

Low academic achievement can lead to drug abuse decades later, research finds

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A Virginia Commonwealth University researcher has found that poor academic achievement can lead to substance abuse. Data collected from Swedish participants over a period of 15 to 20 years indicate a strong

correlation.

Kenneth Kendler, M.D., director of VCU's Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics, and collaborators from Lund University and the Karolinska Institute, which are both in Sweden, and the University of Florida recently published their findings in *JAMA Psychiatry*. Kendler said results show that interventions for struggling adolescents could decrease the likelihood of [drug abuse](#).

"Our results show, using two different and complementary methods, that improvements in academic achievement in 16-year-olds will produce a lowering in their subsequent risk for drug [abuse](#)," Kendler said. "This is especially important because interventions to improve student morale and the quality of teacher-student relationships have already been shown to produce short-term reductions in drug use."

The researchers measured the correlation between academic achievement at 16 years of age and drug abuse by analyzing nationwide data from Swedish-born individuals. They followed 934,462 participants for 15 to 20 years.

Analysis also revealed that birth month influenced academic achievement, which helped lead the authors to conclude that most of the relationship between academic achievement and subsequent drug abuse was causal. Typically, children born later in the year are less developed and do worse academically than children their age born earlier in the year. But when the early month of birth factor was controlled for academic achievement, the researchers found that it was not linked with risk for drug abuse.

The collaborators also analyzed 263,222 pairs of cousins, 154,295 full siblings and 1,623 identical twins with dissimilar levels of academic achievement.

Both methods showed a link between academic achievement assessed at age 16 and increased future risk for [substance abuse](#).

"We are pursuing several additional projects utilizing the resources of these Swedish registries to further understand a range of risk factors for the development of [drug](#) abuse," Kendler said.

More information: Kenneth S. Kendler et al. Academic Achievement and Drug Abuse Risk Assessed Using Instrumental Variable Analysis and Co-relative Designs, *JAMA Psychiatry* (2018). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2018.2337](#)

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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