

Behavior problems, not depression, linked to lower grades for depressed youths

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Behavior problems, not depression, are linked to lower grades for depressed adolescents, according to a study in the December issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

"Behavior problems including attention issues, delinquency, and substance use are associated with diminished achievement, but [depression](#) is not," said the study's lead author Jane D. McLeod, a sociology professor and an associate dean at Indiana University.

"Certainly, there are depressed youths who have trouble in school, but it's likely because they are also using substances, engaging in delinquent activities, or have attention issues."

Titled, "Adolescent Mental Health, [Behavior Problems](#), and Academic Achievement," McLeod's study uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), which followed thousands of U.S. adolescents from their middle and [high school](#) years through their transition to [early adulthood](#). McLeod's analysis focuses on students who were in high school when Add Health began in 1994. To determine academic achievement, McLeod considered the high school GPAs of students after the first wave of Add Health in 1994 and the highest educational degrees they received by 2008-2009.

"There's a fairly sizable literature that links depression in high school to diminished [academic achievement](#)," said McLeod, who co-authored the study with Ryotaro Uemura, a project assistant professor in the International Center at Keio University in Japan, and Shawna Rohrman,

a [doctoral candidate](#) in sociology at Indiana University. "The argument we make in our study is what's really happening is that youths who are depressed also have other problems as well, and it's those other problems that are adversely affecting their achievement."

Unlike students who experienced depression, the study found that adolescents who experienced attention issues, delinquency, or substance use had lower average GPAs than youths without any such problems. Similarly, delinquency and substance use were associated with receiving lesser degrees while depression was not. Adolescents who experienced two problems typically earned lower GPAs and lesser degrees than those who experienced only one problem, although some combinations of problems had more harmful effects than others. For example, substance use increased the educational risks associated with depression, attention issues, and delinquency. In contrast, experiencing depression in combination with attention issues, delinquency, or substance use was not linked to GPAs or levels of [educational attainment](#) lower than those of students who had any of these problems alone. Interestingly, attention issues were not associated with lower levels of educational attainment whereas they were related to lower GPAs.

"It could be that attention issues adversely affect high school GPA, but not level of educational attainment because success in college and graduate school may be less closely tied to behavior and interactions within the classroom than it is in high school," McLeod said. "For example, if you're in a large college classroom and you're someone who needs to be bouncing your knees or tapping your pen, that's not going to come to the notice of the instructor in the same way that it might in a smaller high school classroom."

The analysis controlled for academic aptitude, meaning the researchers took into account whether the youths in the study had the ability to do well in school. "What we found is that there are adolescents who have

the ability to succeed, but who are not succeeding in school because of their troubling behavior—attention issues, [delinquency](#), [substance use](#) or a combination," McLeod said. "This suggests to me that schools should reconsider the approach they take to dealing with these students. Perhaps, they should think about moving away from punitive approaches towards approaches aimed at integrating these students into the school community."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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