

Popularity contest: Student likeability might be link between academic success and risk of depression

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A new study suggests that children doing well in classrooms are more popular and emotionally secure than their peers who are having trouble

academically.

The research from the University of Missouri directly challenges the common stereotype that academically [gifted children](#) are considered less popular than their peers. The findings also confirm the significant impact [academic performance](#) can have on a student's mental and social well-being.

"Plenty of research before this study has shown that children who struggle in elementary school are more likely to experience feelings of frustration and worthlessness, which can put them at greater risk for depression," said Keith Herman, a professor in the MU College of Education. "Now we're finding that there is a link, with clues that a child's social life can be impacted by their success in class."

Herman's team studied 380 [elementary school children](#) and their teachers to examine how early academic struggles can lead to future depressive symptoms. Teachers in first and [second grade](#) rated how well-liked a student seemed to be by their peers. Findings from the study indicated that academic problems in first grade led to lower levels of likeability in second grade, which in turn predicted depression in third grade.

Herman says teachers and students can use this knowledge to find ways to help students address academic and social challenges before they have a lasting negative impact. He suggests that teachers and parents be wary of any subtle messages and judgements they might be sending to children who are experiencing troubles in class or with peers, while finding ways to identify and help children experiencing difficulties with math and reading.

"Teachers and parents should also think about giving as much encouragement and positive attention to [children](#) on other areas in which

they excel," Herman said. "Maybe they struggle with math, but they excel at art. If a child feels like their passions and talents are valued, they are more likely to have a positive outlook on their self-worth."

"Does child likeability mediate the link between academic competence and depressive symptoms in early [elementary school](#)?" was published in *Child Development*.

More information: Keith C. Herman et al. Does Child Likeability Mediate the Link Between Academic Competence and Depressive Symptoms in Early Elementary School?, *Child Development* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13214](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13214)

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