

# Preschool teachers' views on behavior problems and coping strategies they use

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## ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this research is to determine preschool teachers' views on problem behaviors and the strategies they use to cope with these behaviors. The study was conducted using a case study method from qualitative research approaches, and participants were selected through convenience sampling. The study group consists of a total of 29 preschool teachers, 28 female and 1 male, working in private and public institutions in the Altınordu district of Ordu province during the spring semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. A personal information form and a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers were used as data collection tools in the study. According to the findings obtained, teachers indicated that the most common behavioral problems observed in children were hitting, pushing, slang/profanity, hyperactivity, and inability to express oneself. Technological devices and children's new entry into a social environment were identified among the reasons for the emergence of behavioral problems in children. It was determined that behavioral problems in children were not concentrated in a specific gender, and that behavioral problems were observed in both male and female students. It was found that the presence of children with behavioral problems in the classroom not only complicates the educational process but also causes reactions from peers such as exclusion, complaints, and retaliation. The intervention strategies most frequently used by teachers to manage behavioral problems are concentrated under the headings of positive reinforcement methods, family collaboration, verbal warnings, and creative applications.

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## Introduction

The preschool period is a critical stage in which the foundations are laid in terms of cognitive, language, motor and social-emotional development. In this period, the child's social-emotional development is directly related to the child's ability to establish healthy relationships with others, manage emotions and express himself/herself (Kandır & Alpan, 2008). In this period when children transition from family-centered life to a peer-based social environment, social skills such as sharing, queuing, waiting and obeying group rules need to be learned (Denham, et al., 2012).

Problem behaviors are behaviors that negatively affect a child's interactions with their environment, learning processes, and social relationships, and are frequently encountered during the preschool period (Melekoğlu, Tuğ Paftalı & Melekoğlu, 2015). During this period, some children may experience adjustment difficulties and behavioral reactions (Denham, et al., 2012).

Various problem behaviors may be observed in the preschool period, such as noncompliance, overindulgence, wastefulness, swearing, lying, stubbornness, jealousy, aggression, and shyness (Poyraz & Özyürek, 2005). In the literature, different classifications of these behaviors have been made, and behaviors such as aggression, verbal threats, inability to share, not participating in group activities, crying, and

dependence on parents (Kesicioğlu, 2015), as well as introversion and hyperactivity (Güder et al., 2018), eating disorders, separation anxiety, nail-biting and lying, picky eating, fear of separating from parents, bedwetting, excessive activity level, attention deficits, stealing, and tics are also evaluated within this scope (İkiz et al., 2016). Problem behaviors are generally addressed in two groups as externalizing and internalizing behaviors; externalizing behaviors include hitting, biting, shouting, and spitting (Işık, 2021), as well as tantrums, noncompliance with rules, and stubbornness (Güder et al., 2018; Kahraman & Derdiyok, 2024), and the most frequently encountered problems in classrooms include tantrums, crying, shouting, and stubbornness (Güder et al., 2018). Internalizing behaviors, on the other hand, include introversion, shyness, depression (Işık, 2021), excessive anxiety, worry, fear, and nail-biting (Kaya et al., 2021). In a study conducted by Gray and colleagues (2012), it was also reported that a certain portion of preschool children exhibit disruptive behaviors, and that these behaviors vary depending on gender, interaction context, and psychopathological conditions. Therefore, these findings support the prevalence of problem behaviors in the preschool period and their observability in various contexts.

Research on preschool teachers' strategies for coping with children's problematic behaviors shows that teachers use positive and negative strategies with varying degrees of emphasis. Some studies indicate that teachers predominantly adopt reactive approaches and use strategies such as simple reward–punishment methods and establishing eye contact (Akgün, Yazar & Dinçer, 2011; Yağan Güder et al., 2018). For example, studies conducted by Denizel Güven and Cevher (2005), Sadık (2006), and Uysal et al. (2010) reported that teachers mostly prefer punishment-based methods when dealing with negative behaviors. In addition to this, some studies show that teachers place greater emphasis on positive strategies. In their study, Gangal and Öztürk (2019) stated that coping strategies for problem behaviors include using “I-messages,” stating the appropriate behavior, trying to understand the problem, rewarding, explaining the consequences of inappropriate behavior, attracting attention, offering choices, and reminding rules. Another study found that teachers frequently used strategies such as “eye contact,” “ignoring,” “encouraging the child to think,” “removing the child from the classroom,” and “assigning tasks and responsibilities” in response to problem behaviors (Yağan et al., 2018). Moreover, Fox and colleagues (2003) emphasized that tiered and structured strategies are effective in preventing problem behaviors and supporting social–emotional development in children. Consistent with this finding, several studies also demonstrate that applied behavior analysis is used as an effective method for assessing and reducing problem behaviors in children (Al Fandi & Zaharudin, 2023; Due et al., 2024; Güner Yıldız et al., 2020; Inoue, Kishimoto & Fukuzaki, 2021).

