

Putting Research to Work for Families



Focus:
Civilian

Cognitive Abilities, Social Adaptation, and Externalizing Behavior Problems in Childhood and Adolescence: Specific Cascade Effects Across Development

Racz, S.J., Putnick, D.L., Suwalsky, J.T.D., Hendricks, C., & Bornstein, M.H. (2017). Cognitive abilities, social adaptation, and externalizing behavior problems in childhood and adolescence: Specific cascade effects across development. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(8), 1688-1701. doi:10.1007/s10964-016-0602-3

SUMMARY: Understanding trajectories of problematic behaviors throughout childhood and adolescence can help to develop strategies for preventing negative outcomes in youth. This study investigated children's and adolescents' cognitive abilities (e.g., academic achievement), social adaptation (e.g., coping abilities), and externalizing behavior (e.g., conduct problems) throughout different developmental stages. The findings suggest that difficulties in cognitive abilities, social adaptation, and externalizing behavior in childhood can predict outcomes in adolescence.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Participants' scores in cognitive abilities, social adaptation, and externalizing behavior were stable across the ages of 4, 10, and 14 years old.
- Higher cognitive abilities at 10 years old were related to greater social adaptation at 14 years old.
- The social adaptation of children at 4 years old predicted fewer externalizing behavior at 10 years old, which subsequently predicted improved social adaptation at 14 years old.
- Externalizing behavior at 4 years old did not predict social adaptation at 10 years old. Likewise, social adaptation at 10 years old did not predict externalizing behavior at 14 years old.

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS:

- Offer workshops and support groups to parents that focus on parental strategies for minimizing externalizing behavior in children and youth
- Create team building activities to strengthen systems of support for youth struggling with cognitive abilities, social adaptation, and externalizing behavior

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM LEADERS:

- Develop curricula to teach youth program staff and educators about best practices to promote positive outcomes (e.g., improved cognitive abilities) for children and youth
- Disseminate information regarding the risks of prolonged externalizing behavior in childhood that persist into adolescence and adulthood

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS:

- Encourage research of early identification of difficulties in cognitive abilities, social adaptation, and externalizing behavior in children and youth
- Support programs that provide resources and strategies for youth struggling with problem behavior

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METHODS

- Data were collected from a longitudinal study of child development and family functioning of mothers and their children in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S.
- Cognitive abilities were measured with the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence-Revised (WPPSI-R) when children were 4 years old, and the Woodcock-Johnson Revised Tests of Achievement (WJ-R) when children were 10 and 14 years old. Social adaptation was measured with the Socialization domain of the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales: Interview Edition (VABS) across all three age groups.
- Externalizing behaviors were measured with the parent-reported, hostile-aggressive sub-scale of the Preschool Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ) when children were 4 years old, and the Externalizing broad-band scale of the Child Behavior Checklist/4-18 (CBCL) when children were 10 and 14 years old.
- Statistical analyses examined the relationships among cognitive ability, social adaptation, and externalizing behavior of participants across the three different time points (ages 4, 10, and 14 years).

PARTICIPANTS

- This study included 351 children that participated one or more times (with their mothers) at ages 4 (M=4.04, SD=.09), 10 (M=10.34, SD=.16), and 14 (M=13.87, SD=.28) years old.
- The percentage of males within this study was 53.8%. The number of second-born children in this study was 55, and the remaining children were first-borns.
- All participants were White. Families that participated were, on average, middle to upper socioeconomic status.

LIMITATIONS

- The study included only White participants, which restricts generalizability of findings to other racial and ethnic groups.
- Parents' behavioral assessments may be influenced by attempts to minimize problematic behaviors and not accurately reflect their child's behavior.
- The assessments used to measure cognitive abilities and externalizing behaviors changed for the second and third data collections which may have affected the stability of findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Investigate effects of intervention programs for youth with difficulties in externalizing behaviors
- Explore gender differences in the long-term effects of youth struggling with social adaptation
- Research prevention strategies that can be integrated in youth programs for youth with difficulties in cognitive abilities

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design



Appropriate
Research Plan
and Sample

Methods



Excellent
Measurement
and Analysis

Limitations



Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>