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Social Science Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch)

# Reducing children's behavior problems through social capital: A causal assessment



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 30 September 2015

Received in revised form 28 April 2016

Accepted 7 June 2016

Available online 8 June 2016

### Keywords:

Social capital

Behavior

Children

Causation

Randomized control trials

## ABSTRACT

Behavior problems among young children have serious detrimental effects on short and long-term educational outcomes. An especially promising prevention strategy may be one that focuses on strengthening the relationships among families in schools, or social capital. However, empirical research on social capital has been constrained by conceptual and causal ambiguity. This study attempts to construct a more focused conceptualization of social capital and aims to determine the causal effects of social capital on children's behavior. Using data from a cluster randomized trial of 52 elementary schools, we apply several multilevel models to assess the causal relationship, including intent to treat and treatment on the treated analyses. Taken together, these analyses provide stronger evidence than previous studies that social capital improves children's behavioral outcomes and that these improvements are not simply a result of selection into social relations but result from the social relations themselves.

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers and policy makers alike increasingly recognize the importance of children's emotional and behavioral skills for their success in school (Cuellar, 2015). Behavior problems among children in early grades are especially consequential because they can impede cognitive skill development not only in elementary school but also in subsequent school years, with behavior problems at age six associated with math and reading achievement as late as age seventeen (Breslau et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 2007; Vitaro et al., 1999). Socio-emotional skills in kindergarten are associated with a variety of young adult outcomes, including education, employment, criminal activity, substance abuse, and mental health (Jones et al., 2015). The effects of behavior problems on academic achievement are so strong that they are comparable to the effects of prior grades, which are among the strongest predictors of achievement, and which are even larger than gaps typically found by socio-economic status and race/ethnicity (Casillas et al., 2012; Georges et al., 2012). Moreover, the association between behavior problems and academic outcomes does not appear to be merely a spurious relationship. Behavior problems at early ages exert strong effects on later academic achievement and attainment, independent of IQ, birth weight, family characteristics, and behavior problems during the intervening years (McLeod and Kaiser, 2004; Breslau et al., 2011).

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Reducing behavior problems improves academic outcomes through various mechanisms, including increased attention to task (Alexander et al., 1993; Duncan et al., 2007; Howse et al., 2003; Miech et al., 2001) and increased time engaged in academic activities (Duncan and Magnuson, 2011). In contrast, increased antisocial behavior, problems relating to peers, and general aggression promote conflict between students and teachers and reduce exposure to instruction and collaborative learning activities (Ladd et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1993). Depression, anxiety, and withdrawn behavior also reduce children's engagement with classroom activities (Fantuzzo et al., 2003). As a result, scholars and policy makers have indicated that early intervention for children's emotional and behavior skills should be a critical priority (Portes, 1998; Raver and SRCD, 2002).

## 2. Social capital and Children's behavior

Although there are many interventions for addressing children's behavior problems, efforts to prevent problems from developing in the first place are particularly desirable, and an especially promising prevention strategy may be one that focuses on strengthening the relationships among families in schools, often referred to as building social capital (Gamoran et al., 2012). When families have stronger ties with other families, parents feel less isolated and stressed, and their children are less likely to manifest behavioral problems (Neece et al., 2012). Indeed, a recent National Research Council report identified the adverse health effects of social isolation as the strongest evidence of social capital effects in a review of research on social cohesion (Prewitt et al., 2014). Moreover, access to social capital can allow for better control over undesirable behaviors, and parents with more access to social capital can set behavioral norms for their children that aid in the development of human capital (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998).

One mechanism by which parents' social capital helps young children's behavior is through the social support these networks provide, which comes in various forms, including services and information. For example, African American parents of urban elementary school children who have formal contact with school staff are significantly more likely to be involved in at-home and at-school activities that support their children's educational and behavioral development, and this is attributed to the information they receive from school staff (McKay et al., 2003). More generally, parents who are less socially isolated are less likely to be irritable, distracted, neglectful, or abusive, and more likely to attend and respond to their children's needs (Belsky and Vondra, 1989; Creasey and Jarvis, 1994; Kozłowska and Hanney, 2002; Mash and Johnston, 1990; Webster-Stratton, 1990).

Another mechanism by which parents' social capital helps children is through the social control these networks provide, which helps guide children's behavior (Sampson et al., 1999). For example, in wealthy neighborhoods, preschool children have fewer behavior problems if their parents report knowing many neighbors (Caughy et al., 2003). This improved behavior is attributed to the parents' shared expectations regarding the collective socialization of children in the community. These studies indicate that, for young children, social capital functions through parents, and parents' social networks can provide social support and social control, which are beneficial for children's behavioral development. These mechanisms suggest that parents' social capital can reduce children's behavior problems both by preventing behavior problems and by helping parents respond more effectively when behavior problems arise.

Despite the intuitive appeal of these findings, evidence of social capital's causal role is open to question for two primary reasons. First, research on social capital suffers from conceptual and operational ambiguity (Prewitt et al., 2014). Even a brief review of the literature unearths a wide range of definitions and an even wider range of indicators used to measure social capital, which makes it quite difficult to compare across studies. Second, most empirical assessments of social capital have been limited to correlational analyses, which inhibit the causal interpretation of the effects of social capital. In particular, it is unclear whether social capital is a reflection of unobserved variables, a matter of selection (individuals who are alike tend to associate with one another), or a matter of influence (social capital and behavioral outcomes are causally related), and if the latter, it is unclear which way the causal pathway runs (Mouw, 2006). This paper responds to these limitations.

### 2.1. What do we mean by social capital?

Researchers disagree about the conceptualization and operationalization of social capital. In a review of 35 studies of social capital and educational outcomes between 1992 and 2001, Dika and Singh (2002) reported that social capital was conceptualized in a wide variety of ways, including as networks, network resources, trust, information channels, and norms and sanctions; and they reported that social capital was operationalized through an even wider range of measures, including family structure and size, parents' and friends' expectations and aspirations, residential mobility, youth activities, church activities, parent involvement, racial identity, reading and writing abilities, family cohesion, intergenerational closure, neighborhood attributes, social support networks, socioeconomic status, language proficiency and use, and whether parents have a say in school policy. This list, which is not exhaustive, illustrates a clear need for a more focused definition of social capital and a more precise specification of its indicators.

Three conceptual problems with social capital are particularly salient. First, some writers seem to confuse the conditions that generate social capital with the benefits that derive from social capital. The distinction between social capital as a property of relationships and social capital as the resources accessed through those relationships marks a necessary step in the development of social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2000; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1995). This distinction is important because the resources themselves must remain conceptually distinct from the relationships that facilitate resource sharing.

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