

## Study: Negative classroom environment adversely affects children's mental health

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Children in classrooms with inadequate material resources and children whose teachers feel they are not respected by colleagues exhibit more mental health problems than students in classrooms without these issues, finds a new study in the March issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

"Sociologists and other researchers spend a lot of time looking at work environments and how they are linked to the [mental health](#) of adults, but we pay less attention to the relationship between kids' well-being and their 'work' environments—namely their schools and more specifically their classrooms," said Melissa A. Milkie, a sociology professor at the University of Maryland, who led the study. "Our research shows that the [classroom environment](#) really matters when it comes to children's mental health."

According to Milkie, who co-authored the study, "Classroom Learning Environments and the Mental Health of First Grade Children," with Catharine H. Warner, a sociology PhD candidate at the University of Maryland, policymakers typically measure school quality and teacher effectiveness in terms of academic outcomes such as test scores. But, Milkie said, their study demonstrates that schools and teachers also impact children's mental health, making it a barometer that deserves more attention.

"I think parents care a lot about their children's mental health—their emotional and behavioral well being—but we as a society don't tend to

focus on that as an important educational outcome nearly as much as we talk about and think about academic outcomes," said Milkie.

The study relies on a nationally representative sample of approximately 10,700 first graders, whose parents and teachers were interviewed.

As part of their study, the authors considered how the classroom environment impacted four components of mental health: learning (e.g., attentiveness), externalizing problems (e.g., fights), interpersonal behavior (e.g., forming friendships), and internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety and sadness).

Children in classrooms with inadequate material resources and children whose teachers felt their colleagues did not respect them experienced worse mental health across all four measures.

The material resources ranged from basics such as paper, pencils, and heat to child-friendly furnishings, computers, musical instruments, and art supplies.

"Being in a classroom with a lack of resources might adversely impact children's mental health because children are frustrated or disheartened by their surroundings," Milkie said. "Teachers also may be more discouraged or harsh when they can't teach properly due to the fact that they are missing key elements."

Regarding children whose teachers felt their colleagues did not respect them, Milkie suggested there is an adverse trickle down effect on students.

"For teachers to get the support and encouragement that they need from colleagues, including the principal, is likely important for whether the teachers are able to create a classroom climate that helps children

thrive," Milkie said. "If [teachers](#) are feeling stressed out because they aren't getting what they need from their colleagues, that stress may carry over to the kids."

While the study focuses on first graders, Milkie expects similar results for older children. "I would be surprised if there were different findings for older [children](#), but our study only looks at first graders so we can't be certain," Milkie said.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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