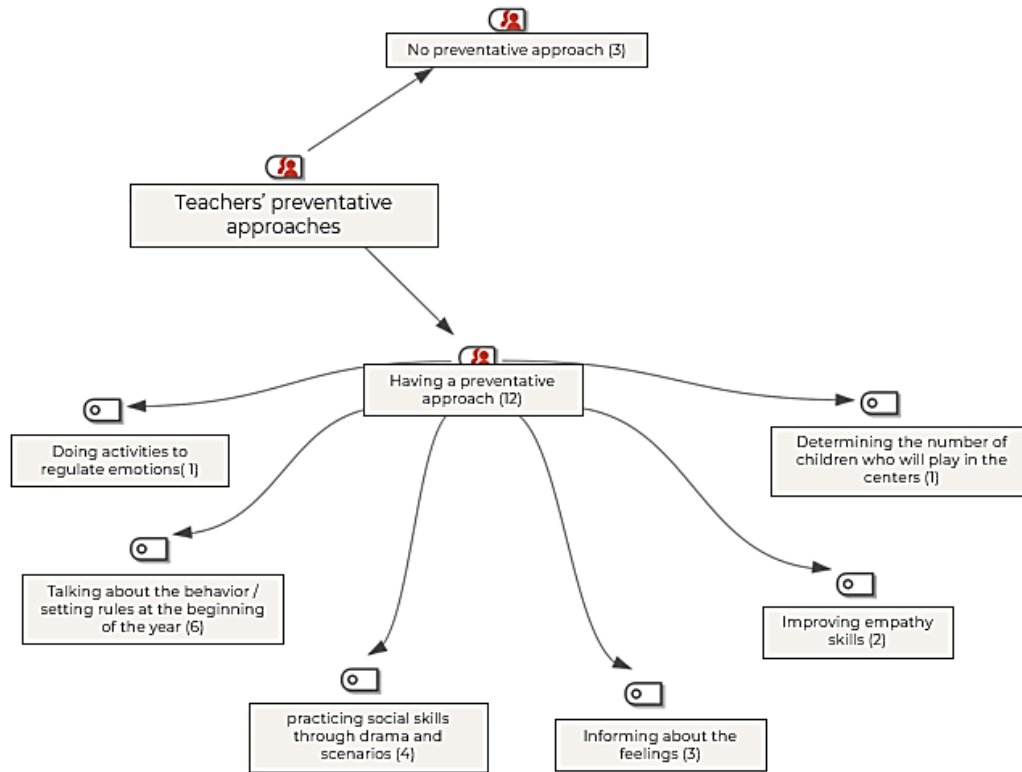
Another supportive method they frequently use is meeting with the family (f=3) and encouraging the children to resolve the issue themselves (f=3). The teacher statements expressing these methods are as follows:

3PT1: *"I sometimes talk to the families because the situation can sometimes escalate. Knowing that the child experiences this at home as well, I discuss it with the family."*

3PT1: *"I usually watch from a distance, and if their complaints aren't serious enough to cause harm, I let them resolve it themselves."*

### Findings Related to Teachers' Preventive Approaches to Children's Aggressive Behaviors

Data have been gathered regarding the preventive approaches that teachers adopt following their interventions in children's aggressive behaviors. The findings obtained in this context are presented in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** Preventive Approaches Adopted by Teachers in Response to Children's Aggressive Behaviors

As shown in Figure 6, it has been observed that teachers engage in very few preventive measures to address aggressive behaviors ( $f=12$ ). These preventive initiatives are primarily focused on discussing appropriate behaviors and setting rules at the beginning of the school term ( $f=6$ ), practicing social skills through drama and case studies ( $f=4$ ), and providing information about emotions ( $f=3$ ).

