

Many kids not ready for kindergarten

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Some children enter preschool able to control their behavior and ready to learn, but others don't develop self-control until they get to kindergarten -- or even later. Credit: Michigan State University

Many children are still learning to control their behavior as they enter kindergarten and may need educational support to develop that critical skill, indicates one of the most conclusive studies to date of early

childhood self-regulation.

The federally funded study, co-authored by Michigan State University scholars, shows major differences in how self-regulation develops in children ages 3 to 7. While some enter preschool more able to control their behavior and ready to learn, others don't develop such self-control until they get to kindergarten - or even later.

The findings come as preschool and kindergarten classrooms in the United States have shifted focus over the past few decades from social and emotional skills, such as self-regulation, to more academic skills. The researchers suggest it may be time to put some of the focus back on self-regulation, widely accepted as a marker for future success.

"If you can help children to develop this fundamental skill of behavioral self-regulation, it will allow these students to get so much more out of education," said Ryan Bowles, associate professor in MSU's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. "Self-regulation is very predictive of academic success."

Together with recent MSU graduate Janelle Montroy, Bowles and colleagues analyzed the data from three separate studies that measured the "Head, Toes, Knees and Shoulders" task, in which young children are instructed to do the opposite of what they're told. If they're told to touch their head, for example, they're supposed to touch their toes. This ability to do the opposite of what they want to do naturally and to stay focused for the entire task involves self-regulation.

A clear pattern emerged in each of the studies, with participants generally fitting into one of three trajectories: early developers, intermediate developers and later developers. On average, the later developers were 6-12 months behind intermediate developers and at least 18 months behind early developers. Overall, about a fifth of the

1,386 participants appeared to make few gains on behavioral self-regulation in preschool.

"I was surprised by the consistency of the findings," said Bowles. "To replicate the same finding multiple times in a single study is remarkable."

Echoing previous research, the study also found that development of self-control was linked to several key factors: gender (boys were more likely to be later developers), language skills and mother's education levels.

"It's well known that self-regulation is crucial to helping kids get an early jump on education, from math to literacy - really all the skills they learn in school," Bowles said. "So the kids that develop later are really missing out on these great opportunities. They're already behind."

Provided by Michigan State University

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