

The cross-lagged relations between children's academic skill development, task-avoidance, and parental beliefs about success

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Abstract

This longitudinal study investigated the cross-lagged associations between children's academic skill development, task-avoidant behaviour in the context of homework, and parental beliefs about their child's success from kindergarten to Grade 2. The participants were 1267 children. The children's pre-skills were assessed at the end of the kindergarten year, and math and reading skills at the end of Grade 1 and Grade 2. Parents provided ratings of their beliefs about their children's school success and task-avoidant behaviour with regard to homework at the end of Grades 1 and 2. The results showed that children's math and reading skills predicted children's task-avoidant behaviour regarding homework as rated by mothers, but not by fathers, when autoregressive effects were taken into account. In addition, task-avoidant behaviour predicted the mothers' subsequent beliefs about their children's school success but not vice versa. A reciprocal effect was found between fathers' beliefs about success and children's task-avoidance.

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1. Introduction

The achievement-related behaviours children deploy at school play an important role in their academic performance. Children who seek challenges, and are task-focused and persistent in the face of obstacles, tend to do well at school, whereas those who evade demanding tasks and exhibit task-avoidant and passive behaviours are more likely to underachieve (e.g., Aunola, Nurmi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2003; Dally, 2006; Georgiou, Manolitis, Nurmi, & Parrila, 2009; Lepola, Poskiparta, Laakkonen, & Niemi, 2005; Lundberg & Sterner, 2006; Mantzicopoulos, 1990). Parents'

beliefs and expectations regarding their children's school success have been shown to contribute to children's use of task-focused versus task-avoidant behaviours at school, which in turn have an effect on their skill development (Aunola et al., 2003; Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2002). Previous research on children's task-avoidant versus task-focused behaviour has mostly been carried out in the context of the classroom. Less is known about the antecedents of children's task-avoidance while doing their homework, and about the consequences of this task-avoidance on parental beliefs and children's skill development. Previous studies with adolescents have shown that greater effort invested in homework has been associated with higher achievement at school (Trautwein, 2007; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005). However, little is known about the homework behaviours in the early school years. Hence, the present study investigated the developmental dynamics between parents' beliefs about their

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children's school success, children's task-avoidance while doing homework, and children's math and reading skills during their first two school years.

1.1. Task-avoidance and academic achievement

The theoretical basis for investigating achievement-related beliefs and behaviours originates from the recognition that, in addition to cognitive abilities, motivational and affective mechanisms play an important role in children's learning (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). A number of different motivational constructs have been proposed that may facilitate or constrain a pupil's learning and achievement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Common to the various theoretical frameworks is the postulation that motivational processes and mechanisms affect children's behaviour, their effort, and persistence in achievement-related settings (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993).

It has been shown that children's task-avoidant behaviours and their reading skill development form cumulative cycles during the first year of school. For example, children who display low skill levels are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of task-avoidance in a classroom context, which further inhibits their skill development (Aunola et al., 2002; Georgiou, Manolitsis, Nurmi, & Parrila, 2009; Onatsu-Arviolommi & Nurmi, 2000). Similar results have been detected for math skills. On the one hand, teacher-rated task-avoidant behaviour has been shown to influence children's skill development (Aunola et al., 2003). On the other hand, math skills have been reported to have an effect on task-avoidant behaviours (Onatsu-Arviolommi & Nurmi, 2000). Children's self-reported task-avoidant behaviours have also been found to contribute to their math and reading skills development (Onatsu-Arviolommi, Nurmi, & Aunola, 2002).

Studies with adolescents have indicated that the way in which students approach their homework has profound effects on their school performance, with greater investments of effort in homework being associated with higher achievement (Trautwein, 2007; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005). However, less is known about the relations between homework behaviour and skill development during early school years. It could be argued that the parents' role in assisting their children in homework situations is most important in the early years of elementary school (Spinath & Spinath, 2005). Consequently, the present study focused on investigating the role of children's task-avoidant behaviours while doing their homework in the development of their reading and math skills at Grade 1 and 2. We expected that high levels of task-avoidant behaviours while doing homework would impair the subsequent development of the children's reading and math skills.

1.2. Parental beliefs and expectations of success

Findings on the relation between parental beliefs and expectations and children's academic achievement are contradictory. Some studies have shown that parental beliefs and expectations predict children's achievement after

controlling for earlier achievement and general cognitive abilities (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Stephenson, Parrila, Georgiou, & Kirby, 2008), whereas others indicate that children's achievement predicts parental expectations but parental expectations have no significant effect on children's achievement over time (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001). Factors such as parents' educational level have been found to predict parental expectations significantly (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Gill & Reynolds, 1999).

It has been argued that it is the quality of relationships within the child's home environment that has an important effect on the child's school performance (Caldas, 1993). Parents who have lower expectations concerning their children's success have been shown to express less warmth towards their children (Davis-Kean, 2005), as well as less encouragement (Bois, Sarrazin, Brustad, Trouilloud, & Cury, 2005), and were found to be less involved in their children's educational process (Davis-Kean, 2005). Lack of support and encouragement might lead to task-avoidant behaviours in challenging situations. However, only a few empirical studies have examined the relations between parental beliefs about children's school success and children's task-avoidant behaviours. In one such study, Aunola et al. (2002, 2003) showed that parents' general beliefs about success had an effect on teacher reports of children's task-avoidant behaviours in classroom situations which, in turn, had an effect on those children's skill development. They also found that children's task-avoidance predicted parents' low beliefs concerning their children's academic achievement. No previous studies have examined the associations between parental beliefs and children's task-avoidant behaviour while doing their homework, which is in focus of the present study. We expected that the parents' high beliefs about their children's school success will lead to low levels of the children's subsequent task-avoidance and have a positive effect on their subsequent academic performance in reading and math (Aunola et al., 2002; 2003; Bois et al., 2005).

2. Aims of the study

This study examined the following research questions:

1. To what extent do children's reading and math skills predict their task-avoidant behaviour while doing their homework?
2. To what extent does children's task-avoidant behaviour in doing homework predict the development of their reading and math skills?
3. To what extent do mothers' and fathers' beliefs about school success predict their children's task-avoidant behaviour in homework situations?
4. To what extent does children's task-avoidant behaviour in the context of homework predict their mothers' and fathers' beliefs about success?

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