

Building language skills more critical for boys than girls

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Developing language skills appears to be more important for boys than girls in helping them to develop self-control and, ultimately, succeed in school, according to a study led by a Michigan State University researcher.

Thus, more emphasis should be placed on encouraging boy toddlers to "use their words" - instead of unruly behavior - to solve problems, said Claire Vallotton, MSU assistant professor of child development.

"It shouldn't be chalked off as boys being boys," Vallotton said. "They need extra attention from child-care providers and teachers to help them build language skills and to use those skills to regulate their emotions and behavior."

The study, co-authored by Catherine Ayoub from Harvard Medical School, is the first to suggest language skills have a bigger impact on boys' self-regulation than on girls'. The findings will appear in an upcoming issue of the journal *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

The researchers examined data on children as they aged from 1 to 3 and their mothers who participated in the National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation study. As with previous research, Vallotton and Ayoub found that language skills - specifically the building of vocabulary - help children regulate their emotions and behavior and that boys lag behind [girls](#) in both language skills and self-regulation.

What was surprising, Vallotton said, was that [language skills](#) seemed so much more important to the regulation of boys' behavior. While girls overall seemed to have a more natural ability to control themselves and focus, [boys](#) with a strong vocabulary showed a dramatic increase in this ability to self-regulate - even doing as well in this regard as girls with a strong vocabulary.

As the United States competes in an increasingly competitive global economy, Vallotton said education officials are focusing many of their efforts on these facets of early childhood education.

"There's been a concentrated effort lately, through policy and programs, to emphasize that kids build their social and emotional skills by the time they reach kindergarten so they can be ready to learn in that environment and throughout their school careers," Vallotton said. "Self-regulation is increasingly talked about as a pivotal skill."

Provided by Michigan State University

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