

The role of emotion regulation in children's early academic success

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of emotion regulation in children's early academic success using a sample of 325 kindergarteners. A mediational analysis addressed the potential mechanisms through which emotion regulation relates to children's early academic success. Results indicated that emotion regulation was positively associated with teacher reports of children's academic success and productivity in the classroom and standardized early literacy and math achievement scores. Contrary to predictions, child behavior problems and the quality of the student teacher relationship did not mediate these relations. However, emotion regulation and the quality of the student–teacher relationship uniquely predicted academic outcomes even after accounting for IQ. Findings are discussed in terms of how emotion regulation skills facilitate children's development of a positive student–teacher relationship as well as cognitive processing and independent learning behavior, all of which are important for academic motivation and success.

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The early childhood years have recently been identified as a crucial period for the development of important executive functions such as attention, inhibition, working memory (Anderson, 2002; Blair, 2002) and literacy skills (Aram, 2005) that are necessary for successful school transition and later academic success. Children demonstrating early academic and learning difficulties are not only more likely to display later academic difficulties including school drop-out (Horn & Packard, 1985), but they are also at risk for developing later peer rejection (Ladd, 1990; Risi, Gerhardstein, & Kistner, 2003) as well as emotional and behavioral disorders including conduct disorder (Bennett, Brown, Boyle, Racine, & Offord, 2003; Moffit, Gabrielli, Mednick, & Schulsinger, 1981). Given these negative outcomes as well as the consistent finding that academic success tends to be stable after first grade (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988), researchers have attempted to examine sociocultural, school, family, and individual factors that contribute to a child's early school success. Among the individual factors associated with academic success, most research has focused on anxiety (Ashcraft, 2002; Eady, 1999; Normandeau & Guay, 1998; Strauss, Frame, & Forehand, 1987), aggression (Farmer, Bierman, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2002; Wentzel, 1993), verbal abilities (Kastner, May, & Hildman, 2001), and intelligence (Lassiter & Bardos, 1995; Lynam, Moffit, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1993). Because of the co-occurrence of children's emotional and behavioral difficulties and academic difficulties (Dodge & Petit, 2003; Horn & Packard, 1985), one additional factor that is important to investigate is emotion regulation.

Although definitions vary, most researchers agree that emotion regulation involves efforts to modulate emotional arousal in a way that facilitates adaptive functioning (Calkins, 1997; Garber & Dodge, 1991; Keenan & Shaw, 2003). Adaptive functioning refers to numerous global positive outcomes including normative social, cognitive, and language development as well as the ability to cope with daily living tasks and environmental changes (Kamphaus, 1987). In children, academic functioning is a significant component of adaptive functioning. Little research, however, has investigated the role of emotion regulation in children's early academic performance. Given the early stability of academic competence, it is particularly important to examine how emotion regulation contributes to academic success upon formal school entry (i.e., kindergarten).

The kindergarten year marks an important transition period for children. As outlined by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition, the kindergarten environment is qualitatively different from both preschool and home environments. In kindergarten, children must adapt to an ecological system that expects them to accomplish numerous goals such as literacy, numeracy, and socialization skills. Moreover, these goals must be accomplished under decreased supervision due to increased class size and increased emphasis on autonomy (Bronson, Tivnan, & Seppanen, 1995). The novel demands of learning new academic and interpersonal skills, in combination with a lack of the extensive supports offered in preschool, present a challenge for many young children. Consequently, these novel demands coupled with a new academic environment likely elicit various arousing emotions such as excitement, anxiety, and fear. Children's ability to regulate these emotions efficiently may facilitate their transition to kindergarten and consequently their ability to acquire academic information.

There is some evidence that emotional regulation aids performance on cognitive tasks, particularly in adults (Phillips, Bull, Adams, & Fraser, 2002). In terms of academic success,

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