

Recognizing children's successes in all areas may prevent teenage depression

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Students' successes in the first grade can affect more than their future report cards. In a new study, University of Missouri researchers found links among students' weak academic performance in the first grade, self-perceptions in the sixth grade, and depression symptoms in the seventh grade.

"We found that students in the first grade who struggled academically with core subjects, including reading and math, later displayed negative self-perceptions and symptoms of depression in sixth and seventh grade, respectively," said Keith Herman, associate professor of education, school and counseling psychology in the MU College of Education. "Often, children with poor academic skills believe they have less influence on important outcomes in their life. Poor academic skills can influence how children view themselves as students and as social beings."

In the study, MU researchers examined the behaviors of 474 boys and girls in the first grade and re-examined the students when they entered middle school. Herman found that students who struggled academically with core subjects, such as reading and math, in the first grade later showed risk factors for negative self-beliefs and depressive symptoms as they entered sixth and seventh grade. Herman suggests that because differences in children's learning will continue to exist even if all students are given effective instruction and support, parents and teachers should acknowledge student's skills in other areas.

"One of the main ways children can get others to like them in school is by being good students. Children with poor academic skills may believe that they have one less method for influencing important social outcomes, which could lead to negative consequences later in life. Children's individual differences will always exist in basic academic skills, so it is necessary to explore and emphasize other assets in students, especially those with lower academic skill relative to their peers," Herman said. "Along with reading and math, teachers and parents should honor skills in other areas, such as interpersonal skills, non-core academic areas, athletics and music."

The researchers also found the effect of academic proficiency on self-perceptions was significantly stronger for girls. Girls who did not advance academically believed that they had less control of important outcomes, a risk factor for symptoms of depression.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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