

Being excluded or truant from school leads to mental health problems—and vice versa

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In the aftermath of the pandemic there has been a substantial increase in the number of students who are absent from school in the UK, and children are reporting [higher levels](#) of mental ill health than ever before.

Research has previously shown that [exclusion](#) (a child being removed from school) and [truancy](#) are linked with poor [mental health](#).

Now, I have [carried out research](#) with colleagues to examine whether mental health leads to [exclusion](#) and truancy, or whether exclusion and truancy are in fact contributing to poor mental health in children and adolescents.

We found that the connection goes both ways. Children who struggled with their mental health were more likely to later be excluded from school and to truant. And we also found evidence that exclusion and truancy could increase their mental health difficulties.

A vicious cycle

Missing out on school [is detrimental](#) not only to children's educational achievement but also to their well-being and overall development. These children miss out on important formative interactions with their peers and teachers.

Being excluded from school can have a long-term—even life-long—impact. Research suggests that children who have been excluded are [more likely](#) to be unemployed and to go to prison, as well as to have mental health difficulties.

In [our study](#) we used nationally representative data from more than 15,000 children born in the UK [between 2000 and 2002](#). The survey collected extensive information on participants during their childhood and [teenage years](#), including information on behavioral problems, such as aggressive behavior, and emotional problems involving symptoms of anxiety and depression. It also included information on children's experience of school exclusion and truancy.

Our analyses revealed that mental health difficulties in primary school left children more vulnerable to exclusion and truancy later when entering [secondary school](#). More specifically, increases in emotional problems heightened a child's chances of being excluded in their early adolescent years, and their chances of being truant from school.

Primary school children with worsening behavioral problems were also more at risk of being excluded when they reached secondary school. But, we found no evidence that behavioral problems increased children's probability of truancy.

In our study, we also discovered that truancy and exclusion may in turn be exacerbating mental health problems. We showed that some of these detrimental effects differed according to the child's gender. And while some affected mental health only in the short-term, others had a longer lasting impact.

For example, boys—but not girls—who had been excluded in secondary school went on to have higher levels of depression and anxiety, with effects lasting even into late adolescence after they had left school. Both boys and girls who had been excluded also went on to have worse behavioral problems in early adolescence but not later in adolescence. Truants went on to have greater long-term emotional problems, and short-term their conduct problems were also higher.

Changing the pattern

Our study very clearly demonstrates a cycle of disadvantage, where children who were struggling with their mental health went on to be truant or be excluded, but at the same time truancy and being excluded further exacerbated their problems, sometimes into late adolescence.

This new knowledge emphasizes the need for prevention and

intervention for child mental health problems. This could reduce the number of vulnerable children missing out on educational opportunities and also reduce further damage to their mental health.

School-based social and emotional learning programs may have an [important role to play](#) as these have shown success in reducing both behavioral and [emotional problems](#). [Sports-based programs](#) may be another promising avenue for keeping children connected to school. More awareness of child mental health is also vital, even as young as primary school age. Many children may [slip through the net](#): they need better and early access to mental health services.

It is interesting that school exclusion was found to increase emotional symptoms in boys, but not in girls, in both early and late adolescence. These symptoms generally increase much more in girls during this [developmental period](#). Additional focus might be needed on finding alternatives to excluding boys from school.

It is particularly poignant that despite behavioral problems not leading to truancy, these types of problems increased following truancy. Children's bond with their school seems key to reversing this trend.

Programs that focus on transforming the [school environment](#) by developing student commitment to learning and creating a sense of belonging in the school, as these can [reduce truancy](#), could make a significant difference here. And later mental health problems may also be avoided.

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