

Social Influences on the Development of Children's Adaptive Help Seeking: The Role of Parents, Teachers, and Peers

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An important way in which elementary- and middle-school students regulate their own learning and intellectual development is by obtaining assistance from others at times of need. At school, a child who engages in *adaptive help seeking* monitors his or her academic performance, shows awareness of difficulty he or she cannot overcome independently, and remedies that difficulty by requesting assistance from teachers and classmates. In this article, I discuss how parents, teachers, and peers contribute to the development of children's skills and attitudes associated with adaptive help seeking. I trace early help-seeking behaviors, in particular, in the home and link these to help-seeking behaviors in the classroom. © 2000 Academic Press

A common complaint among elementary-, middle-, and secondary-school teachers is that many of their students do not take an active role in their own learning; in particular, when the students face challenge and difficulty. Despite awareness of academic problems they may have and despite availability of assistance, many schoolchildren tend to give up prematurely, sit passively, or persist unsuccessfully on their own without ever asking for help (Good, Slavings, Harel, & Emerson, 1987). This characterization of students differs from the typical picture of young children as innately curious, inquisitive, and eager to learn (Harter, 1978; White, 1959). Something happens that transforms many children into passive learners who neither enjoy challenge nor take the initiative required to overcome adversity. Of course, many other students do not fit this developmental pattern, but rather exhibit continuing curiosity, resilience, and eventual academic success. And still others fall somewhere between, actively meeting challenges in some domains but remaining more passive in others.

Although decades of psychological, sociological, and educational research have addressed the question, "What undermines student motivation to learn?" (see Brophy, 1998; Covington, 1992; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele,

I thank Dr. Mary Gauvain for her insightful comments on earlier versions of this article. I also thank Dr. Ross Parke for his helpful suggestions.

1998; Finn, 1989; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996), relatively little research has focused on how students deal with academic difficulty; in particular, how they go about seeking help from teachers and classmates. In the existing help-seeking literature, there are studies relating classroom characteristics (e.g., activity structure, goal orientation, and type of learning task) to help seeking. Studies have identified personal characteristics of students (e.g., achievement level, personal goals, and self-perceptions of ability) that predict those individuals who tend to seek help and those who do not. Several studies have examined and shown age- and grade-related differences in student help seeking (see Nelson-Le Gall, 1985, 1992; Newman, 1991, 1994; Shell & Eisenberg, 1992). Missing from much of the research, however, is a developmental perspective (although see discussions by Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Nelson-Le Gall, Gumerman, & Scott-Jones, 1983).

The purpose of this article is to provide a developmental perspective on help seeking; in particular, one that focuses on socialization. What accounts for individual differences in elementary- and middle-school students' academic help seeking? The article traces the origins of students' attitudes and behavioral patterns of help seeking and examines how parents, teachers, and peers contribute to this development. A central goal of the article is to explore how parents begin, and how teachers and classmates continue, the socialization process. Understanding continuities between the home and school in this particular domain promises to help explain why some children are able to cope successfully with academic difficulty and some are not.

Before reviewing the relevant literature on this topic, it is necessary to clarify the different ways in which help seeking has been conceptualized. Until recently, it was viewed in largely negative terms, i.e., as an indicator of children's incompetence, dependence on others, and immaturity. According to this view, as children developed independence, they would no longer need to rely on others (e.g., Hartup, 1963; Maccoby & Masters, 1970; Winterbottom, 1958). In the past decade-and-a-half, however, research has differentiated between help seeking that indicates overdependence and help seeking that is necessary, or "instrumental," for learning (see Ames, 1983; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981, 1985). It has been demonstrated that when children monitor their academic performance, show awareness of difficulty they cannot overcome independently, and exhibit the wherewithal and self-determination to remedy that difficulty by requesting assistance from another individual, they are exhibiting mature, strategic behavior. Help seeking can maintain task involvement, avert possible failure, and, in the long run, optimize students' chances for mastery and autonomy (Corno, 1989; Kuhl, 1985; Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). Indeed, help seeking can be viewed in positive terms, i.e., as an *adaptive strategy of self-regulated learning* (Newman, 1991, 1994, 1998a).

A good deal of research has recently focused on self-regulated learning in the classroom (see Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2000; Pintrich, 1995;

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