

Program to reduce behavior problems boosts math, reading, study shows

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A program aimed at reducing behavior problems in order to boost academic achievement has improved performance in math and reading among low-income kindergartners and first graders, according to a study by researchers at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

Their findings, which appear in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, point to the value of well-designed interventions to improve education, the study's authors say.

"Supporting young low-income children so they can reach their potential in the classroom and beyond is of vital importance," says Sandee McClowry, a professor in NYU Steinhardt's Department of Applied Psychology and the study's senior author. "Our findings show that learning is enhanced when it also addresses the social and emotional development of children."

The study's other authors were: Erin O'Connor, an associate professor in NYU's Department of Teaching and Learning; Elise Cappella, an associate professor in NYU Steinhardt's Department of Applied Psychology; and Meghan McCormick, a doctoral candidate in NYU Steinhardt's Department of Applied Psychology.

Previous scholarship has shown that growing up in poverty significantly increases the likelihood that children will begin school well behind their more economically advantaged peers. Moreover, other research has

revealed that children from poor families often start school with inadequate social-emotional skills, which can stymie academic progress. The impact of these phenomena is particularly felt in pre-kindergarten through third grade.

In recent decades, researchers have created interventions designed to address these matters. Among them is INSIGHTS Into Children's Temperament, which provides teachers and parents with a framework for appreciating and supporting differences in the personalities of children. During the 10-week period, teachers and parents are also taught child management strategies that match the child's temperament. In addition, children participate in 10 weekly sessions in their classrooms. As part of this program, educators employ puppets depicting four temperaments—Fredrico the Friendly, Gregory the Grumpy, Hilary the Hard Worker, and Coretta the Cautious—to help children understand and solve dilemmas they face on a daily basis.

In their study, the researchers randomized 22 urban elementary schools serving low-income families to either the INSIGHTS intervention or a supplemental reading program, which served as a control condition. Participants included 435 students in 122 classrooms.

Students received the intervention during the second half of kindergarten and the first half of first grade, with their parents and teachers participating during the same time period. The researchers collected data on students' progress at five different points during the studied period. Standardized tools were used for measuring temperament, [attention span](#), behavioral problems, and reading/math achievement.

Their results showed that children enrolled in INSIGHTS experienced growth in math and reading achievement and sustained attention that was significantly faster than that of children enrolled in the supplemental reading program. In addition, children participating in INSIGHTS

showed decreases in behavior problems over time while those enrolled in the supplemental reading program demonstrated increases.

"These results indicate that INSIGHTS supports young children's development of self-regulatory skills that are vital to learning, such as sustained attention span and curbing inappropriate behaviors," says O'Connor, the study's lead author. "The findings, combined with previous research in this area, show that programs of this nature can enhance low-income [children](#)'s self-regulation skills and, with it, enhance their [academic achievement](#) in early elementary school."

Provided by New York University

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