**Table 4.** Distribution of Teachers' Preventive Interventions for Aggressive Behaviors According to Their Years of Experience

Kod Sistemi	Teachers with 0-5 Years of Experience	Teachers with 5-10 Years of Experience	Teachers with 10 Years and Above Experience	TOTAL
Teachers' Preventive Approaches to Aggressive Behaviors				
There is a Preventive Approach				12
Determining the Number of Children Playing in Centers				1
Emotion Regulation Activities				1
Discussing Appropriate Behaviors/Setting Rules at the Beginning				6
Providing Information About Emotions				3
Developing Empathy Skills				2
Practicing Social Skills Through Drama and Case Studies				4
No Preventive Approach				3
TOTAL	12	10	10	32

In the distribution of preventive interventions according to years of experience, no significant differences were observed in the attitudes of teachers with varying lengths of experience (See Table 4). Some statements from teachers with different levels of experience regarding their preventive intervention methods are as follows:

3PT4: *"When school starts, I dedicate about a month and a half to two months to establishing classroom order and rules. Once the rules are set, everyone knows what to do and when, and I generally don't encounter problems throughout the year."*

3PT1: *"I divide the play activities. For example, I might say, 'You can play football, and you can play in the pretend play corner,' ensuring that there aren't too many children in one area."*

2PT4: *"As I mentioned before, we used to intervene on the spot, but this year we're focusing more on activities that help them regulate their emotions. For instance, I conduct activities on how they can calm themselves down when they're angry or how they can reduce their sadness when they're upset or angry."*

1PT3: *"Yes, I do. As I mentioned, I usually try to approach it through case examples. For instance, I read a book or try to discuss a situation that has occurred."*

### **Discussion, Result and Suggestions**

In this study, preschool teachers reported that the most frequently encountered physical aggressive behaviors in their classrooms included children "pushing their peers," "hitting their peers," and "throwing or hitting objects." Verbal aggressive behaviors most commonly observed were "mocking a peer," "ridiculing," "telling a peer that they do not want them," and "using bad language/profanity." In terms of relational aggression, the behavior most frequently observed was "excluding peers" from activities. These findings are consistent with several studies in the literature (Akman et al., 2011; Kesicioğlu, 2015; Özbey, 2010; Özbey & Alisinanoğlu, 2009; Sadık, 2004; Taner Derman & Asude Başal, 2013; Uysal et al., 2010). Additionally, unlike other studies reviewed in the literature (Akgün et al., 2011; Denizel Güven & Cevher, 2005; Dinçer & Akgün, 2010; Uysal & Dinçer, 2013), the current study found that physical and relational aggressive behaviors were more frequently observed by teachers with over 10 years of experience. This may be because teachers with less than 10 years of experience reported encountering more verbal forms of aggression than other types of aggressive behavior. This finding suggests that more experienced teachers may be better at recognizing and addressing the subtleties of physical and relational aggression, possibly due to their extended exposure and developed skill set in managing such behaviors. On the other hand, less experienced teachers might focus more on verbal aggression, which could be more overt and easier to identify in classroom settings. These variations highlight the importance of experience in shaping teachers' perceptions and interventions regarding different types of aggression in early childhood settings.

A significant majority of teachers reported that they observed children's aggressive behaviors most frequently during playtime in learning centers. This finding aligns with several studies in the international literature (e.g., Crick et al., 2006; Olweus, 1994; Ostrov & Keating, 2004; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). For example, Crick and colleagues (2006) conducted a longitudinal study over 18 months with 91 preschool children and their teachers to determine the levels of relational and physical aggression in these children. The children's levels of relational and physical aggression were measured through observation during free play at four different time periods. Similarly, Ostrov and Keating (2004) examined the types of aggression (physical, relational, verbal) exhibited by 48 preschool children (average age 64 months) living in rural areas of the United States, using observation techniques during free play to identify these types of aggression.

