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Early School Engagement Helps Youths Avoid Problem Behaviors and Eventual Dropout

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The Reciprocal Links between School Engagement, Youth Problem Behaviors, and School Dropout During Adolescence

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Help your teenager stay engaged in school and he or she will be less likely to drop out. That's the conclusion of a new longitudinal study that found that teens who were less engaged in school tended to engage in more delinquency and substance use over time, and that lower levels of engagement and greater problem behaviors in turn predicted a higher likelihood of dropping out of school. Specifically, the study points to the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that provides opportunities for students to feel competent and autonomous, and that sustains them emotionally.

The study, by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh and Connecticut College, appears in the journal *Child Development*.

Active engagement in secondary school—the extent to which students participate in the academic tasks of school, feel connected to the institution, value schooling, and are motivated to learn—has been found to promote the skills, competencies, and values that allow adolescents to successfully transition into adulthood. But evidence suggests that students become increasingly disengaged as they progress through secondary school, with some studies estimating that 40 to 60 percent show signs of disengagement such as being uninvolved in or apathetic about their studies, not trying hard, or not paying attention.

Researchers looked at about 1,300 youths in seventh through eleventh grades recruited from 23 public schools in a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse county on the East Coast of the United States; 58 percent were African American, 36 percent were European American, and 6 percent were either biracial or other ethnic minorities. Teens completed surveys over a seven-year period on topics related to their problem behaviors, school engagement, relationships with parents and teachers, and general demographics.

"The findings support the idea that behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement are assets that help students cope with the stressors, setbacks, and difficulties they face in school," according to Ming-Te Wang, assistant professor of psychology in education at the University of Pittsburgh, who led the study. "Student

engagement and academic and other difficulties influence each other reciprocally.

“Youths who are engaged with school feel more academically competent, are more connected to the institution, and elicit more positive reactions from their teachers and parents. In contrast, disengaged youths have more academic difficulties, receive less positive support from teachers, and are more likely to associate with disengaged peers.

“The study also suggests that early behavioral and emotional engagement in school can buffer against participation in problem behavior,” Wang notes. “Educational interventions for students that aim to improve school engagement may decrease delinquency and substance use, and prevent adolescents from dropping out of high school.”

The National Institute on Drug Abuse funded the study.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, The Reciprocal Links between School Engagement, Youth Problem Behaviors, and School Dropout During Adolescence by Wang, M-T (University of Pittsburgh), and Fredricks, J (Connecticut College). Copyright 2013 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.