



Society for Research in Child Development
Office for Policy and Communications
750 First St., NE • Washington, DC 20002-4242
OFFICE: (202) 336-5926 • FAX: (202) 336-5953

PRESS RELEASE

Child Development (September/October 2005)

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE ON SEPTEMBER 14, 2005 (12:01 AM)

Contact Information:

Andrea Browning
Society for Research in Child Development
Office for Policy and Communications
(202) 336-5926
abrowning@srgd.org

Teacher Quality Important for At-Risk Children

Take a young child at high risk of doing poorly in the elementary school years, put him or her in a classroom with a great teacher, and that child will do just as well as children who have no such risks. This finding, published in the September/October issue of the journal *Child Development*, provides important evidence that the quality of everyday experiences in schools can greatly reduce children's academic and social problems, even closing gaps between children of varying demographic, experiential and developmental backgrounds in the early school years.

Researchers from the University of Virginia used data from a large, national prospective study of children and families to examine whether exposing children at risk of early school failure to high levels of instructional and emotional support in first grade resulted in higher achievement and lower levels of conflict with teachers.

A critical component of this study was that researchers examined naturally occurring variation in everyday classroom interactions rather than an intervention designed to improve classroom interactions. Thus, their findings have implications for every school across the nation.

Researchers identified two groups of at-risk children: those whose mothers had less than a four-year college degree and those who displayed significant behavioral, social and/or academic problems in kindergarten. The at-risk groups were behind their peers in early achievement at age 4, fell further behind their low-risk peers by first grade, and had higher levels of conflict with first-grade teachers.

Yet not all children in these two categories of early risk for school problems displayed academic or relational problems in first grade. If placed in classrooms offering low instructional quality, children whose mothers had lower levels of education had poorer achievement than their peers who had more educated mothers.

However, in classrooms offering higher instructional quality, children with less-well-educated mothers achieved at the same level as those with mothers with a college degree. And when children displaying difficulties in kindergarten were placed in emotionally supportive first-grade classrooms, they showed achievement and adjustment levels identical to children who had no history of problems in kindergarten.

“These findings provide evidence of the potential for everyday experiences in schools to greatly reduce children's academic and social problems—to close gaps in the early school

years,” said Bridget K. Hamre, Ph.D., research scientist at the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia. “They support school reforms aimed at improving teacher quality but only when such efforts focus on the actual instructional and social-emotional interactions that take place in classrooms.”

“Unfortunately, classroom quality is highly varied and overall rather mediocre,” she noted, “and few children are consistently exposed to high quality from year to year, even within the same school. If children are not systematically exposed to high levels of classroom support across time, the effects of such positive placements are likely to be short-lived.”

Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 76, Issue 5, *Academic and Social Advantages for At-Risk Students Placed in High Quality First Grade Classrooms* by Hamre BK and Pianta RC (University of Virginia). Copyright 2005 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.