In the current study, teachers attributed the prevalence of problem behaviors during playtime to the increased activity levels of children during this period and the greater difficulty in maintaining classroom control. It was observed that during this time, children exhibited behaviors such as "excluding others from play," "not allowing others to join in play," "not sharing toys," and "throwing toys and objects." Tremblay (2000) similarly suggested that this situation could be related to the fact that preschool children have not yet fully developed self-regulation and emotional control, which may lead to difficulties in managing emotional responses and, at times, result in aggressive behaviors during conflicts with peers or siblings. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to closely monitor students during these periods and develop strategies aimed at



encouraging positive social interactions. By doing so, they can help mitigate the occurrence of aggressive behaviors and promote a more harmonious play environment. It was observed that preschool teachers use both reactive/restrictive and supportive intervention approaches when dealing with aggressive behaviors in their classrooms. Teachers participated in the current study employed reactive/restrictive approaches such as "punishing the child," "scaring families by suggesting their child might not be wanted at school," "telling the child to apologize," "yelling or threatening," and "changing the child's seat." On the other hand, supportive approaches included "talking with the children involved in the behavior," "finding a solution to the problem together," "giving verbal warnings," "establishing rules," "offering solutions to the children," "meeting with the family," "encouraging empathy," "reminding the children of the rules," "keeping the child close and constantly observing," "asking the children to resolve the issue themselves," "investigating the reasons behind the behavior," and "collaborating with the guidance department."

The current study found that teachers primarily employed supportive interventions. In contrast, Bulut and İflazoğlu (2007), using observation and semi-structured interview methods, emphasized that most teachers responded to problem behaviors with reactive behaviors that could be categorized as punitive. The studies by Gershoff (2002) and Skiba and Peterson (2000) indicate that punitive interventions can increase aggression and social problems in children in the long term. This contrast suggests a positive shift over time in how teachers intervene in problem behaviors. Indeed, other recent studies in the literature also indicate that teachers now prefer methods such as offering solutions, cognitive persuasion, providing guidance, understanding the problem, fostering empathy, and observing/reinforcing (Özdemir & Tepeli, 2016). Additionally, they use approaches like talking with the student, encouraging them to think, asking them to resolve the issue, establishing rules, meeting with the family, and referring the issue to the administration or guidance department (Keleş, 2015). These methods for dealing with aggressive behaviors highlight the importance of fostering empathy, building positive relationships, and encouraging individuals to adopt solution-oriented behaviors. Similarly, Parsak and Kuzucu (2020) state in their study that the development of empathy can help prevent aggressive behaviors. Such approaches not only help manage aggressive behaviors but also prevent these behaviors from arising in the first place. Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley (2015) demonstrated in their study that modeling appropriate behavior can enhance children's social behaviors and empathy skills. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to recognize their role as role models in preventing aggressive behaviors and to act in ways that are empathetic and developmentally appropriate, taking into account the individual differences of the children they work with. This approach can be instrumental in effectively managing and preventing aggressive behaviors in the classroom.

Some statements from the teachers in the study group also indicate that they employed reactive/restrictive interventions such as punishing, threatening, and changing the child's seat in response to aggressive behaviors. Similarly, Özdemir and Tepeli (2016) found that teachers preferred methods like giving second-type punishments and moving the child or giving them a time-out. They explain isolation (taking a short break) as removing the child from the reinforcing environment to reflect on the undesirable behavior, which can be implemented by having the child wait at the back of the classroom or in a corner (Celep, 2002). Gershoff (2002), in a meta-analysis, revealed a positive relationship between punishment and increased aggression, lower social skills, and psychological issues. Additionally, research by Skiba and Peterson (2000) showed that teachers' use of zero-tolerance policies and harsh punishments within disciplinary structures could lead to an increase in aggressive behaviors and other discipline problems. These findings suggest that while some teachers continue to use punitive measures, these strategies may actually exacerbate aggressive behaviors rather than mitigate them. It highlights the importance of considering the potential long-term effects of such interventions and the need for teachers to adopt more supportive and constructive approaches in managing classroom behaviors.

