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Prevention of School Dropout Through the Reduction of Disruptive Behaviors and School Failure in Elementary School

Frank Vitaro, Mara Brendgen, and Richard E. Tremblay
University of Montréal

We report the effects of a preventive intervention program on dropping out of school in a sample of disruptive boys from low socioeconomic status (SES). We tested the role of grade retention/special classroom placement as a putative mediating variable in the trajectory linking the proximal impact of the prevention program on early disruptiveness and its distal impact on dropping out of school. The program was implemented during the second and third grades. It included a component aimed at improving social-cognitive skills at school and a component aimed at improving parental management skills in the home. The results showed that the program had an indirect effect on later school dropout problems through its impact on grade retention/special classroom placement. The reduction of grade retention/special classroom placement was, in turn, partially mediated by the program's proximal effect on children's early disruptiveness. We recommend using intervention studies to test developmental models. © 1999 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

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Dropping out before the completion of secondary school has become a major problem in North America. In 1992, 11% of all American youths aged 16 to 24 were dropouts, meaning they were not enrolled in school and had not graduated (McMillen, Kaufman, Hausken, & Bradby, 1993). Prevalence rates in the United States, however, vary greatly depending on ethnic origin and socioeconomic status (SES) variables. Dropout rates in Canada are also dramatically high—around 20% since 1992 (Statistics Canada, 1995). Quebec's dropout rates are the highest in Canada, ranging from 25–36% (between 32% and 42% when only boys are considered, Statistics Canada, 1995). These rates remain high even after considering that about 10% of dropouts return to school and manage to graduate by age 20.

Personal and societal consequences of dropping out of school are costly. Weidman and Freedman (1984) estimated that the unemployment rate of

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Address correspondence to Frank Vitaro, Research Unit on Children's Psychosocial Maladjustment, University of Montréal, 3050 Edouard-Montpetit Blvd., Montréal (Québec), Canada H3T 1J7. Phone:(514) 343-6111, ext. 2561; fax:(514) 343-6962; E-mail: frank.vitaro@umontreal.ca

dropouts is roughly twice that of graduates. By the end of the 1990s, new job market requirements might cause the gap to widen even more. Rumberger (1987) estimated that the difference in expected lifetime earnings between dropouts and graduates is more than US \$250,000. Finally, prevalence rates for suicide, mental health problems, and delinquency are higher for dropouts (Rumberger, 1987).

Many studies have shown that dropping out of school is influenced by a wide variety of factors associated with children's personal, familial, peer group, and environmental characteristics (see Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1986; Rumberger, 1987). Among personal factors, a disruptive behavioral profile (i.e., aggressive-hyperactive-oppositional behaviors) has repeatedly been shown to predict early withdrawal from school, even after controlling for familial and socioeconomic factors (see Parker & Asher, 1987). For example, Ensminger and Slusarcick (1992) showed that aggressive behaviors and low grades as early as first grade predicted later school dropout. This link was stronger for children living in poor neighborhoods. In a follow-up study, Ensminger, Lamkin, and Jacobson (1996) confirmed that, for boys, math grades and aggressive behavior in the first grade predicted the number of years of schooling. Similarly, Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, and Tremblay (1997) showed that disruptiveness rated as early as kindergarten was related to dropping out of school, even after controlling for sociodemographic variables and IQ.

Disruptiveness may lead to early withdrawal from school because it contributes to school problems that are conducive to grade retention or special classroom placement (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997). In Canada, as in the United States, grade retention has been and still is a frequently used strategy for children with learning or conduct problems (American Federation of Teachers, 1997; Statistics Canada, 1995; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). The result of this strategy is that retained children end up in regular classrooms with younger classmates (i.e., non-age-appropriate regular classroom [AARC] environments). Special classroom or special school placement is a more extreme and less frequently used remedial strategy, at least in Canada. Despite many criticisms of this strategy, it is nevertheless still used, mainly for conduct-disordered children. The consequence is that problem children end up spending most of their time with other problem children, but in a reduced teacher-student ratio classroom. For the sake of simplicity and because of their relative rarity, special classroom and special school remedial strategies were considered in this paper as other forms of non-AARC environment, even if, strictly speaking, the children in special classrooms or special schools are most of the time grouped with children of the same age and are not in "regular" classrooms.

The overlap between externalizing behavioral problems and grade retention is dramatic (i.e., up to 50%, Hinshaw, 1992), and longitudinal studies show that the odds of being placed in a non-AARC environment at some

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