Recent studies show that teachers' classroom practices and the relationships they establish with children have a decisive effect on children's social–emotional skills and the development of problem behaviors. In particular, when teacher–child relationships are warm, responsive, and consistent, this enables children to use their social–emotional competencies, establish healthy interactions with their peers, and reduces the likelihood of displaying disruptive behaviors (Yoleri & Adigüzel, 2025). Yağan Güder, Alabay, and Güner (2018) examined teachers' views on how they solve problem behaviors in their study. As a result, they determined that teachers generally resort to temporary solutions rather than permanent ones, do not focus much on the causes of behavioral problems, and often approach the problems they encounter impulsively. Many studies in the literature (Erbaş and Yücesoy Özkan, 2010; Öngören Özdemir and Tepeli, 2016) emphasize the importance of teachers being able to correctly identify children's problem behaviors, develop the most appropriate strategies for children with behavioral problems based on these identifications, demonstrate approaches suitable for children's individual differences, and thereby contribute to children's healthy developmental processes. Therefore, this study will shed light on identifying the strategies teachers use to cope with problem behaviors in the classroom by examining their views, and the results will serve as a guide in the development of early intervention programs and the planning of teacher training. In this context, the primary aim of the research is to determine preschool teachers' views on the problem behaviors they encounter in their classrooms and the strategies they implement. In line with this primary aim, the research questions to be answered are as follows:

1. What are the problem behaviors that preschool teachers most frequently encounter in their classrooms?
2. What strategies do teachers use in response to these problem behaviors?
3. Which of the strategies used by teachers have been found to be more effective?

## Method

### Research design

This research was conducted using a case study, which is one of the qualitative research methods. A case study is a qualitative research design that aims to examine a particular situation in depth, and allows for events to be addressed within their own context and analyzed in a multidimensional manner (Creswell,

2013). In this study, the case study method was preferred since the aim was to examine in depth preschool teachers' views on the problem behaviors they encounter in their classrooms, the strategies they implement, and the experiences they have gained.

**Study group**

The study group of the research consists of preschool teachers working in private and public institutions in the Altınordu district of Ordu province during the spring semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. Participants were determined using convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling is a method formed by the researcher's inclusion of individuals who are easily accessible and willing to participate in the research, taking into account time, access, and resource limitations. It is frequently preferred in qualitative research due to the practicality and flexibility it provides to the data collection process (Büyüköztürk et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). In the study, an inclusion criterion was that teachers must have encountered at least one situation in their professional careers that could be classified as a problem behavior in their classrooms. This criterion was adopted to ensure that the teachers' views were grounded in real experiences and that the data obtained would be sensitive to the contextual dynamics. In this context, the study group of the research consists of 29 preschool teachers working in private and public institutions in Ordu province during the spring semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. A total of 31 preschool teachers were reached in the study. However, two of the teachers were not included in the interview process because they stated that there were no problem behaviors in their classrooms. Therefore, the research was conducted with a total of 29 preschool teachers, 28 of whom were female and 1 male. Demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Information about the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Educational Status	School Type	Class Age	Institution Type	Professional Seniority	Department	Training/Course/Seminar
T1	Female	37	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	3	Public	14	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T2	Female	-	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	4	Public	20	Other	Yes
T3	Female	52	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	4	Public	-	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T4	Female	44	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	6	Public	-	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T5	Female	43	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	6	Public	16	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T6	Female	39	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5	Public	13	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T7	Female	-	Bachelor's	Preschool Class	5	Public	-	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T8	Female	43	Bachelor's	Preschool Class	5	Public	-	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T9	Female	-	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	6	Public	14	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T10	Male	-	Associate Degree	Independent preschool	5	Public	-	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T11	Female	35	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	4	Public	-	Department of Child Development	No
T12	Female	31	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	4	Public	3	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T13	Female	35	Master's	Independent preschool	5–6	Public	10	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T14	Female	41	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5	Public	19	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T15	Female	37	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5	Public	13	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T16	Female	48	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5	Public	23	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T17	Female	50	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	4	Public	28	Department of Early Childhood Education	No