When examining the preventive interventions that teachers employ to prevent aggressive behaviors, it was found that they frequently use methods such as establishing rules at the beginning of the term, discussing behaviors, and utilizing drama and case study methods. On the

other hand, notable preventive interventions mentioned by teachers include talking about emotions, supporting empathetic thinking skills, and conducting emotion regulation activities. Indeed, Parsak and Kuzucu (2020) emphasize in their study that the development of empathy and social skills from early childhood is crucial in preventing behavioral problems such as aggression. Similarly, studies examining the relationship between preschool children's emotion regulation skills and relational aggression (Arı & Yaban, 2016; Jun Ah et al., 2014; Mihic et al., 2016) have found that improvements in emotion regulation skills positively affect the control, observation, evaluation, and management of emotional responses, leading to a decrease in relational aggression. Early intervention policies are seen as a more child-centered approach aimed at identifying problematic behaviors and promoting positive behaviors (Özen Tuncer, 2022). Enhancing relationships with children, using positive discipline strategies, and focusing on early intervention policies help reduce aggressive behaviors and improve student behavior (Yurdabak, 2024). At this point, it is crucial to provide teachers with the necessary guidance and counseling services to address behavioral problems and aggressive behaviors in the classroom. Such support can be instrumental in equipping teachers with the tools and strategies needed to effectively manage and mitigate these behaviors.

Organizing in-service practical training for teachers aimed at preventing aggressive behaviors is essential. Such training should emphasize incorporating activities that support prosocial behaviors into educational plans, actively participating with children during play in learning centers, considering the number of children per learning center, and ensuring that the time children spend in these centers is efficiently and effectively planned by teachers. It is crucial for teachers to understand that this time is not merely free play but a valuable period for learning and development. Throughout all these processes, collaboration with the guidance department and the child's family should be maintained. Additionally, it is important to include preventive intervention courses in teacher education programs during undergraduate studies. In this study, data were collected using qualitative measurement tools and were obtained from the teachers of preschool children. Future research could examine children's levels of aggression using both quantitative measurement tools and qualitative approaches, including direct data collection from children. Moreover, longitudinal studies could be conducted to observe the development and changes in the aggression levels of preschool children over time.

### **Ethical Statement**

During the writing process of the study titled 'An Examination of Teacher Approaches to Aggressive Behaviors in Preschool Children,' scientific principles, ethical guidelines, and citation rules were adhered to; no manipulation was made to the collected data, and this study has not been submitted for evaluation to any other academic publication platform.

### **Statement of Contribution Rate of Researchers**

The contribution rates of the authors in the study are equal.

### **Declaration of Conflict**

There is no potential conflict of interest in the study.

### **Note**

The study was presented as an oral presentation at the 16th World Conference on Educational Sciences (WCES-2024).

