



## Connections Between Early Literacy and Social Behavior

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**A review of a recent study investigating the mutual influences between literacy skills and social conduct in elementary school students.**

**Why was this study done?** In early elementary school, children face the challenges of achieving skills in literacy (i.e., reading and writing) and getting along with others. But are these achievements related to each other? Are children who are delayed in literacy development more prone to poor social conduct? Do children who are more aggressive fall behind in language skills, perhaps because of more negative relationships with teachers and peers? Moreover, does the association between social behavior and literacy achievement change over time?

**How was the study conducted?** Two groups of children from lower-income families were studied. The primary group of 140 children was studied during the early elementary years at first, third, and fifth grades. A second group of 237 children was studied in kindergarten, third, and fifth grades to replicate the findings from the first group. On each occasion, children's literacy achievement was evaluated through standardized tests, and their teachers rated children's aggressive conduct and their prosocial behavior (such as their caring for and helping others).

**What did the study find?** Children's poorer literacy achievement was associated with greater aggressive behavior in third and fifth (but not first) grade, and this association strengthened over time. Moreover, lower literacy in first and third grades predicted greater aggression two years later, but the reverse was not true (i.e., higher aggression did not predict later lower literacy). In general, first-grade literacy was important as it predicted aggression in third-grade which, in turn, led to aggressive conduct in fifth grade. With respect to children's prosocial behavior, children who were more helpful in first grade had greater literacy skills two years later, but the association between early prosocial behavior and later literacy weakened over time, and the reverse was not true (i.e., higher literacy did not predict later prosocial conduct). Findings from the second sample (who were studied in kindergarten) are consistent with these findings for the primary sample.

**What do the findings mean?** In the early elementary years, in the authors' words, "social development and academic development are inextricably connected." This is especially true of the lower-income children of this



## SCIENCE BRIEFS

summarize the findings and implications of a recent study in basic science or clinical research. Studies are selected for review based on their scientific merit and contributions to understanding early development. No single study is definitive, of course. Understanding of early development is based on many studies that, taken together, permit broad conclusions and human applications. Generalizing to human children the results of studies with animals, for example, must be done cautiously and confirmed by research with children and their families. The National Scientific Council rests its work on a rigorous discussion of the validity of many studies like these conducted over many years and using different methodologies and samples.

study, who are at greater risk for school failure. Early problems in literacy achievement are not immediately associated with aggressive behavior but, over time, they become increasingly predictive as these difficulties gather momentum and as children become more frustrated. Problems in one domain can thus lead to problems in the other. Unfortunately, the same is not true of benefits. Children who are helpful show later benefits in literacy (perhaps because they develop better relationships with teachers), but this influence does not persist over time. ●

Study Title and Authors: Miles, S. B., & Stipek, D. (2006). Contemporaneous and longitudinal associations between social behavior and literacy achievement in a sample of low income elementary school children. *Child Development* 77:103-117.