T18	Female	43	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5	Public	21	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T19	Female	36	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5	Public	13	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T20	Female	25	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	3	Private	2	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T21	Female	23	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5	Private	1	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T22	Female	40	Bachelor's	Preschool Class	5	Public	17	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T23	Female	49	Bachelor's	Preschool Class	5	Public	25	Department of Preschool Education	Yes
T24	Female	-	Bachelor's	Preschool Class	4	Public	22	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T25	Female	54	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5-6	Public	16	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T26	Female	42	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	5	Public	17	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T27	Female	37	Master's	Independent preschool	5	Public	14	Department of Early Childhood Education	No
T28	Female	42	Bachelor's	Independent preschool	6	Public	19	Department of Early Childhood Education	Yes
T29	Female	42	Bachelor's	Preschool Class	6	Public	20	Department of Early Childhood Education	No

\*Some participants did not provide their age and professional seniority; however, this does not affect the study's results or conclusions.

According to Table 1, a total of 29 preschool teachers, including 1 male and 28 females, participated in the study. The participants' ages range from 23 to 54, with a mean age of 40.3. Of the teachers who participated in the study, 2 hold master's degrees, 1 holds an associate degree, and 26 hold bachelor's degrees. Regarding the type of school where they work, 23 teachers work in independent kindergartens and 6 work in preschool classes attached to elementary schools. Two of these schools are private institutions, while 27 are public institutions. Regarding the age groups the participants work with: 2 participants work with 3-year-olds, 6 participants with 4-year-olds, 13 participants with 5-year-olds, 5 participants with 6-year-olds, and 2 participants with 5-6 year-old groups. The participants' years of professional experience range from a minimum of 1 year to a maximum of 28 years. Regarding whether the participants have received "any training, course, or seminar on behavior problems," 13 participants answered yes and 16 participants answered no.

### Data collection tools and process

In the study, a personal information form and a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers were used as data collection tools.

#### Personal information form

This form was used to determine teachers' demographic characteristics and their educational background regarding children's behavioral problems. In the form, information about teachers' gender, age, educational status, type of school they work in, age group they work with, type of institution they work in, professional seniority, and department they graduated from was requested for demographic characteristics. In addition, information was obtained about whether they had previously received any education/course/seminar on behavioral problems.

#### Semi-structured interview form

In creating this form, the researchers first prepared a draft form consisting of questions on the subject in order to determine teachers' views on behavioral problems in children and the coping strategies they use to address them. Then, this form was sent to three field experts to ensure content validity, and expert opinions on the questions were requested. Necessary adjustments were made in line with the experts' feedback, and the questions were finalized. Subsequently, the questions created were administered to two preschool teachers, and a pilot application was conducted to test the comprehensibility of the questions.

The final interview form included seven open-ended questions focusing on the types of problem behaviors observed in classrooms, their causes, early signs, the impact on the educational process, reactions of other children, and the coping strategies teachers employ. Interviews were carried out face-to-face in May 2024 with teachers from both public and private preschools in the Altınordu district of Ordu province. Each session lasted approximately 25-30 minutes, and audio recordings were made with the participants'

voluntary consent. The recordings were transcribed, and the summaries were shared with participants for verification, which helped to enhance the credibility and reliability of the data.

**Data analysis**

In data analysis, the personal information collected were first coded from T1 to T29, and participant confidentiality was maintained. Subsequently, the recordings collected through the semi-structured interview form were listened to and transcribed by the researchers. The data obtained were analyzed using the content analysis method. The analysis process was carried out in three stages: coding the data, creating categories and themes, and interpreting the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Following these stages, the interview texts were first read repeatedly by the researchers to identify and code meaningful expressions. Then, similar codes were brought together, and subcategories were formed based on their common aspects. These subcategories were grouped under themes taking into account semantic integrity. In the final stage, the themes created were interpreted and direct quotations from participant statements were included to increase the validity of the findings. The coding and analysis process was conducted independently by two researchers and subsequently evaluated comparatively. Necessary corrections were made to ensure conceptual consistency between researchers, and consensus was reached on the emerging codes and themes.