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## GENİŞ ÖZET

Erken yaşlarda yeterince desteklenmeyen çocuklar ileriki dönemlerde problem davranışlar sergileyebilmektedir (Özbey & Alisinanoğlu, 2009). Bu problem davranışlardan biri olan saldırganlık psikolojik ya da fiziksel zarar verme niyetiyle gerçekleştirilen bir davranış olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Erken çocukluk döneminde en yaygın görülen saldırganlık davranışı ise fiziksel saldırganlıktır (Kadan, 2010). Çalışmalara göre, çocuklardaki saldırgan davranışların sıklığı, önceki okul deneyimi ve cinsiyet gibi birçok faktörden etkilenmektedir (Alisinanoğlu & Kesicioğlu, 2010; Gülay, 2011; Gülay-Ogelman & Çiftçi Topaloğlu, 2013; Kadan, 2010; Karaca ve ark., 2011; McKinney, 2008; Ostrov & Keating, 2004; Smith, 2004). Erken çocukluk döneminde ortaya çıkan problem davranışlar sıklıkla ilerleyen yaşlarda da devam etmektedir ve bu davranışların kalıcı hale gelme olasılığı oldukça yükselmektedir (Taner Derman & Başal, 2013). Bu nedenle, çocuk gelişimi ve ruh sağlığı açısından problem davranışların önlenmesi ve iyileştirilmesi için ebeveynler ve öğretmenlere önemli bir rol düşmektedir. Çocuğun gelişim ve eğitiminden sorumlu yetişkinlerin iş birliği içinde harekete geçmesi, çocuğun üstün yararını gözeterek önlemler alması gerekmektedir. Güncel literatürde, okul öncesi eğitim dönemindeki çocukların saldırgan davranışlarını veya öğretmenlerin bu duruma müdahalelerini inceleyen çalışmaların sayısı oldukça sınırlıdır (örn. Akyol ve ark., 2011; Ay, 2017; Güder ve ark., 2018; Kanlıkılıçer, 2005; Öngören-Özdemir & Tepeli, 2016). Ayrıca, sınıf yönetimi ve saldırgan davranışların önlenmesinde etkili olduğu düşünülen öğretmenlerin hizmet süresinin etkisini inceleyen bir çalışmaya rastlanmamıştır. Mevcut çalışma, okul öncesi dönemdeki çocukların saldırgan davranışlarını belirlemeyi ve öğretmenlerin bu davranışlara yönelik müdahale yaklaşımlarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda aşağıdaki araştırma sorularına yanıt aranmaktadır: 1- Okul öncesi çocuklar sınıf ortamında ne tür saldırgan davranışlar sergilemektedir? 2- Okul öncesi çocuklar saldırgan davranışları günlük eğitim akışının hangi zaman dilimlerinde en sık sergilemektedir? 3- Öğretmenler, çocukların sergilediği saldırgan davranışlara nasıl müdahale etmektedir? 4- Öğretmenler, okul öncesi çocuklardaki saldırgan davranışları azaltmak veya önlemek için hangi önleyici tedbirleri uygulamaktadır? Okul öncesi çocukların saldırgan davranışlarını belirlemek ve öğretmenlerin bu tür durumlara müdahalelerini incelemek amacıyla yapılan bu çalışma, bir veya birden fazla durumu ayrıntılı olarak ortaya koymaya olanak sağlayan nitel araştırma desenlerinden biri olan durum çalışması olarak tasarlanmıştır (Christensen ve ark., 2015). Bu çalışma kapsamında araştırma sorularını daha kapsamlı bir şekilde ele almak amacıyla maksimum çeşitlilik örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Araştırmaya farklı hizmet sürelerine sahip öğretmenler dahil edilerek maksimum çeşitlilik sağlanmıştır. Türkiye'deki devlete bağlı anaokullarında görev yapan 15 okul öncesi öğretmeni (0-5 yıl hizmet süresine sahip 5 öğretmen, 5-10 yıl hizmet süresine sahip 5 öğretmen, 10 yıl ve üzeri hizmet süresine sahip 5 öğretmen) gönüllü olarak çalışma grubunu oluşturmuştur. Tüm öğretmenler kadın olup ortalama yaşları 32'dir. Öğretmenlerden sekizi 5-6 yaş arası, yedisi ise 4-5 yaş arası öğrencilere eğitim vermektedir. Mevcut çalışmada veriler araştırmacılar tarafından geliştirilen ve açık uçlu sorulardan oluşan yarı yapılandırılmış bir görüşme formu aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Öğretmenlere öğrencilerinin ne tür saldırgan davranışlar sergiledikleri, bu davranışların gün içinde hangi zamanlarda daha sık gözlemlendiği, öğretmenlerin çocukların saldırgan



