



Distinguishing among disruptive behaviors to help predict high school graduation: Does gender matter? ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study examined unique predictive associations of aggressive and hyperactive–inattentive behaviors in elementary school with high school graduation. The current study also investigated whether these associations were moderated by gender. At Time 1, 745 children in the 3rd through 5th grades completed peer ratings on their classmates' disruptive behaviors. At Time 2, school records were reviewed to determine whether students graduated within four years of entering high school. Results showed that gender and hyperactivity–inattention are uniquely associated with high school graduation, but childhood aggression is not. Results also indicated that gender moderated associations between hyperactivity–inattention and graduation. Among boys, hyperactive–inattentive behaviors were not significantly associated with graduation, above and beyond aggression. In contrast, among girls, hyperactive–inattentive behaviors in childhood were significantly associated with graduation even after controlling for aggression. These findings suggest that in middle childhood, hyperactive–inattentive behaviors may be a more meaningful predictor of high school graduation than other forms of early disruptive behavior (e.g., aggression), especially for girls. Such findings could have significant implications for prevention and intervention programs designed to target children at risk for dropping out of school.

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1. Introduction

Failure to complete high school has deleterious consequences for individual students and their families as well as negative repercussions for society. At the individual level, those who fail to complete high school have been shown to have higher rates of health problems (Molla, Madans, & Wagener, 2004), substance abuse (Crum, Ensminger, Ro, & McCord, 1998; Obot & Anthony, 2000), and interpersonal problems (e.g., Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Fagan & Pabon, 1990; Townsend, Flisher, & King, 2007). Moreover, they are more likely to be unemployed or, if employed, to earn less money than graduates, which has a dramatic impact on the American economy (e.g., Peng, 1985). For example, it has been estimated that the 1.3 million high school dropouts in 2010 cost the nation more than \$336 million in lost wages, taxes, and productivity (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Taken together, this evidence highlights the magnitude of the problem of school dropout. Accordingly, identifying students who are at greatest risk of not graduating high school and implementing interventions to improve graduation rates are high priorities.

A number of risk factors for the failure to graduate high school have been identified, including demographic variables (e.g., Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005), family factors (e.g., Farahati, Marcotte, & Wilcox-Gök, 2003), individual characteristics (e.g., Farmer et al.,

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2003), and academic achievement (Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Poor academic achievement is one of the most commonly cited variables found to be related to subsequent high school noncompletion (e.g., Cairns et al., 1989; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Fagan & Pabon, 1990; Rumberger, 1995), but there is no single cause for failure to graduate. Identification of other risk factors that are amenable to treatment has the greatest potential to inform the development of effective prevention and intervention work aimed at improving graduation rates and thus is of particular importance. Disruptive behaviors in elementary school (including oppositional, aggressive, and hyperactive-inattentive behaviors) is a promising area of study in this regard as there is a large body of research that shows that students who exhibit disruptive behavior problems in the early school years are less likely to graduate high school (e.g., Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Cairns et al., 1989; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Grissom & Shepard, 1989) and because interventions have been shown to be effective in changing these individual factors (e.g., Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). The processes by which disruptive behavior problems contribute to high school noncompletion are not entirely clear but several hypotheses about causal mechanisms have been offered, including increased risk of expulsion as a consequence of disciplinary problems (e.g., Jack et al., 1996; Kortering, Braziel, & Tompkins, 2002; Morgan-D'Atrio, Northup, LaFleur, & Spera, 1996; Nelson & Roberts, 2000), affiliation with peers also at risk for school noncompletion (Cairns et al., 1989; Dishion, 2000; Gilmore, Hawkins, Day, & Catalano, 1992), and less social support from peers (French & Conrad, 2001; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989), all of which may lead to children's desire to retreat from the school environment.