**Results**

The research results present the behavior problems observed by preschool teachers in their classrooms, the reasons for the emergence of these behaviors, their occurrence patterns, the signs and indicators shown by children before these behaviors emerge, the effects of children with problem behaviors on the educational process in the classroom, the reactions of other children to children exhibiting problem behaviors, and the intervention strategies teachers apply to manage these behaviors, and these results are presented below through relevant tables. The results regarding the behavior problems teachers observed in their classrooms are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Behavior Problems Observed by Teachers in Their Classrooms

Theme	Category	Code	Participants
Problem Behaviors	Physical Aggression	Hitting	T1, T2, T3, T5, T8, T10, T14, T17, T23, T24, T26, T27, T28, T29
		Pushing	T17, T19
		Throwing Toys	T17
	Verbal Aggression	Slang/Profanity	T12, T21, T22
		Lying	T5
		Disrespect	T21
	Social Adjustment Problems	Exclusion	T2, T16
		Not Sharing	T1, T8,
		Egocentrism	T8, T9
	Attention and Hyperactivity Problems	Hyperactivity	T4, T15, T18, T25
Attention Problems		T15	
Communication Problems	Inability to Speak	T8, T15	
	Inability to Express Oneself	T21, T27, T28	

As seen in Table 2, the behavior problems encountered by preschool teachers in their classrooms have been examined. Based on the data obtained from participants, the categories of "physical aggression", "verbal aggression", "social adjustment problems", "attention and hyperactivity problems" and "communication problems" were reached through the theme of "problem behaviors". Fourteen of the participants stated that "hitting" behavior was observed, and four stated that "hyperactivity" behaviors were observed. When examining the participants' views, it was seen that one expressed it as "...when he says I can't share the toy and then when they set up another game, they don't invite him to play. Then he feels excluded." (T16). Another participant expressed it as "Can we say that listening problems are actually the most important behavior problem? I'm not quite sure. We can say not listening to each other. We can call it a communication problem. Apart from this, there are actually difficulties related to self-control and internal regulation." (T18). The results regarding the reasons for the emergence of children's behavior problems are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Reasons for the Emergence of Children's Behavior Problems

Theme	Category	Code	Participants
Reasons for Behavior	Family Factors	Lack of Boundaries	T21
		Lack of Rules	T21, T22
		Violence	T14

	Education Level		T24
	Influence of Adults		T18, T21
Environmental Factors	Technological Devices (TV, Tablet, Phone)	T6, T8, T10, T15, T23, T25, T26, T29	
	Violent Games		T14, T23
Individual Characteristics	Jealousy		T3
	Attention-Seeking/Egocentrism		T5, T27
	New Entry to Social Environment		T1, T8, T16, T17
Pandemic Effect	Growing Up Alone		T16
	Lack of Social Skills		T12, T16

As seen in Table 3, the reasons for the emergence of children's behavior problems have been examined. Based on the data obtained from participants, the categories of "family factors," "environmental factors," "individual factors," and "pandemic effect" were reached through the theme of "reasons for behavior." Seven of the participants stated the reason for the behavior as "technological devices" and four as "new entry to social environment." When examining the participants' views, it was observed that one teacher used the expression "...I think it stems from the education provided by the mother and father. In other words, they cannot teach children how to manage their anger..." (T24). Another participant stated "Frankly, they are raised without rules by their families. However, when they come to school, they are raised according to certain rules, so this situation confuses them. Regarding respect, while the family has the mentality of 'okay my son, okay my daughter, I'll give it to you, it's yours,' here they have to learn to share..." (T18), while another participant's statement was "...I'm connecting them to tablets, phones, televisions, screens. I think they are too heavily involved with the digital world. I think behavioral problems are more prevalent because they are a generation that doesn't know how to play." (T15). The results regarding the occurrence of behavioral problems are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Occurrence of Behavior Problems

Theme	Category	Code	Participants
Prevalence and Group Characteristics	Gender	Male Child	T3, T15, T16, T29
		Female\Male Child	T4, T5, T7, T8, T12, T14, T18, T20, T21, T22, T23, T25, T26, T27, T28, T29
	Prevalence	Small Group	T3, T9, T14, T19
		Large Group	T1, T6, T11
		Individual	T17, T23

