

**Press release: Embargoed until 9am, Thursday, January 31, 2008**

The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London

## Pupils' behaviour tends to improve if they do well in English, study says

Young children's behaviour often improves markedly during their primary school years if they do well in English at age 7, new research suggests.

Researchers who tracked more than 2,000 children between the ages of 8 and 10 found that those who had made a good start in English became much less likely to get involved in antisocial activities such as bullying. Pupils who were good at maths at age 7 but struggled with English showed fewer improvements in behaviour during their junior school years.

Dr Leslie Gutman, the study's principal author, said: "This does not necessarily mean that we will see an improvement in children's behaviour by enhancing key stage 1 English scores. It could be more complicated than that. It may be that aspects of development associated with English proficiency, such as communication skills and sociability, promote positive behaviour."

Although there was no evident association between good grades in maths and improved behaviour, children who did well in maths at 7 generally had stronger feelings of control, more confidence in their scholastic abilities, and less depression.

Dr Gutman and Professor Leon Feinstein, of the Institute of Education, University of London, also found that most children appear to enjoy their primary school years and do not get involved in bullying or other antisocial activities. "We believe this is a significant finding given the widespread concerns about the quality of children's lives in the UK today," they say.

Their study found that there was an overall improvement in children's social behaviour between the ages of 8 and 10. However, 20 per cent of pupils suffered from either declining or low levels of well-being. They were most likely to be low-achieving boys from poorer backgrounds. "Nevertheless, boys generally had better mental health than girls, with higher levels of belief in their own abilities and more feelings of control," say the researchers, who analysed information gathered on children taking part in the Avon Longitudinal Study.

School factors were found to explain 7 per cent of the between-school variation in key stage 2 maths grades at age 11, and 10 per cent of the difference in English scores.

However, they explained only 3 per cent or less of the variation in pupils' mental health and behaviour.

Pupils in schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged children were more likely to be depressed, experience victimisation and engage in antisocial behaviour. By contrast, pupils in voluntary-aided primaries, most of which are faith schools, were less likely to be victimised and more likely to talk to their teacher.

"It is, however, children's individual experiences, such as bullying or friendships, and their beliefs about themselves and their environment, which mainly affect their well-being, rather than the type of school they attend," says the study, which covered 242 schools.

"This does not mean that schools are unimportant for children's well-being. A school's policy on bullying, for example, may significantly affect a pupil's experience of victimisation. Schools can also help by encouraging children to believe that what they do can make a difference."

Gutman and Feinstein add that early intervention could help the minority of children who are unhappy in primary school. "It may discourage their continuing, and perhaps escalating, path towards mental health problems, delinquency and disengagement from school," they say.

*Children's well-being in primary school: pupil and school effects: Wider Benefits of Learning Report No 25* can be found at [www.learningbenefits.net](http://www.learningbenefits.net)

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Notes for editors:

- 1) The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL) investigates the benefits that learning brings to the individual and to society. It is funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. WBL's main objectives are to clarify, model and quantify the outcomes of all forms of intentional learning so as to inform the funding, implementation and practice of educational provision through the life course.

- 2) The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children is an ongoing research project. To be eligible for the study, mothers not only had to be living in Avon while pregnant, their expected date of delivery had to lie between 1st April, 1991 and 31st December, 1992 inclusive. Demographic data, including gender, maternal education, family income, and parental marital status, were gathered from mothers when the children were 47 months of age. Children were also tested at both 8 and 10 years. These half-day tests occurred in a clinical setting. The data they produced allowed Dr Gutman and Professor Feinstein to examine four dimensions of well-being: mental health, pro-social behaviours, antisocial behaviours, and achievement.