

The Connection Between Social Relationships and Adolescent Academic Success

By Olivia Cui

Author Bio

Olivia Cui is a senior at Summit High School interested in psychology and cognitive science. She is the President of Math Club and Co-president of American Sign Language Club at her high school. In her free time, Olivia loves reading and playing piano.

Abstract

Adolescence is a time of heightened susceptibility to social influence; teens look to important social figures to help guide their decision-making. Thus, their social relationships hold power in shaping how adolescents regard their education. Three main factors that impact a student's academic performance are social relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. These relationships vary in how they influence academic achievement: for parent-child relationships, the parent's involvement with the child's education affects academic performance, for peer-to-peer relationships, social norms regarding education is the key source of influence, and for teacher-student relationships, the teachers' perception and expectations of their students has the greatest impact on students' academic performance. This paper discusses current research on the effects of social relationships (i.e., parent-child, peer-to-peer, and teacher-student) on adolescent academic success and offers explanations as to why these social relationships have such a significant impact on academic success.

Keywords: Social relationships, academic performance, adolescent education, adolescent psychology, parent-child relationships, peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, self-perception, academic achievement, social influence

Introduction

Academic success in America varies greatly: some students conquer factoring polynomials in middle school, while their peers struggle with one digit multiplication. The implications of childhood academic performance extend well past adolescence and into adulthood, impacting educational attainment and employment (Gevrek et al., 2015). Myriad factors contribute to these students' academic prowess, but social relationships in particular have been discovered to improve students' academic performance by increasing students' academic motivation (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Familial relationships, friendships with peers, and teacher-student relationships comprise three key social relationships in adolescents' lives. Since adolescence is a time of heightened susceptibility to social influence, teens look to important social figures to help guide their decision-making. For example, involvement in peer groups that value high academic achievement may encourage an adolescent to strive for better grades. Parents who value education may pass this value on to their children, potentially resulting in strong academic records. Teachers with trusting relationships with their students may help the student feel supported and lead to more effective learning. This paper discusses current research on the effects of social relationships (i.e., parent-child, peer-to-peer, and teacher-student) on adolescent academic success and offers explanations as to why these social relationships have such a significant impact on academic success.

Parent-Child Relationships

Parental involvement in their child's education is one characteristic of the parent-child relationship that influences an adolescent's academic success. This may manifest in the parents initiating school-related discussions with their child, helping them with schoolwork, or encouraging their child to pursue academic activities instead of noneducational activities (Jafarov, 2015). Regardless of the type of parental involvement, an important factor that drives parental involvement is the parents' expectations of their child's performance in school. Research has indicated that by improving their child's self-perception of their academic competence, parents can increase their child's academic success (Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2002). Self-perception of academic

competence can impact academic achievement by boosting self-esteem or fostering a positive mindset regarding learning (Banks & Woolfson, 2008). Parental expectations may shape their child's perception of their academic abilities, which has been shown to predict academic outcomes (Pajares, 1996). In contrast, parental involvement in the form of supervision at home does not have as high a correlation with a child's academic success as parental expectations do (Fan & Chen, 2001). Parental supervision may not be as accurate a predictor of academic performance as parental expectations are because supervision may only be implemented after low academic achievement, as opposed to being implemented before any academic results. However, parental expectations are not the only element of parent-child relationships that affect academic success. Another factor that moderates the influence of parent-child relationships on academic achievement is socioeconomic status.

How a student's parents regard education in terms of importance will impact the student's relationship with schoolwork. This may then influence parental expectations of a student's success in school, indirectly shaping the student's self-perceived competence at school. Studies have shown that a student's perception of their competence may be the factor that is both affected by parent expectations and responsible for their own academic achievement (Loughlin-Presnal & Bierman, 2017). Higher parental expectations from various demographics were all correlated to the student's higher academic performance, so regardless of background, parental expectations may increase the student's self-perception of their educational competence and thus positively influence their academic achievement.

The influence of the parent-child relationships on adolescents' academic success may be connected to the family's socioeconomic background because students living in poverty tend to demonstrate lower academic achievement than those not living in poverty (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In fact, participation in school reduced or free lunch programs, one indicator of socioeconomic hardship, has been associated with worse academic performance (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Children who qualify for reduced/free lunch may be hungry during the school day, which negatively affects their ability to focus on schoolwork, or not have the resources for extra academic help. Their lower academic achievement may have resulted

from few parent-child discussions about education or their parents' low expectations for the student's academic performance, which were reported by parents whose children participated in the free/reduced lunch program (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Children living in low-wage households may have parents who work all day and are not able to support their children's academic pursuits, which could lead to their academic performance suffering. It is important to take into account that parents whose children did not receive free/reduced lunch reported more attempts at restricting their children's time for enjoyment and focused more on reading time than parents whose children received free/reduced lunch (Lee and Bowen, 2006). It may be that wealthier parents have more time and resources to monitor their children's activities and academic pursuits. Thus, the influence of the parent-child relationship on adolescents' academic success interacts with factors such as socioeconomic status. Schools should be sensitive to the fact that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may need additional resources and support to help them succeed academically.

