

Mental Health Predicts Better Academic Outcomes: A Longitudinal Study of Elementary School Students in Chile

J. Michael Murphy ; Javier Guzmán; Alyssa E. McCarthy; Ana María Squicciarini; Myriam George; Katia M. Canenguez; Erin C. Dunn; Lee Baer; Ariela Simonsohn.

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Abstract

The world's largest school-based mental health program, *Habilidades para la Vida* [Skills for Life (SFL)], has been operating on a national scale in Chile for 15 years. SFL's activities include using standardized measures to screen elementary school students and providing preventive workshops to students at risk for mental health problems. This paper used SFL's data on 37,397 students who were in first grade in 2009 and third grade in 2011 to ascertain whether first grade mental health predicted subsequent academic achievement and whether remission of mental health problems predicted improved academic outcomes. Results showed that mental health was a significant predictor of future academic performance and that, overall, students whose mental health improved between first and third grade made better academic progress than students whose mental health did not improve or worsened. Our findings suggest that school-based mental health programs like SFL may help improve students' academic outcomes.

Keywords

Children, Mental health, Screening, School-based services, Low-income population