

Friendships between young children can protect against ADHD

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Children who experience social exclusion in preschool are at greater risk of becoming so-called "school losers." Norwegian researchers are studying what happens to children who are marginalized.

It has long been known that children – like adults – can become anxious and depressed when they feel they don't belong and don't have good peer relationships. But can the lack of friends also affect cognitive characteristics like concentration, attention and self-regulation?

Gap in the research

The number of ADHD-diagnosed children has skyrocketed. Researcher Frode Stenseng believes that some of this trend could have been averted if fewer children had experienced [social exclusion](#) in early childhood.

Earlier experiments with students were based on the "need-to-belong theory," which suggests that the ability to regulate one's thoughts and feelings is weakened when a person feels socially excluded. Research on young children in the same situation hadn't been done, and "this is where we saw a gap in the research," says Stenseng. He is currently employed as an associate professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology's (NTNU) Regional Centre for Child and Youth Mental Health and Child Welfare (RKBU), and as a professor at Queen Maud University College in Trondheim.

Stenseng has used data from the longitudinal study Tidlig Trygg i Trondheim (TTiT) to investigate how children who struggle to establish stable friendships in preschool develop over time. TTiT is a programme that aims to find out why some children are particularly vulnerable to psychological and psychosocial problems, while others seem to be more protected from similar health challenges.

Compound issues

The main finding was that children who are thought to be socially excluded in preschool and at school have greater difficulty than other

children in controlling their temper and anger. They also struggle to a greater degree with concentration difficulties and high impulsivity.

"In concrete terms, these kids have a harder time following directions, queuing up, or sitting and listening to adults reading, than do children who live with secure friendships," says Stenseng.

Children who are rejected by peers "respond to exclusion with aggression, and fail to figure out strategies to be accepted back into the group. They struggle with self-regulation and resort to impulsive behaviours more easily, such as hitting others, shouting or succumbing to other momentary temptations," he says.

Upset at not fitting in

Research shows that higher levels of social exclusion at 4 years of age lead to an increased incidence of ADHD symptoms at 6 years old. The same happens between 6 and 8 years of age.

Many researchers have previously shown that children who are unsettled have fewer friends in school and preschool. The research done at NTNU Social Research shows that the effect also goes the other way: that children become unsettled when they don't fit in. These findings emphasize how important it is to make sure that all children in preschool and at school learn to function well socially.

Rejected kids become stressed

The number of ADHD-diagnosed children has skyrocketed. Stenseng believes that some of this development could have been averted if fewer children had experienced social exclusion in [early childhood](#). Kids who are rejected by their peers can end up in a mess later on.

"Friend problems trigger increased production of stress hormones, which in turn weakens the development of brain structures we need for self-regulation, learning and concentration," Stenseng says. "And sadly, social exclusion appears to remain stable. Once a child experiences peer rejection, this is unfortunately not likely to change the next time around," he adds.

Stenseng believes teacher education programmes place too little emphasis on understanding these mechanisms, and points out that it is important that the adults who support children's development are aware of the major consequences that social [exclusion](#) at the preschool level can have for the rest of a child's school life.

The researcher also hopes that politicians will take the knowledge from this research into account.

"There's a lot of talk concerning early academic efforts. But early social efforts seem to be just as important for [children](#)'s ability to succeed in school," says Stenseng.

More information: Frode Stenseng et al. Peer Rejection and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Symptoms: Reciprocal Relations Through Ages 4, 6, and 8, *Child Development* (2015). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12471](#)

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