Parent-child relationships are often shaped by the time that the parents have available for their child, which indirectly impacts the student's academic success. Differences in how parents engage in their children's education can be attributed to a variety of barriers that low-income or marginalized racial and ethnic groups face. For instance, lower education is a major contributor to the wage gap in the United States (Smith & Fernandez, 2017). This means parents in low-income households are less likely to hold degrees higher than a high school degree, and as such, may not pass on a favorable mindset about education to their child or have the experience to guide their children (e.g. a parent with only a high school education is less likely to know about the college admissions process) (Leww & Bowen, 2006). The current education system in the United States targets middle-class students, so low-income students and students from other demographics may have a more difficult adjustment to school (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Parents of these students may not be able to participate in school events, which translates to teachers thinking that the parents may not value education as much, resulting in lower teacher ratings of a student's academic performance (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Peer Relationships

While parent-child relationships do impact students' self-perception and thus their academic achievement, peer relationships also influence how much effort students put into their school work and how they view their academic abilities. Many friendships are shaped by similar backgrounds and interests, and adolescents value feeling accepted and well-liked by their peers (Lerner, & Steinberg, 2009). Research has shown that peer pressure and the need to conform in adolescence is powerful in influencing students' actions (Santor & Kusumakar, 2000). Through the values of peer groups, academic performance may be impacted by students' relationships with their peers. For example, if the adolescent is part of a social circle where high grades are respected, they may be more motivated to perform well academically (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Also, research has shown that with peer support, students' attendance strengthens, which may be because friends allow school to be more of a positive experience (Rosenfeld & Bowen, 2000). Therefore, peer relationships may place pressure on students to perform well academically so that they will fit in with their social circle.

The effect of peer relationships on academic success may also be related to the competitive or noncompetitive nature of the relationships. Research has shown that cooperative learning during middle to high school is more effective at inspiring a desire to learn and instilling permanent knowledge than competitive learning (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Cooperative learning is defined as the learning environment where mastering the material is the goal, not outcompeting peers. Students work together to learn in cooperative learning (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). In contrast, competitive learning is defined as the learning environment where comparison between peers is emphasized, such as in a teacher style where only the highest test scores are rewarded (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). The finding that cooperative learning facilitates greater student achievement could indicate that peer friendships help students achieve higher grades, since cooperative learning encourages students to help each other instead of one student's loss being another student's gain. As a result of the emphasis of teamwork, cooperative learning is also linked to students prioritizing learning for the

sake of gaining knowledge over social comparison and having increased confidence in their academic abilities (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Gamification, a competitive learning teaching style where students earn points for tasks such as participating in class discussions and have their points tracked on a public leaderboard, has been linked to a decrease in both student motivation and confidence in their academic abilities, and therefore negatively impacts academic performance (Hanus & Fox, 2014). As such, peer relationships may influence the mindset that a student holds about school: if a student has many friends at school, they may be more likely to enjoy school and put more effort into their schoolwork, raising their GPA. In fact, lower levels of school dropout and increased GPA have been linked to higher school satisfaction (Martinez et al. 2004).

Since friendships are more likely to form within the same class because the students are more likely to interact and work together, peer relationships may be affected by the teacher's teaching style. Research has not yet been conducted to study whether more friendships form in a specific style of teaching (e.g. lectures vs. seminar-based) than other styles. However, in classrooms that incorporate social and emotional lessons, the social and emotional well-being of students was not the only improvement—many previously low-achieving students improved their academic performance as well (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). The teachers who taught social and emotional lessons reported that the students had better emotion management and displayed more engagement during academic subjects (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). The results were not limited to any gender nor ethnic and racial backgrounds. In classrooms where social and emotional lessons were taught, students exhibited greater growth in their reading levels than classrooms that did not receive social and emotional lessons. Peer relationships in the school environment may allow students to boost their social and emotional well-being, thereby increasing their perception of their academic abilities and improving their academic performance. Altogether, despite various motivations for achieving high grades, supportive peer relationships allow students to focus on learning at school and increase academic achievement.