As seen in Table 4, the study examined whether problem behaviors were observed throughout the entire classroom or in specific groups. The categories of "gender" and "prevalence" were reached through the theme of "Prevalence and Group Characteristics." Four of the participants stated that behavior problems were more commonly observed in male children, while sixteen stated that behavior problems were observed in both female and male children regardless of gender. At the same time, two stated that behavior problems occurred individually in their classrooms, three said they were observed in large groups, and four stated that they occurred in small groups within the classroom. One of the participants expressed, "...I think it occurs more in male children." (T15). Another participant stated, "In certain students, not among all my students, but among most of my students." (T6). The results regarding the signs and indicators displayed by children before behavior problems emerge are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Signs and Indicators Displayed by Children Before Behavior Problems Emerge

Theme	Category	Code	Participants
Pre-Behavior Indicators	Physical Signs	Frowning	T20
		Putting Toy in Mouth/ Taking from Hand	T21, T19
		Banging Hand on Table	T1
	Emotional Indicators	Crying	T13,
		Silence	T8, T13
		Getting Angry	T2, T4, T6, T5, T24, T28
	Verbal Warnings	Shouting	T6, T19
		Threatening	T1
		Verbal Aggression	T12

As seen in Table 5, the distinctive signs or behaviors that children display before exhibiting problem behaviors were examined. Through the theme of "pre-behavioral indicators," the categories of "physical

signs," "emotional indicators," and "verbal warnings (children displaying verbal precursor signs before problem behavior)" were reached. Five of the participants stated that signs of "anger" were observed before the behavior. Four stated that there were no warning behaviors. Upon examining the participants' statements, it was observed that they provided explanations such as "They get angry quickly." (T24), "...they gradually select a friend for themselves, for example. They approach them. Other than that, when physically rejected, they may exhibit behaviors like frowning or spreading their arms, for example. We can already understand the reaction they will give from their physical movements to some extent." (T20), "We can understand from how they get up from the table, whether they stare at their friend, from their manner of going, why they are going there." (T1), "They can react suddenly; when they don't get what they want while playing with their friend, they can shout..." (T6), "Beforehand, children definitely use rude words to each other during conversation, then physical behaviors manifest themselves..." (T12). The results regarding the impact of a child displaying behavior problems in the classroom on the educational process are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: The Effects of the Presence of a Child Displaying Behavior Problems in the Classroom on the Educational Process

Theme	Category	Code	Participants
Impact on Educational Environment	Negative Impact	Disruption of Classroom Dynamics	T16, T18, T26
		Strain on Educational Environment	T1, T4, T6, T7, T8, T11, T12, T13, T15, T18, T20, T21, T22, T23, T24, T27, T29
		Distraction	T14
	Spread of Behavior	Negative Example	T2, T17, T19, T25, T29
	Disruption of Education	Disruption of Activities	T3, T9, T17,

As seen in Table 6, the impact of the presence of a child displaying behavior problems in the classroom on the educational process was examined. The categories of "negative impact," "spread of behavior," and "disruption of education" were reached through the theme of "impact on educational environment." Seventeen of the participants stated that a child with behavior problems "strains" the educational process. One of the participants said, "While trying to completely eliminate this behavior, our educational process is significantly disrupted. Children are greatly influenced by each other. When they are together with children who easily display these behaviors, other children think they can easily display these behaviors as well. (T29)". The results regarding the reactions of other children to children displaying problem behaviors are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Peer Reactions Displayed Toward Children Exhibiting Problem Behaviors

Theme	Category	Code	Participants
Peer Reactions	Negative Reaction	Exclusion	T2, T5, T14, T15, T16, T23, T24, T29
		Complaining	T2, T9, T10, T14, T25, T27, T29
		Imitation	T21
	Defensive Reaction	Retaliating	T1, T2, T7, T14
	Emotional Reaction	Crying	T7, T10
Being Afraid		T26	

As seen in Table 7, the reactions of other children to the problem behaviors of a child with behavioral problems were examined. The categories of "negative reaction," "defensive reaction," "emotional reaction," and "withdrawal" were reached through the theme of "peer reactions." Seven of the participants stated that peers displayed "exclusion" behavior, and seven stated "complaining" behavior. One of the participants said, "...they take measures such as cutting off their relationships with friends who insist on and continue engaging in wrong behaviors." (T29). Another participant stated, "...other children prefer not to play with their peers." (T15). Another participant expressed, "...they first come to me and tell me. Then I say to them, 'But they didn't do this to me, they did it to you. Did you tell them that what they did was wrong?' They said no, I didn't tell them. But I say, if you don't tell them, they don't know it's wrong." (T17). The results regarding the intervention strategies teachers apply to manage these behaviors are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Intervention Strategies Applied by Teachers to Manage Problem Behaviors