Despite theoretical and empirical support for an association between childhood disruptive behaviors and subsequent high school noncompletion, some important unresolved questions remain that warrant further study. One question regards the nature of behavior problems predicting high school noncompletion: Is failure to complete high school better predicted by some types of disruptive behavior than others? The answer to this question is important for identifying the children most in need of preventive interventions as well as for guiding the focus of interventions (i.e., selection of target behaviors). Aggression has been the focus of much more research than other types of disruptive behaviors. Indeed, there is strong support for predictive associations between aggression and high school noncompletion, leading many studies to conclude that aggression is a strong and unique predictor of the failure to complete high school (e.g., Janes, Hesselbrock, Myers, & Penniman, 1979; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990); however, a closer examination of this body of research calls into question this conclusion. With few exceptions (e.g., Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose, & Tremblay, 2005), studies that reported significant predictive links between aggression and school dropout focused solely on aggression and other types of disruptive behaviors that are typically comorbid with aggression (e.g., hyperactivity and inattention) went unmeasured (e.g., Farmer et al., 2003; Kokko, Tremblay, Lacourse, Nagin, & Vitaro, 2006; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990). Yet there is evidence to suggest that problems with hyperactivity and inattention are also associated with increased risk of not graduating (e.g., Barkley, Fischer, Smallish, & Fletcher, 2006; Mannuzza, Klein, Bessler, Malloy, & Hynes, 1997). Furthermore, even though these disruptive behaviors frequently covary, hyperactive and inattentive behaviors have been shown to be distinguishable from aggressive behaviors in their etiology, correlates, and course (Hinshaw, 1987). In sum, prior research demonstrates that different types of disruptive behavior in children are negatively related to high school graduation; however, many studies have failed to account for the high rate of comorbidity between disruptive behaviors such as aggression and hyperactivity-inattention. Thus, it remains an unresolved question as to whether failure to graduate from high school is predicted by aggression, hyperactivity-inattention, or both.

Interestingly, Vitaro et al. (2005) found that when they controlled for comorbid, disruptive behaviors (i.e., hyperactivity-inattention), aggression did not uniquely predict the failure to complete high school. Instead, it was hyperactivity-inattention that uniquely predicted later school dropout. Findings such as these suggest that the link between disruptive behaviors and high school graduation is in fact attributable to different kinds of disruptive behaviors. One reason that aggression may not have emerged as a unique predictor of graduation in Vitaro et al.'s (2005) study is the young age of their sample (i.e., kindergartners), as most prior research predicting high school graduation assessed behavioral characteristics in older age groups. There is considerable evidence that rates of aggression decrease precipitously in the early school years (Brame, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2001; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] & Arsenio, 2004). Therefore, aggression may not emerge as a unique predictor of graduation until the late elementary school years when individual differences in aggression are more stable (Dumas, Neese, Prinz, & Blechman, 1996; Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2005; Van Beijsterveldt, Bartels, Hudziak, & Boomsma, 2003). In addition to the age of their sample, reliance on teacher ratings of children's behaviors may also have contributed to the results reported in Vitaro et al. (2005). In fact, the authors speculated that teachers may have been influenced by their perceptions of children's academic abilities, particularly in their ratings of hyperactive and inattentive behaviors, and that this may have accounted for stronger prospective associations with high school graduation relative to aggression. In light of the paucity of research on how different aspects of children's disruptive behaviors are prospectively associated with high school graduation, replication of these findings is needed.

A second unresolved question not addressed in most of the prior studies is whether behavioral predictors of high school graduation differ for boys and girls. Despite the importance of this information for appropriate generalization and application of findings on risk factors for the failure to graduate high school, few studies have addressed this question. This gap in research may be rooted in the perception that school dropout is largely a problem of boys. Although boys are more likely than girls to drop out of school, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that school dropout is also a significant concern for girls (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002; Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000; Rumberger, 1983). In fact, a report from the National Center for Education Statistics estimated that approximately 44.3% of all dropouts are girls (Laird, DeBell, Kienzl, & Chapman, 2007). Furthermore, the long-term costs to society, and to the girls themselves, are often more pronounced than those for boys. Girls who fail to obtain a high school diploma have higher rates of unemployment and earn considerably lower wages (Rumberger & Lamb, 2003), and have increased welfare dependency than boys who do not earn their diploma (National Women's Law Center,

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