Teacher-student Relationships

Similar to how parental expectations greatly impact the student's motivation in school, teacher expectations shape their relationships with their students and therefore influence their students' academic performance. Throughout an adolescent's education, they will interact with several different teachers, and their relationships with these teachers are highly important to their overall educational experience (Frymier & Houser, 2000). As one of the most powerful authority figures at school, a teacher is key not only academically, but emotionally as well. Students' self-perceptions of their abilities correlates to their actual success (Pajares, 1996), and teachers play an influential role in how their students see themselves (Rosenfeld et al., 2000). For example, middle-school students with a stronger teacher-student relationship had higher self-esteem levels, thus increasing their academic success (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

Strong teacher-student relationships are characterized by the student's trust in the teacher, helping them feel safer in the school environment and more competent academically (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). However, a stronger teacher-student relationship's correlation to higher academic success and the influence a teacher has on their student's academic performance may be affected by the teacher's perception of their student. Instead, these correlations may be indicators of the Pygmalion effect or halo effect, where teachers may be inclined to rate students with better grades with higher self-esteem (Berger et al., 2011). Research has shown that teachers with low expectations for a student may be more hostile in their interactions, make less eye contact with them, and give them easier tasks (Peterson et al., 2016). Teachers may also subconsciously grant more support, whether academic or socially, to students that achieve higher grades (Berger et al., 2011).

Furthermore, adolescents are able to identify whether teachers have high or low expectations through their nonverbal behavior (Peterson et al., 2016). By creating and reinforcing expectations for a student's success academically, teachers are also forming the same expectations in the student's mindset. Since stronger teacher-student relationships are usually linked to more frequent teacher-student

interactions (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004), the teacher may receive the impression that the student cares about school and develop better expectations for the student's academic outcomes, influencing the student's perception of their academic abilities and their academic achievement.

Another important aspect of the teacher-student relationship is that teachers are likely to play the largest role in shaping a student's attitude towards academics, and a positive attitude supports functioning in the brain regions responsible for learning and memory, allowing for higher academic achievement (Chen et al., 2018). One way teachers can cultivate a positive attitude towards learning and improve academic performance is by teaching their students to adopt a growth mindset, whether through modeling or lessons about social and emotional well-being (Moser et al., 2011). A growth mindset is defined as the belief that mistakes are necessary steps in learning and improvement, whereas a fixed mindset is the belief that mistakes are not opportunities for growth (Moser et al., 2011). A strong teacher-student relationship may help the student adopt a growth mindset, which has been connected to increased accuracy after making a mistake, and thus improve their academic performance (Moser et al., 2011). In addition, research has found that teachers with growth mindsets further the development of a growth mindset in their students, which fosters a positive attitude towards schoolwork and leads to higher academic performance (Mesler, 2021). On the contrary, teachers who hold a fixed mindset lead to lower student expectations of their own academic performance (Mesler, 2021). Teacher-student relationships thus wield immense power in influencing students' academic performance by molding a student's perspective on their academic abilities.

Conclusion

Three main factors that impact a student's academic performance are social relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. These relationships vary in how they influence academic achievement: for parent-child relationships, the parent's involvement with the child's education affects academic performance, for peer-to-peer relationships, social norms regarding education is the key source of influence, and for teacher-student relationships,

the teachers' perception and expectations of their students has the greatest impact on students' academic performance.

Strong parent-child relationships, peer-to-peer relationships, and teacher-student relationships all positively influence academic performance despite varying socio-economic statuses and cultures because social relationships mold a student's mindset and attitude towards school. In doing so, social relationships help develop the student's self-perception of their academic prowess, increasing their academic success. By learning how to interact with their peers, teachers, and parents, students also build social-emotional skills, which affect students' academic performance (Rhoades et al., 2011). However, research has not yet been conducted to discover if social relationships help improve academic success by developing social-emotional skills, or if better social-emotional skills lead to stronger social relationships, which then increases academic success. It is also important to note that social-emotional skills may correlate to self-esteem, which impacts academic achievement by regulating the students' self-perception of their academic abilities (Sklad et al., 2012). For now, schools and teachers should seek ways to allow students to bond with each other and their teachers. This may mean allocating time for lessons promoting social and emotional skills or a period of free time where teachers can play games with their students. By understanding the importance of social relationships, schools can take action to help their students learn better than ever.

References

- Ashdown, D. M., & Bernard, M. E. (2011). Can explicit instruction in social and emotional learning skills benefit the social-emotional development, well-being, and academic achievement of young children? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 39(6), 397–405. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-011-0481-x>
- Berger, C., Alcalay, L., Torretti, A., & Milicic, N. (2011). Socio-emotional well-being and academic achievement: Evidence from a multilevel approach. *Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica*, 24(2), 344–351. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0102-79722011000200016>

