

# Self-control and social and behavioural conduct

Maintaining positive social interactions with peers and adults, having good social skills (e.g., empathy, mutual help, an ability to listen) and controlling one's impulses are linked to success at school. Greater self-control, meaning the ability to control one's behaviour and urges, is associated with higher reading, vocabulary, and mathematics performance, and is a recognized determinant of school perseverance.

## What the research says

An examination of the developmental paths of children who exhibit frequent behavioural problems in kindergarten reveals that many of them maintain high levels of behavioural problems throughout their schooling.<sup>1</sup> They are also at risk of having trouble academically, of dropping out,<sup>2</sup> and of exhibiting delinquency and social integration problems. Students with behavioural problems are also more likely to leave school before earning their high school diploma.<sup>3</sup> Developing mechanisms for self-control is therefore a strategic issue in improving the educational experience of these young people.

Self-control means giving up a behaviour that provides immediate gratification and replacing it with one that has more long-term benefits.

The three main behavioural problems encountered in schools are conduct disorder (CD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and attention-deficit disorder, either with or without hyperactivity (ADD or ADHD). Conduct disorder is characterized by aggression toward people or animals, destruction of property, theft, or serious breach of established rules. Oppositional defiant disorder involves a range of persistent negative, hostile or provocative behaviours but that do not break laws or impact the rights of others. ADD-ADHD, while involuntary, can take on three forms. It can manifest as having trouble concentrating, in compulsive or hyperactive behaviour, or having all of these at once. Young people who are diagnosed with more than one of these behavioural problems have a higher risk of not finishing school.

## For more information

*Troubles du comportement externalisés*

<http://www.crifpe.ca/download/verify/1265>

*Guide d'implantation de programmes de développement d'habiletés sociales et de résolution de conflits*

<http://www.preventionscolaire.ca/doc/implantation.pdf>

*La réussite scolaire évaluée sous l'angle de l'attachement*

[http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site\\_web/documents/PSG/recherche\\_evaluation/prprsFiche14.pdf](http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/PSG/recherche_evaluation/prprsFiche14.pdf)

[1] S. M. Côté, T. Vaillancourt, J. C. LeBlanc, D. S. Nagin, and R. E. Tremblay (2006), The Development of Physical Aggression from Toddlerhood to Pre-Adolescence: A Nation Wide Longitudinal Study of Canadian Children, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 34(1), 71–85.

[2] F. Vitaro, M. Brendgen, S. Larose, and R. E. Tremblay (2005), Kindergarten disruptive behaviors, protective factors, and educational achievement by early adulthood, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97(4), 617–629.

[3] Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (2006), *Classe ordinaire et cheminement particulier de formation temporaire. Analyse du cheminement scolaire des élèves en difficulté d'adaptation ou d'apprentissage à leur arrivée au secondaire*, Québec, Canada.

## Taking effective action

Among the effective programs for treating conduct or behavioural problems, those that incorporate both universal and targeted components show the most promise, for both boys and girls. Such programs have certain characteristics in common: they focus on behaviour-modification approaches and they systematically and explicitly teach social skills, problem solving, and self-control strategies. They are also based on positive reinforcement.

Most proven programs also have a component aimed specifically at parents and people who work directly with families. When parents and certain community members can support and build on interventions that occur at school, there is a much greater chance that these interventions will be effective.

Of all at-risk youth, those with behavioural troubles attract the least sympathy from the people who work with them. And yet there has been significant progress over the past 20 years in experimenting with and finding effective practices that offer alternatives to the withdrawal and isolation that such youth continually experience.

In a different vein, researchers conducting a longitudinal study of several cohorts of students followed since kindergarten examined the relationship between behavioural problems and reading problems.<sup>[1]</sup> They found not only that students who had behavioural problems in grade 1 were likely to have reading problems in grade 3, but also that students who had reading problems in grade 1 were likely to have behavioural problems in grade 3. This finding highlights the importance of dealing with both issues as soon as schooling begins.

### Avenues for effective action related to self-control and social and behavioural conduct

#### Put social skills development workshops in place for ALL children starting in early childhood:

- to work consistently with families from the beginning,
- to convey community expectations in terms of group behaviour and social code (i.e., rules of conduct, sharing, empathy, conflict resolution, politeness, respect, communication with peers and adults, etc.),
- to demonstrate the effects of behaviour on others rather than resort to punishment.

#### Involve parents in all actions related to their children's behaviour:

- to ensure that favourable developmental conditions are in place (sleep, nutrition, coping with disturbing events, choosing positive relations, etc.),
- to ensure that work with practitioners is consistent (shared discourse, clear messages, etc.).

#### Systematically screen youth upon entering school to take early action:

- Focus special attention on children entering school, especially boys, and on at-risk youth entering high school, and work intensively with them.

Implement measures that reward positive behaviour and reinforcement (e.g., interventions, code of conduct, expectations rather than criticism).

Implement measures that include and integrate troubled youth rather than excluding them (e.g., individualized help in developing skills to resolve problem situations, making use of a youth's strengths and expertise in various situations, activities that complement the youth's own interests to develop positive attitudes).

Offer extracurricular activities that attract such youth and that give them a chance to work hard, invest themselves, and experience success (e.g., sport, robotics, arts, martial arts, poetry slam, dance).

[1] Morgan et al. (2008), Are reading and behavior problems risk factors for each other? *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 41(5), Sept. 2008.