

Youth's social problems contribute to anxiety and depression

Socially successful children tend to have fewer symptoms of anxiety or depression, while children with problems such as anxiety and depression tend to have difficulties forming relationships and being accepted by friends. However, it is difficult to determine whether the anxiety and depression lead to the social problems, or vice versa. New research suggests that social problems are more likely to contribute to anxiety and depression than the reverse. The research also shows that this is particularly likely during the transition from adolescence into young adulthood.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Vermont and the University of Minnesota, appears in the March/April 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Using data from Project Competence, which has followed a group of 205 individuals from middle childhood (ages 8 to 12) over 20 years into young adulthood, the researchers used detailed interviews with participants and reports from their parents, teachers, and classmates to create measures of so-called internalizing problems (anxiety, depressed mood, being withdrawn) and social competence (how well one functions in relation to other people, particularly with respect to getting along with others and forming close relationships). They then examined how these measures related to each other over time, taking into account the stability of each (in other words, that children who have social problems at the start of the study may continue to have them over time).

The researchers found that young people who had more internalizing problems (such as anxiety and depression) at the start of the study were more likely to have those problems in adolescence and young adulthood. Those who were socially competent at the start of the study were socially competent as they grew up. However, in addition to this evidence of continuity, the study found evidence of spillover effects, where social problems contributed to increasing internalizing symptoms over time.

Children who were less socially competent in childhood were more likely to have symptoms of anxious or depressed mood in adolescence. Similarly, young people who were less socially competent in adolescence were at greater risk for symptoms of anxiety and depression in young adulthood. The findings remained the same when the researchers took into account some other possible explanations, such as intellectual functioning, the quality of parenting, social class, and such problems as fighting, lying, and stealing. And the results were generally the same for both males and females.

“Overall, our research suggests that social competence, such as acceptance by peers and developing healthy relationships, is a key influence in the development of future internalizing problems such as anxiety and depressed mood, especially over the transition years from adolescence into young adulthood,” explains Keith Burt, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Vermont and the study’s lead author. “These results suggest that although internalizing problems have some stability across time, there is also room for intervention and change. More specifically, youth at risk for internalizing problems might benefit from interventions focused on building healthy relationships with peers.”

The study was funded, in part, by the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health.

Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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