

Awareness of ethnicity-based stigma found to start early

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Students are stigmatized for a variety of reasons, with youths from ethnic-minority backgrounds often feeling devalued in school. New research on young children from a range of backgrounds has found that even elementary school children are aware of such stigmatization and, like older youths, feel more anxious about school as a result. Children who are stigmatized are more likely to have less interest in school, yet ethnic-minority children in this study reported high interest in school in the face of stigma. For some students, feeling close to people at school helps them maintain higher levels of interest in academics, despite the potentially negative effects of stigmatization.

The findings are from researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, and New York University. They appear in the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers studied more than 450 second and fourth graders in New York City with ethnic-minority backgrounds (specifically, African American, Chinese, Dominican, and Russian) or ethnic-majority backgrounds (European American). The [children](#) were asked questions about their awareness of [stigma](#), [anxiety](#) about school, interest in school, and feelings of belonging in school.

Differences in the young children's awareness of stigma were similar to differences among adults, with ethnic-minority children generally reporting more awareness than ethnic-majority children. There were few differences by grade, suggesting that even second graders are sensitive to

ethnic attitudes in society.

Ethnic-minority children also reported higher academic anxiety, which the researchers attributed to their greater awareness of stigma.

But the study also found that some ethnic-minority students reported significantly higher interest in school than their ethnic-majority [peers](#), despite past research showing that awareness of stigmatization is associated with lower interest in school. For Dominican children in particular, this seemingly paradoxical finding was explained, in part, by their feelings about belonging: For these youngsters, feeling close connections to people at school accounted for their high levels of interest in school, despite their awareness of stigma.

The study has implications for intervention efforts, suggest the researchers. Programs aimed at decreasing students' perceptions of group stigma (such as community role models) could help keep students' academic anxiety in check. And school-based interventions that foster close connections among individuals at school may help students stay interested in learning.

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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