davranışlarına nasıl müdahale ettikleri ve bu tür davranışları önlemek için hangi adımları attıkları yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu aracılığıyla sorulmuştur. Veri toplama sürecinden önce araştırma için etik izin alınmıştır. Çevrimiçi platformlar aracılığıyla ulaşılan öğretmenlere araştırmanın amacı ve süreci hakkında bilgi verilmiştir. Araştırmaya gönüllü olarak katılmayı kabul eden öğretmenlerle çevrimiçi platformlar üzerinden görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Bu araştırmada görüşmelerden elde edilen veriler, içerik analizi yöntemi ile MAXQDA 2022 programında analiz edilmiştir. Verilerin deşifre edilmesiyle oluşturulan veri seti, kodlanmış ve ilgili literatür temel alınarak bir kod listesi oluşturulmuştur. Bu kodlar aracılığıyla temalar ve alt temalar elde edilmiştir. Bulgular, uygun görüşmelerden alıntılar kullanılarak detaylı betimleme ve yorumlama ile raporlanmıştır. Öğretmenlerin ifadelerine göre, okul öncesi dönem çocuklarında fiziksel saldırganlık (f=42) ve sözel saldırganlık (f=30) ve en az ise ilişkisel saldırganlık (f=16) gözlemlenmektedir. Ayrıca saldırganlık gösteren çocukların çoğunlukla arkadaşlarını hedef aldığı belirlenmiştir. Okul öncesi öğretmenleri sınıflarında en sık karşılaşılan fiziksel saldırgan davranışların "arkadaşlarını itme," "vurma" ve "nesnelere vurma/fırlatma" olduğunu belirtmişlerdir. En yaygın sözel saldırganlık davranışları ise "dalga geçme," "alay etme," "istemediğini söyleme" ve "küfür etme" olarak gözlemlenmiştir. İlişkisel saldırganlık ise en çok "arkadaşları dışlama" şeklinde görülmüştür. Bu bulgular, literatürdeki diğer çalışmalarla tutarlıdır. Ayrıca, 10 yıldan fazla deneyime sahip öğretmenlerin daha fazla fiziksel ve ilişkisel saldırganlık davranışları gözlemlediği ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu durum, deneyimli öğretmenlerin bu tür davranışları daha iyi tanıyıp yönetebilmeleriyle açıklanabilir. Öğretmenler, saldırgan davranışların en sık oyun zamanı ortaya çıktığını belirtmiştir. Bu bulgu, çocukların öğrenme merkezlerinde daha aktif oldukları zamanlarda sınıf kontrolünün zorlaşmasıyla ilişkilendirilmiştir. Bu süreçte çocukların "oyun dışı bırakma" ve "oyuncakları paylaşmama" gibi davranışları sergilediği gözlemlenmiştir. Öğretmenlerin, çocukların sergilediği saldırgan davranışlarla karşılaştıklarında genellikle destekleyici bir yaklaşım (f=54) benimsedikleri görülmüştür. Destekleyici müdahaleler arasında çocuklarla konuşma, empatiyi teşvik etme ve kuralları hatırlatma öne çıkarken, kısıtlayıcı müdahaleler arasında çocuğu cezalandırma ve tehdit etme yer almaktadır. Bu çalışma, öğretmenlerin daha çok destekleyici yaklaşımlar benimsediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Öğretmenlerin müdahale yaklaşımlarının, eğitim alanındaki hizmet süresine bağlı olarak farklılık gösterdiği tespit edilmiştir. 0-5 yıl deneyime sahip öğretmenlerin genellikle daha az müdahale ettikleri (f=16) ve çoğunlukla destekleyici bir yaklaşımı (f=13) benimsedikleri, 5-10 yıl deneyime sahip öğretmenlerin ise diğerlerine göre daha fazla müdahale ettikleri (f=30) gözlemlenmiştir. Farklı hizmet süresine sahip öğretmenlerin önleyici müdahale dağılımındaki tutumlarında ise anlamlı bir fark bulunmamıştır. Öğretmenler, saldırgan davranışları önlemek için dönem başında kurallar koyma, duygu düzenleme etkinlikleri ve empatiyi destekleyen beceriler üzerinde çalışmaktadır. Erken müdahale politikaları ve pozitif disiplin stratejilerinin saldırganlık davranışlarını azaltmada etkili olduğu vurgulanmıştır. Bu bağlamda, öğretmenlere yönelik saldırgan davranışları önlemeye yönelik hizmet içi eğitimlerin düzenlenmesi büyük önem taşımaktadır. Ayrıca, araştırma neticesinde rehberlik servisi ve çocuğun ailesi ile işbirliklerinin artırılması ve sürdürülmesi, öğretmen yetiştirme programlarında önleyici müdahale derslerine yer verilmesi önerileri getirilmiştir.