



ILLINOIS

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

College of Education

Research Highlights of Current Faculty Projects

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Pathways Project: Successful Adjustment to the World of School

What are the most effective ways to encourage children's success in school? How do child, family, peer, and school characteristics affect children's attitudes toward school and the level of participation and achievement they evidence in the classroom? Gary Ladd, professor of educational psychology at UIUC, and his colleagues are conducting the Pathways Project, a large-scale, long-term study of the diverse factors that influence children's early and continuing educational progress. The Project began in 1992 when the children in this study entered kindergarten; they are currently in grades 6 and 7. Ladd and colleagues plan to follow them until grade 9. Currently participating families and children live in Illinois and 26 other states and are interviewed yearly in approximately 300 classrooms.

What this research can tell us:

One important discovery from the study's wide array of findings is that school adjustment appears to depend on more than just the "obvious" predictors, such as children's intellectual aptitude, language skills, family backgrounds, and so on. Especially among younger children, these predictors do not appear to tell the whole story about what leads children toward healthy school adjustment and progress.

Some findings show that there are complex sequences of events that affect how children achieve in school. First, how children act toward their classmates and are treated by them may have an important bearing on classroom relationships they develop. Once relationships with teachers and classmates have formed, the quality of these relationships appears to affect how much children engage in the school environment. Finally, and not surprisingly, children who like school and participate more actively in classroom activities show much higher gains in achievement than do children who dislike school and evidence low levels of participation.

What this research might mean for schools and students:

Findings from the early years of this study suggest that there are a number of ways schools and teachers can help children get off to a good start as they enter grade school.

- *Before* children enter school, establish communication lines with families and preschool/childcare teachers. These open lines of communication enable children to form positive, realistic feelings and attitudes toward the purpose of school and toward both the social and scholastic tasks that will be expected of them.
- Once children enter kindergarten, encourage teachers and parents to pay attention to (and try to improve, if necessary) children's feelings toward school, and the *quality of the relationships they form with classmates and teachers*. Start activities to support this early in the year.
- Early childhood programs that help children develop skills in these domains before they enter school (friendship-making skills, cooperative behaviors) also increase the children's early chances of success.
- Soon after children enter kindergarten, educators and families should make sure that children take an active and cooperative role in classroom activities.
- Establish programs or activities that *prevent* children's exposure to major stressors, such as peer harassment or peer rejection at school.

To learn more about The Pathways Project...

Ladd, G. W., Kochenderfer, B. J., & Coleman, C. C. (1996). Friendship quality as a predictor of young children's early school adjustment. *Child Development, 67*, 1003-1118.

Ladd, G. W., Birch, S. H. & Buhs, E. (1999). Children's social and scholastic lives in kindergarten: Related spheres of influence? *Child Development, 70*, 1373-1400.