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The academic consequences of early childhood problem behaviors [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Social/emotional skills in early childhood are associated with education, labor market, and family formation outcomes throughout the life course. One explanation for these associations is that poor social/emotional skills in early childhood interfere with the development of cognitive skills. In this paper, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ($N = 2302$) to examine how the timing of social/emotional skills—measured as internalizing, externalizing, and attention problem behaviors in early childhood—is associated with cognitive test scores in middle childhood. Results show that externalizing problems at age 3 and attention problems at age 5, as well as externalizing and attention problems at both ages 3 and 5, are associated with poor cognitive development in middle childhood, net of a wide array of control variables and prior test scores. Surprisingly, maternal engagement at age five does not mediate these associations.

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1. Introduction

Social/emotional skills—such as the ability to get along with peers and to focus on a particular task—play an important role in processes of social mobility and stratification (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Duncan and Magnuson, 2011; Farkas, 2003). Social/emotional skills in childhood are associated with educational attainment (Alexander et al., 1993; Entwisle et al., 2005; McLeod and Fettes, 2007; McLeod and Kaiser, 2004), labor market success (Duncan and Dunifon, 1998; Heckman et al., 2006), mental health (Knoester, 2003), and social behaviors such as marriage, relationship quality, and delinquency (Heckman et al., 2006; Knoester, 2003).

One explanation for this association is that poor social/emotional skills in childhood interfere with the development of cognitive skills in middle childhood (McLeod and Kaiser, 2004). Poor social/emotional skills may impair cognitive development directly, by interfering with children's ability to learn. Poor social/emotional skills may also impair cognitive development indirectly, by making adult–child interactions less rewarding or by lowering parents' and teachers' expectations of children's capabilities, both of which may undermine children's academic performance (Entwisle et al., 2005; McLeod and Fettes, 2007; Robinson and Harris, 2013). Indeed, a large literature considers the association between social/emotional skills at school entry and later achievement outcomes. Although this literature consistently shows that attention problems are inversely associated with achievement (Claessens and Dowsett, 2014; Duncan et al., 2007), the evidence regarding the

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influence of internalizing or externalizing behaviors on achievement is more mixed, with some studies finding a positive association (DiPrete and Jennings, 2012; Fergusson and Horwood, 1998; Jennings and DiPrete, 2010; Kokko et al., 2006) and others finding a weak or null association (Claessens et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 2007). Although a life course perspective suggests that the timing of social/emotional skills may be especially important for cognitive development (e.g., Elder, 1998), existing studies have rarely considered this possibility, primarily because of data limitations.

In this article, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWB), a birth cohort study, to address three research questions: (1) Are internalizing, externalizing, and attention problem behaviors (measured using the Child Behavior Checklist [CBCL]) associated with cognitive development in middle childhood (measured by the Woodcock–Johnson (W–J) Passage Comprehension [i.e., reading] and Applied Problems [i.e., math] tests)? (2) Is the timing of internalizing, externalizing, and attention problem behaviors associated with cognitive development in middle childhood? (3) Is the association between internalizing, externalizing, and attention problem behaviors in early childhood and cognitive development in middle childhood mediated by children’s cognitive development and maternal engagement when they enter school? The first research question is essentially a replication of prior research with a different data source (e.g., Duncan et al., 2007) and we present these analyses to ensure that these earlier studied relationships exist in the FFCWB data. The second and third research questions extend prior research by examining problem behaviors prior to school entry, by comparing problem behaviors at ages 3 and 5, and by examining possible mechanisms linking problem behaviors to cognitive development.

2. Background

2.1. What are social/emotional skills?

Social/emotional skills in childhood comprise two developmental tasks: the sustainment of positive engagement with peers and the regulation of emotions and expressions (Rose-Krasnor and Denham, 2008). Some social/emotional skills, such as cheerfulness or conscientiousness, are considered innate and stable over time (Bowles and Gintis, 1976), whereas others, such as shyness or aggressiveness, are considered more malleable and susceptible to social influences. In his review of the literature, Farkas (2003) lists a host of these skills, including, but not limited to, effort, discipline, aggressiveness, self-esteem, sociability, disruptiveness, and a sense of mastery or self-control (also see DiPrete and Jennings, 2012). Importantly, unlike cognitive skills that are generally measured by tests of children’s reading and math abilities, social/emotional skills are most commonly measured through parent or teacher reports of children’s behaviors (which are considered a manifestation of these skills).

The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1992; see Duncan et al., 2007; Farmer and Bierman, 2002) is often used to measure social/emotional skills. The full CBCL, which is typically administered to children’s primary caregivers, includes numerous items that vary depending on children’s ages. The most commonly used CBCL subscales are internalizing problem behaviors (such as appearing shy, withdrawn, or nervous) and externalizing problem behaviors (such as breaking rules, destroying things, or fighting). More recently, researchers have considered the importance of attention problems (Claessens et al., 2009; Claessens and Dowsett, 2014; Duncan et al., 2007; McClelland et al., 2000). In this paper, we measure children’s social/emotional skills using three CBCL subscales: internalizing problem behaviors, externalizing problem behaviors, and attention problem behaviors.

2.2. Why would social/emotional skills in childhood affect cognitive development?

2.2.1. Theoretical link between social/emotional skills and cognitive development

Problem behaviors are expected to impede children’s cognitive development both directly and indirectly. With respect to the former, behavior problems may undermine the learning process (Lerner et al., 1985). For example, *internalizing problems*, such as being shy and withdrawn, may interfere with a child’s ability to interact with and learn from his or her parents, teachers, and other caregivers (e.g., not following along while an adult is reading to him/her). Additionally, children with internalizing problems may cling to adults, making it more difficult for them to interact with and learn from their peers (Mashburn et al., 2009). Children who are anxious may spend substantial time ruminating on their interactions with peers and adults, making it more difficult for these children to master new material or improve upon existing skills (Finn et al., 1995).

Similarly, children with *externalizing problems*, which often involve physical (e.g., fighting, hitting others) or emotional (e.g., screaming, anger, aggression) displays, may be distracted from the learning process and/or have less energy than their peers for engaging in learning activities. Easily frustrated, these children may give up on trying to learn or improve their reading or math skills (Hinshaw, 1992). Similarly, children with externalizing problem behaviors, such as aggression or rule breaking, may be less engaged in their learning environment than their peers who do not exhibit such behaviors.

Finally, children with *attention problems*, such as problems focusing or hyperactivity, may find it difficult to follow teacher instructions, complete assignments, and focus long enough to learn new skills (Razza et al., 2012).

2.2.2. Empirical evidence

A large literature finds that problem behaviors observed at school entry are associated with poor academic performance in middle childhood (Alexander et al., 1993; Entwisle et al., 2005; Farmer and Bierman, 2002; Jennings and DiPrete, 2010;

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