

For Black adolescents, feeling connected to school has long-lasting mental health benefits, researchers find

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School connectedness—the degree to which students feel part of their school community—influences more than grades. For Black students, it's a protective factor against depression and aggressive behavior later in

life, according to a Rutgers University-New Brunswick study.

"Our data provide fairly strong evidence for the idea that the experiences Black adolescents have in their school impacts their long-term [mental health](#)," said Adrian Gale, an assistant professor in the Rutgers School of Social Work, and lead author of the study [published](#) in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Researchers have long understood the benefits of school connectedness for youth well-being and physical health outcomes. But most research into the topic has been focused on White adolescents, with limited research exploring the relationship among Black youth, Gale said.

To address this gap, Gale and Lenna Nepomnyaschy, an associate professor in the Rutgers School of Social Work, analyzed [longitudinal data](#) from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a population-based birth cohort study following children born in large United States cities between 1998 and 2000.

From the total cohort of nearly 5,000 children included in the FFCWS, Gale and Nepomnyaschy identified 1,688 who self-identified as Black or African American, were interviewed at ages 9 and 15, and whose primary caregivers were interviewed at the 15-year follow-up.

At age 9, participants were asked about their connectedness to schools. Participants were asked to rate the frequency they felt "part of your school, close to people at your school, happy to be at your school, and safe at school." Six years later, caregivers were asked about their children's propensity for aggressive behaviors, and youth reported their experiences of depression.

Using these data as inputs, the researchers then used linear regression models to control for variables that could influence the association

between school connectedness, depression and aggressive behaviors. Covariates included family characteristics, mother's education, neighborhood characteristics and perceived neighborhood disorder—such as the presence of garbage.

Even with this "rich set of child, parent, family, neighborhood and school-district characteristics that could potentially confound the associations between school connectedness and mental health," the researchers said they found evidence that early school connectedness may reduce depressive symptoms and aggressive behaviors later in life. The association was strongest for girls.

"These findings demonstrate that when Black children felt connected to their school at age 9, they had fewer [depressive symptoms](#) and less [aggressive behavior](#) issues as adolescents," Gale said. "Simply put, when Black kids feel closely tied to their school, their mental health benefits."

Gale said these findings have implications for school districts nationwide and should be viewed as more evidence to support increased school funding.

"School connectedness, no matter how it's defined, is about the relationships people in school have with one another," he said. "The extent that you can improve the quality of those individual relationships—with funding for smaller classes, for example—is what will lead to improved [school](#) connectedness and better student outcomes."

More information: Adrian Gale et al, School Connectedness and Mental Health Among Black Adolescents, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10964-023-01898-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-023-01898-0)

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