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Abstract:

During the preschool years, children develop social-emotional skills – such as cooperation and self-regulation – which predict later academic achievement. Research shows that parents also play an important role in the development of these skills. However, it remains unclear how specific parenting practices may facilitate the relationship between social-emotional development and academic success. Often, children who grow up in low-income families are at risk for a variety of cognitive and emotional problems. Head Start is a federal program offered to low-income families that provides services, including early childhood education programs, to help offset these risks. Using Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory, this purpose of this dissertation was to explore the relationship between these three factors – social-emotional skills, academic achievement, and parenting practices – in an effort to better understand children who attend Head Start. There were three primary aims of this dissertation: (1) to demonstrate the inter-relatedness of several social-emotional skills for children who attended Head Start at age three; (2) understand the relationship between social-emotional skills during preschool and academic achievement at the end of kindergarten; and (3) understand how parent characteristics can influence the relationship between social-emotional skills in preschool and academic achievement by the end of kindergarten. Using a large, nationally representative data set from the Head Start program, several specific research questions were addressed through secondary data analysis. Findings from backwards regressions and moderation analysis indicate that there was a relationship between social-emotional skills at age three and academic achievement at age five, and that these relationships were sometimes moderated by parenting attributes.

Keywords: Social-emotional development; academic achievement; Head Start; parenting practices