

RNBC Research Identifies Three Key Factors in Avoiding Social Rejection

By

Three Key Factors to Help Children Avoid Social Rejection Identified
New Study May Help Develop Assessment Tests in Social-Emotional Learning

(CHICAGO) Neurobehavioral researchers at Rush University Medical Center have found three key factors in a child's behavior that can lead to social rejection. The studies are a crucial step in developing scientifically sound screening tests and treatment planning for social-emotional learning difficulties. The results from the studies are published in the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*.

Findings from the pair of studies indicate that the ability to pick up on non-verbal cues and social cues in social interaction as well as recognize the meaning and respond appropriately to them are key to helping children develop skills to maintain friendships and avoid a host of problems in later life.

A child who experiences social rejection is more likely to suffer from academic failure, drop out of school, experience depression or anxiety, and experiment with drugs.

"Children's ability to develop positive peer relationships is critical to their well-being," said Dr. Clark McKown, study principal investigator and associate executive director and research director at the Rush NeuroBehavioral Center. "Compared to children who are accepted by their peers, socially rejected children are at substantially elevated risk for later adjustment troubles."

Researchers observed two groups of children. One was a random sample of 158 children in the Chicago school system. The other group was a random sample of 126 clinic-referred children.

The studies indicate that some children have difficulty picking up on non-verbal or social cues.

According to McKown, "They simply don't notice the way someone's shoulders slump with disappointment, or hear the change in someone's voice when they are excited, or take in whether a person's face shows anger or sadness."

A second major factor is that some children may pick up on non-verbal or social cues, but lack the ability to attach meaning to them. The third factor is the ability to reason about social problems.

"Some children may notice social cues and understand what is happening, but are unable to do the social problem solving to behave appropriately," said McKown.

A child who can take in social cues, recognize their meaning and respond appropriately, and who is capable of "self-regulating," or controlling behavior, is more likely to have successful relationships.

"The number of children who cannot negotiate all these steps, and who are at risk of social rejection, is startling," said McKown.

Nearly 13 percent of the school age population, or roughly four million children nationwide, have social-emotional learning difficulties.

For some time, behavioral scientists have known the social costs associated with this problem. Illinois is one of a handful of states which require school districts to assess and monitor the social-emotional learning needs of its students.

“Because it was not known exactly which behaviors set a child up for failure, or how to measure these skills, it was difficult to provide support,” said McKown. “Now, it will be possible to pinpoint which abilities a child needs to develop and offer help.”

According to researchers at Rush, the results of the studies could potentially help develop tests to assess for social-emotional learning that are easy to administer and scientifically sound.