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# Temperamental attention and activity, classroom emotional support, and academic achievement in third grade

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the interplay of children's temperamental attention and activity (assessed when children were 4-and-a-half years old) and classroom emotional support as they relate to children's academic achievement in third grade. Particular focus is placed on the moderating role of classroom emotional support on the relationship between temperament (attention and activity level) and academic achievement. Regression analyses indicated that children's attention and activity level were associated with children's third grade reading and mathematics achievement, and classroom emotional support was associated with children's third grade reading and mathematics achievement. In addition, classroom emotional support moderated the relation between children's attention and reading and mathematics achievement, such that attention mattered most for reading and mathematics achievement for children in classrooms with lower emotional support. Findings point to the importance of understanding how children's temperament and classroom emotional support may work together to promote or inhibit children's academic achievement.

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*Keywords:* Temperament; Attention; Activity level; Classroom environment; Academic achievement

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## 1. Introduction

Children's early academic achievement has been linked to later success in life in areas such as types of employment, life satisfaction, health, and the academic achievement of offspring (Easterlin, 2001; Murrell, Salsman, & Meeks, 2003; Subasi & Hayran, 2005). More proximally, children's early academic achievement has important implications for their future academic achievement. According to Alexander, Entwisle, Blyth, and McAadoo (1988) "...by the end of the third grade, children are launched into achievement trajectories that they follow for the rest of their school years" (p. 1). Indeed, landmark legislation, *No Child Left Behind* (2002), mandated third grade as the first year of required annual testing of reading and mathematics achievement in all public schools (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb>). Thus, the importance of early academic achievement for ongoing academic success is widely accepted.

The need to understand influences on early academic achievement is urgent given the established importance of early achievement and the high stakes context of early education. Historically, several factors have been found to be associated with children's early achievement, including temperament and classroom support processes. However, we know less about the ways in which these child and process characteristics work *together* to predict children's academic outcomes. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the interplay of child temperament (attention and activity) before the onset of formal schooling and classroom emotional support in third grade as they relate to children's third grade academic achievement.

### 1.1. Biological systems theory

The bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) provides a model for considering the interacting influences of person, process, context, and time (PPCT) on children's development and academic achievement. Person characteristics influence children's development by affecting children's everyday interactions (i.e., proximal processes). For example, child characteristics can manifest as active behavioral dispositions that promote or hinder development as they interact with proximal processes. According to Bronfenbrenner, children's developmental competence emerges in the context of participation in increasingly complex, reciprocal proximal processes over time. In the current study, synergistic factors of child temperament (person) characteristics (i.e., attention and activity level) and proximal processes (i.e., classroom emotional support) are examined in relation to children's school achievement in reading and mathematics in third grade.

### 1.2. Temperament

Temperament refers to constitutionally based individual differences in *reactivity* and *regulation* (Rothbart, Derryberry, & Hershey, 2000). According to Rothbart and Derryberry (1981), the *constitutional* nature of temperament means that it is "the relatively enduring biological makeup of the [individual], influenced over time by heredity, maturation, and experience" (p. 40). Indeed, temperament is widely acknowledged to be relatively stable

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