

Writing About Values Boosts Grades for Middle Schoolers



By **Serena Gordon**

HealthDay Reporter

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THURSDAY, April 16 (HealthDay News) -- When children write about their values, these self-affirmation exercises can help boost grades, new research suggests.

However, the positive effect seems to only translate into higher marks for black students, according to the study, which appears in the April 17 issue of *Science*.

"This psychological intervention can have a long-term positive impact on children's academic performance and help to close the racial achievement gap," said study author Geoffrey Cohen, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

But, added Cohen, "This is not a silver bullet. The improvements came from the psychological interventions paired with good resources and good teachers."

For this study, Cohen and his colleagues had three groups of seventh-graders: European-American children, high-performing black children and low-performing black children. Each group was split into two, with half receiving the intervention and the other half serving as a control. Each group had between 65 and 75 children.

The intervention was a series of structured writing assignments where the kids were asked to select a value and then write about that value. Each writing assignment took about 15 minutes to complete, and was repeated between three and five times throughout a year.

"What we found is that African-Americans who received the intervention did better academically over the two-year study. Grades improved almost a half a grade point for low-performing African-Americans. The intervention consistently closed the racial achievement gap," said Cohen.

For blacks, the rate of remediation or grade repetition dropped from 18 percent to 5 percent for those children who received the intervention.

One of the ways this type of intervention helps children, according to Cohen, is by reducing stress. "If I have a moment to think about my family, to reflect on what matters to me during an important performance situation -- such as before a test -- the stressful performance situation becomes less stressful, and I think of myself as capable and good," he said.

This type of change in thinking might be especially important for minority students, he said, because they may feel that they'll be judged in a stereotypical way.

"African-Americans might have more stress in school, because they have the extra burden of a stereotype threat. They may worry that they'll be seen by teachers or peers through the negative lens of stereotyping," said Cohen.

And, more good news from this study was that the benefits of the intervention persisted for at least two years. Cohen said that's likely because the intervention breaks the negative downward spiral that's often seen in middle school.

"Because it's a recursive cycle, early outcomes make a huge difference. Recursive cycles are sensitive to initial outcomes, and early experiences have a lasting impact," he said.

Dr. Debra Hollander, chief of psychiatry at Providence Hospital in Southfield, Mich., wasn't surprised that the intervention helped some children improve their grades. "The kids were being asked to be more reflective, to think about what's important to them and what they value. This can help reset where they want to be, and it can empower them," she said.

But, Hollander said she was surprised that the positive effects were only seen in black children, and added that it's something that should be explored further in research.

What's important for parents and educators to take away from this study, she said, is that, "how we interact with one another, and the subtle messages we send, can have a huge impact on children."

For example, Hollander said, when children are struggling in school and their parents just sign them up for tutoring, the kids may interpret that to mean that they can't do well on their own. A better way, she suggested, is to ask your children what they want to accomplish and how you can help them get there.

More information

The Nemours Foundation offers advice on [building kids' self-esteem](#).