

# Researchers to study effects of early intervention on older kids

May 21 2014, by Diane Kukich

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As an expert in childhood development, the University of Delaware's Mary Dozier is all too familiar with the harmful effects of early neglect on young children.

To address that problem, she developed an intervention for at-risk caregivers called Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up, or ABC, which has proved effective in enhancing attachment security, emotion expression, and physiological regulation among infants and toddlers.

Now, Dozier and two colleagues in UD's Department of Psychology have been awarded a \$3.1 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to examine the effects of ABC on older children.

"We've seen the positive effects of the 10-week intervention on very [young children](#)," says Dozier, who is the Amy E. du Pont Chair of Child Development at UD. "Now we want to know how lasting those effects are. This grant will allow us to examine children when they're eight, nine, and 10 years old—an age range when kids have typically learned to regulate their own behavior and when the demands for that skill are high."

The team will look at four key areas important in middle childhood—[inhibitory control](#), [emotion regulation](#), peer relations, and physiological regulation—to determine the longer-term effects of the early childhood intervention.

"Inhibitory control comes into play in both classroom and peer settings," Dozier explains. "For example, to be successful in school, children need to be able to sit at their desks and sometimes work on boring worksheets rather than jump up and look out the window at children running on the playground."

"Emotion regulation is what keeps a healthy ten-year-old from looking disappointed when grandma's birthday gift is a pair of pajamas instead of a video game," she continues. "And most of us are familiar with the third key task for kids in this age group, which is developing positive relationships with their peers. For example, if a child accidentally steps on another child's foot, there are important differences in whether the child realizes that the incident was accidental or assumes the other child did it on purpose. When the child assumes it is on purpose, he or she is much more likely to behave aggressively than when he or she assumes it was accidental."

"Finally, children need to be able to regulate their physiology," she says. "Kids who have experienced significant adversity often have abnormal patterns of the hormone cortisol in their bodies, which can have [harmful effects](#) on their health and well-being."

The participants in the follow-on study will include 210 children, at least 140 of whom were enrolled in the earlier study to test the efficacy of the ABC Intervention, and 70 low-risk comparison children matched for age, ethnicity, and gender.

"We expect the children whose parents received the ABC Intervention, as well as the low-risk comparison children, to show stronger inhibitory control, better emotion regulation, more appropriate behavior with peers, and more normative cortisol production than children whose parents participated in the control intervention in our earlier study," Dozier says.

Dozier will collaborate with Robert Simons, chair of UD's Department of Psychology and an expert in the use of psychophysiological approaches to study human emotion and cognition, and Julie Hubbard, associate professor of psychology, whose work focuses on peer rejection, aggression, emotion regulation, and social cognitive processes in middle childhood.

The team will assess inhibitory control through behavioral tasks and event-related potentials, a technique that measures brain activity. They will evaluate emotion regulation through tasks that require [children](#) to control the expression of emotions under challenging conditions; peer relations through video-vignettes and play groups; and physiological regulation through the measurement of cortisol.

The project, "Intervening Early with Neglected Children: Key Middle Childhood Outcomes," is funded by the National Institute of Mental Health for five years.

Provided by University of Delaware

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