

Early behavioural problems linked to lower GCSE grades

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As thousands of 16-year-olds find out their GCSE results, new research has found that three-year-olds who display hyperactivity, inattention or conduct problems are at risk of worse academic outcomes when GCSEs come around.

Researchers at the Universities of Nottingham and Bristol sampled over 11,000 children as part of the study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

The research findings are published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

Methodology

Parents were asked to complete a [questionnaire](#) when their child was 47

months old (just before their fourth birthday) to assess whether their child showed signs of [hyperactivity/inattention](#) or conduct problems. The children's [academic achievements](#) were then assessed at 16 by looking at their GCSE results.

The sample were from the [Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children](#) (ALSPAC) in the UK, also known as the Children of the 90s study.

The results

After adjusting for variables such as IQ, maternal and paternal education, and parental social class, boys who displayed high levels of hyperactivity and inattention at 47 months (just before their fourth birthday) were found to be 33 per cent more likely to not achieve a minimum level of five good GCSE grades (A*-C) at 16.

For boys, both hyperactivity/inattention and conduct problems were associated with worse [academic outcomes](#). On average, boys who displayed high levels of hyperactivity/inattention at 47 months scored 10 fewer points (equivalent to 1.67 GCSE grades) at 16. Boys with abnormal conduct at three scored 15 fewer points (equivalent to 2.5 GCSE grades) than boys with normal scores.

For girls, the effect of conduct problems on education achievement was comparable to boys. Girls with borderline scores for conduct problems scored nine fewer points (equivalent to 1.5 GCSE grades) at 16. Additionally, girls with abnormal scores scored 12 few points (equivalent to two GCSE grades) than girls with normal scores.

Early identification of behavioural problems

The findings of the research have a range of ramifications about the implications of early behaviour difficulties, as well as the importance of taking parental concerns seriously.

Dr Kapil Sayal, Reader in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at The University of Nottingham, was one of the key researchers. He believes there is a clear link between behavioural problems at three and academic attainment at 16.

He said: "Our findings raise questions about early identification of children with hyperactivity and attention problems. Although there is little evidence that routine screening for ADHD-type problems in the early school years is effective, teachers are well placed to identify young children with high levels of behavioural problems. Teachers should be encouraged to enhance their awareness of the long-term implications of early behavioural difficulties, and to take parental concerns about behaviour problems seriously.

"Health professionals should also inform the parents and teachers of young children with high levels of hyperactivity/inattention and [conduct problems](#) about the long-term academic risks, so that help can be offered at school. Early academic support for children with these problems may help reduce the long-term risk of poorer academic outcomes."

Provided by University of Nottingham

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