Theme	Category	Code	Participants
Teacher Intervention Strategies	Positive Reinforcement	Sticker	T3, T4, T5, T16,
		Reward Board	T3, T9, T10, T17
		Rewarding	T9, T10, T17

	Behavior Chart	T20
Empathy and Drama	Storytelling	T24
	Drama	T24
	Discussing Emotions	T21
	Parent Meetings	T4, T8, T14, T24, T25, T29
Family Collaboration	Assigning Tasks and Responsibilities	T22, T26
	Time-Out	T10, T14
Verbal Warning	Deprivation	T6, T7, T9
	Verbal Warning	T12, T13, T19, T23, T24
	Humorous Techniques	T18
Creative Applications	Motivation Games	T9, T19, T21, T16

As seen in Table 8, the strategies applied in the classroom to change behaviors were examined. Under the theme of "teacher intervention strategies," the categories of "positive reinforcement," "empathy and drama," "family collaboration," "time-out," "deprivation," "rewarding," and "creative methods" were reached. Six participants stated they applied "parent meetings," five teachers "verbal warning," and four teachers each applied "sticker," "reward board," and "motivation games" strategies. One of the participants expressed, "...To overcome these, I tried to include him more in group games. I didn't want to leave him alone and I encouraged him even if he didn't want to. I mean, I tried to reward him. I said well done, I had everyone applaud, I gave him a sticker...even when he participated in a simple activity, and I tried to motivate him like this. I tried to make him proud in front of his friends by saying nice words. That was somewhat effective, of course. The parents had also talked with their child at home and we made some progress" (T16). Another participant stated, "...After first meeting with the family, in the second round we meet with the guidance counselor. During this process, I try to work together with them..." (T8).

## Discussion and conclusion

This study aims to reveal the behaviors encountered by preschool teachers, their causes, and coping strategies.

According to the results obtained in the research, it was concluded that teachers most frequently observed problem behaviors such as hitting, hyperactivity, profanity/swearing, and inability to express oneself in their classrooms. This result may stem from the fact that children's emotion regulation skills are not yet fully developed during the preschool period. It can be considered that children who have difficulty expressing themselves tend to communicate through non-verbal means. These results show similarity to Kesicioğlu's (2015) finding that aggression and communication problems are common in children during the preschool period, and to Özbey's (2010) finding that behaviors such as taking others' belongings without permission, swearing, and lying are frequently observed in children. Looking at other studies in the literature, it has been observed that children frequently exhibit problem behaviors such as inability to share, jealousy, hitting, getting angry, swearing, crying, shouting, and stubbornness (Temiz, 2020; Yağan Güder et al., 2018). Tercan and Demircioğlu (2019) also stated in their study that teachers frequently encounter violent and destructive behaviors in children. When teachers were asked about the behavior problems they encounter in their classrooms within the scope of the study, it was observed that they identified hyperactivity and speech disorder—both of which are clinical disorders rather than behavioral problems. However, the American Psychiatric Association defines attention deficit hyperactivity disorder as a disorder primarily characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, accompanied by a range of other cognitive and behavioral symptoms (as cited in Torun, 2009). Speech disorder, on the other hand, is defined as disruptions in the motor, cognitive, and linguistic processes necessary for producing sounds in verbal language (Aydın Uysal & Tura, 2018). In this respect, it is evident that teachers experience difficulty distinguishing between behavioral disorders and behavior problems. This situation indicates that participants do not possess sufficient professional knowledge to recognize and differentiate behavior problems. Indeed, the fact that the majority of teachers participating in the study have not attended any seminars related to behavior problems is considered to be a reason for this inadequacy.

According to another result of the study, teachers indicate that among the main causes of problem behaviors they encounter in children are the excessive use of technological devices and children's new entry into a social environment. These two findings are parallel to each other and can be interpreted as technology reducing opportunities for social interaction. This result suggests that children's social interaction opportunities have decreased in the digital age and that this situation directly affects behavioral

development. This result aligns with research in the literature indicating that children's social-emotional development is closely related to environmental and experiential factors (Madigan et al., 2022; Denham & Bassett, 2019). Indeed, another study revealed that intensive screen exposure at an early age negatively affects children's emotional regulation, attention maintenance, and social interaction skills (Linebarger & Vaala, 2010). Çınar Karasu and Bütün Ayhan (2024) also found in their study that as children's daily screen exposure time increases, their aggressive behaviors increase. Similarly, Özata, Ersöz, and Arcagök (2024) examined children's aggression tendencies during the preschool period in their study and found a significant relationship between screen time and aggressive behaviors.