- Banks, M. & Woolfson, L. (2008). Why do students think they fail? The relationship between attributions and academic self-perceptions. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35, 49-56.
- Chen, L., Bae, S. R., Battista, C., Qin, S., Chen, T., Evans, T. M., & Menon, V. (2018). Positive attitude toward math supports early academic success: Behavioral evidence and neurocognitive mechanisms. *Psychological Science*, 29(3), 390-402. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617735528>
- Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1009048817385>
- Fredriksen, K., & Rhodes, J. (2004b). The role of teacher relationships in the lives of students. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2004(103), 45-54. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.90>
- Frymier, A. B., & Houser, M. L. (2000). The teacher-student relationship as an interpersonal relationship. *Communication Education*, 49(3), 207-219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520009379209>
- Gevrek, D., Gevrek, Z. E., & Guven, C. (2015). Benefits of education at the intensive margin: Childhood academic performance and adult outcomes among American immigrants. *Eastern Economic Journal*, 41(3), 298-328. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ej.2015.6>
- Gonzalez-pianda, J. A., Nunez, J. C., Gonzalez-pumariaga, S., Alvarez, L., Rocas, C., & Garcia, M. (2002). A structural equation model of parental involvement, motivational and aptitudinal characteristics, and academic achievement. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 70(3), 257-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220970209599509>
- Hanus, M. D., & Fox, J. (2015). Assessing the effects of gamification in the classroom: A longitudinal study on intrinsic motivation, social comparison, satisfaction, effort, and academic performance. *Computers & Education*, 80, 152-161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2014.08.019>
- Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2006). Student-Teacher Relationships. *National Association of School Psychologists*, 59-71.
- Jafarov, J. (2015). Factors affecting parental involvement in education: The Analysis of Literature. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18(4), 35-44. <https://doi.org/10.5782/2223-2621.2015.18.4.35>
- Lee, J.-S., & Bowen, N. K. (2006). Parent involvement, cultural capital, and the Achievement Gap Among Elementary School Children. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(2), 193-218. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312043002193>
- Lerner, R. M., & Steinberg, L. (2009). The Scientific Study of Adolescent Development. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy001002>
- Loughlin-Presnal, J., & Bierman, K. L. (2017). How do parent expectations promote child academic achievement in Early Elementary School? A test of three mediators. *Developmental Psychology*, 53(9), 1694-1708. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000369>
- Martinez, C. R., DeGarmo, D. S., & Eddy, J. M. (2004). Promoting academic success among Latino youths. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 26(2), 128-151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986304264573>
- Mesler, R. M., Corbin, C. M., & Martin, B. H. (2021). Teacher mindset is associated with development of Students' growth mindset. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 76, 101299. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2021.101299>
- Moser, J. S., Schroder, H. S., Heeter, C., Moran, T. P., & Lee, Y.-H. (2011). Mind your errors: evidence for a neural mechanism linking growth mind-set to adaptive posterror adjustments. *Psychological Science*, 22(12), 1484-1489. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611419520>
- Pajares, F. (1996). Self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(4), 543-578. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543066004543>

- Peterson, E. R., Rubie-Davies, C., Osborne, D., & Sibley, C. (2016). Teachers' explicit expectations and implicit prejudiced attitudes to educational achievement: Relations with student achievement and the Ethnic Achievement Gap. *Learning and Instruction*, 42, 123–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2016.01.010>
- Rosenfeld, L. B., Richman, J. M., & Bowen, G. L. (2000). Social support networks and school outcomes: The centrality of the teacher. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17(3), 205–226. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1007535930286>
- Rhoades, B. L., Warren, H. K., Domitrovich, C. E., & Greenberg, M. T. (2011). Examining the link between preschool social-emotional competence and first grade academic achievement: The role of attention skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 26(2), 182–191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2010.07.003>
- Santor, D. A., Messervey, D., & Kusumakar, V. (2000). Measuring peer pressure, popularity, and conformity in Adolescent boys and girls: Predicting school performance, sexual attitudes, and substance abuse. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 29(2), 163–182. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1005152515264>
- Sklad, M., Diekstra, R., Ritter, M. D., Ben, J., & Gravesteyn, C. (2012). Effectiveness of school-based universal social, emotional, and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students' development in the area of skill, behavior, and adjustment? *Psychology in the Schools*, 49(9), 892–909. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21641>
- Smith, W. C., & Fernandez, F. (2017). Education, skills, and wage gaps in Canada and the United States. *International Migration*, 55(3), 57–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12328>
- Urdu, T., & Schoenfelder, E. (2006). Classroom effects on student motivation: Goal structures, social relationships, and competence beliefs. *Journal of School Psychology*, 44(5), 331–349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2006.04.003>
- Woolley, M. E., Kol, K. L., & Bowen, G. L. (2009). The Social Context of School Success for Latino Middle School Students: Direct and Indirect Influences of Teachers, Family, and Friends. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 29(1), 43–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431608324478>
- Wentzel, K. R., & Wigfield, A. (1998). Academic and Social Motivational Influences on Students' Academic Performance. *Educational Psychology Review*, 10(2), 155–175. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1022137619834>