Another result of the study was that teachers stated that unruly and permissive attitudes in families cause problems in children. Supporting this result, Temiz (2020) also concluded in their study that reasons such as "incorrect parental attitudes," "rule-free family environment," and "families' inability to teach anger management to children" create behavioral problems. It is stated that teachers encounter problem behaviors more frequently in cases where social-emotional skills are low (Bierman et al., 2018). This result in the literature also corresponds with the conclusion obtained in our study that "lack of social skills" is a reason for exhibiting behavioral problems. In another study, significant relationships were found between preschool children's social skill levels and school adjustment factors; connections were identified between social skills and antisocial behaviors such as peer relationships, aggression, and exclusion (Gülşay Ogelman & Erten Sarıkaya, 2014). The data obtained in the research revealed that behavioral problems generally emerge in specific groups or at an individual level, and that there was no significant difference according to gender. Yoldaş and Demircioğlu (2022) concluded in their study that problem behaviors did not differ according to children's gender. However, Gökteş et al. (2024) stated in their study that boys' mean scores were higher than girls' particularly in behavioral problems such as aggression and hyperactivity. Derman and Başal (2013) also stated in their study that 53.6% of children displaying behavioral problems were boys and 46.4% were girls. Gray et al. (2012) stated in their study that boys exhibited externalizing behaviors more than girls, whereas gender difference was not pronounced in internalizing behaviors. A study conducted by Álvarez-Voces and Romero (2025) found that males displayed more behaviors than females in terms of bullying, victimization, relational aggression, overt aggression, emotional regulation, and emotional variability. These different results in the literature demonstrate that the differentiation of problem behaviors according to gender cannot be explained by a single-dimensional variable. The differences among results may stem from variables such as sample size of the studies, cultural context, teacher perception-based data collection methods, and evaluation criteria.

In the research, teachers stated that children typically exhibit behaviors such as getting angry, crying, becoming silent, frowning, shouting, or threatening before displaying problem behaviors. This result reveals that teachers need to observe and intervene not only when problem behavior emerges, but also beforehand. According to the applied behavior analysis approach, teachers' identification of these early signs, development of appropriate responses, and guidance of the student's behavior can reduce the frequency of problem behaviors (Erbaş, 2017). This research is also parallel to the study by Denham and colleagues (2012), which shows that early recognition of children's emotional reactions increases classroom adjustment.

In the study, teachers stated that the presence of children exhibiting behavioral problems in their classrooms makes the flow of education difficult, causes disruptions in activities, and negatively affects classroom order. Similarly, Yağan Güder, Alabay, and Güner (2018) found that education is frequently interrupted in classrooms with children who have behavioral problems and that there is an increase in negative modeling behaviors among students who do not exhibit problems. Likewise, Temiz (2020) stated that this situation causes negativity in the classroom and disrupts the educational process. Based on this, it can be said that children exhibiting behavioral problems negatively affect not only their own learning processes but also those of their peers.

In the study, it was observed that children generally respond to their peers' negative behaviors with reactions such as exclusion, complaining, retaliation, fear, or crying. This finding supports the previous research results. It can be stated that these attitudes shown by peers toward children exhibiting behavioral problems negatively affect both peer communication within the classroom and the overall classroom climate.

Teachers indicated that they prefer strategies such as positive reinforcement, collaboration with families, verbal warnings, reward charts, and drama activities most frequently to deal with problem behaviors. Based on this finding, it can be said that teachers prefer collaborative and positive strategies more in behavior management. Studies in the literature (Kılıç, Kalkan & Avcı, 2021; Uyanık, Kaya & Gözüm, 2024) also reveal that the positive approaches teachers display in response to problem behaviors reduce problem behaviors observed in children and minimize negativity within the classroom. In addition, studies in literature also report the use of both positive and negative strategies. In their study, Yağan Güder et al. (2018) stated that

strategies such as removing the child from the classroom, using the mirror technique, giving stern warnings, applying rewards and punishments, involving the child in the process, drama, play, and storytelling were used. Another study revealed that teachers employed both positive and negative strategies—including family collaboration, warnings, establishing eye contact, ignoring, attracting attention or redirecting, fostering empathy, punishment, persuasion, rewarding, threatening or reminding rules, relocation, listening to or allowing the student to speak, role modeling, and the use of emphasis and intonation—to prevent problem behaviors encountered in the classroom (Kolak Özdemir & Özdemir, 2023). Although the findings of the present study mostly point to positive strategies, the presence of studies in the literature indicating the use of both positive and negative strategies may be due to the fact that the majority of the teachers participating in the present study have high levels of professional seniority and therefore tend to use more positive strategies. Additionally, variations such as the type of school in which teachers work, the age group of the students, and the geographical location of the study may also account for this difference.

The participants of this study predominantly consist of female teachers, most of whom hold undergraduate degrees and work in independent preschools and public institutions. A significant portion of the teachers have high levels of professional seniority, and the majority are graduates of early childhood education programs. However, it is noteworthy that more than half of the participants have not attended any specialized training, courses, or seminars related to behavior problems. This participant profile provides an important framework for interpreting the study's findings. Indeed, the relevant literature indicates that teachers' knowledge and skills regarding child development and behavior management significantly influence how they assess and respond to children's behaviors (Hemmeter et al., 2006; Pianta et al., 2008; Webster-Stratton et al., 2001). Moreover, research shows that teachers' competencies in identifying and classifying behavior problems are closely linked to the education and professional development opportunities they receive (Davis et al., 2023; Hemmeter et al., 2011). In this regard, teachers' limited participation in current professional development activities may lead them to perceive some behaviors that are developmentally typical as problem behaviors and may also result in the misclassification of certain behavioral disorders (such as hyperactivity or speech disorders) as behavior problems. Therefore, supporting teachers through updated professional development programs may contribute to their accurate identification of behavior problems, more appropriate interpretation of children's behaviors, and, consequently, the strengthening of classroom practices.

In summary, this study revealed the problem behaviors that preschool teachers frequently encounter in their classrooms, the probable causes of these behaviors, and the strategies teachers use to cope with these behaviors. According to the findings, behaviors such as hitting, hyperactivity, profanity/swearing, and inability to express oneself are most commonly observed in children; the problem behaviors experienced have many causes including individual, environmental, and familial factors; the behaviors exhibited by children affect not only themselves but the entire classroom and cause negativity in the educational process; and teachers frequently prefer collaborative and positive strategies. In this context, the following recommendations can be made for teachers and future studies:

- Studies that examine the causes of problem behaviors in detail and evaluate the effectiveness of teacher strategies can be conducted.
- The study can be conducted with families with whom children spend the most time, so that the topic can be approached more comprehensively and from a different perspective, and the subject can be interpreted holistically.
- Studies that reveal the results of the strategies teachers implement can be conducted, and the most effective strategies in reducing problem behaviors can be identified.
- Through quantitative studies to be conducted to determine problem behaviors and teacher strategies, more objective and generalizable results regarding problem behaviors and teacher strategies can be obtained.

## Declarations

### Ethics statements

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Educational Research Ethics Committee of Ordu University Rectorate (Session: 8; Decision No: 2025-102; Date: 23/05/2025). The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. Participants (preschool teachers) voluntarily took part in the study, were informed about the purpose and scope of the research and provided written consent. Personal data was anonymized, identifying information was not reported, and the data was used solely for scientific purposes.

## Informed consent

All participants (preschool teachers) were thoroughly informed about the purpose, scope, and procedures of the research and voluntarily agreed to participate. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. No identifying images or other personal data were included in this publication; therefore, no additional consent was required.

## Availability of data and materials

The data used in this study cannot be made publicly available in order to protect participant confidentiality. However, anonymized data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to appropriate ethical approval.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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## Authors' contributions

Author 1: Contributed to the study design and planning, and to the Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations sections. Actively participated in manuscript drafting and revision. Author 2: Contributed to the study design and planning, and to the Introduction, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion sections. Assisted in manuscript drafting and revision. Author 3: Contributed to the study design and planning, and to the Introduction, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion sections. Participated in manuscript drafting and revision.

## Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence was not used in the preparation, collection, processing, or analysis of the data for this article; it was only utilized for translation and grammar support.

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