

DECA Scores & Academic Achievement: The Connection is STRONG

Summary of a new study published in the Early Childhood Research Quarterly:
School readiness skills at age four predict academic achievement through 5th grade

By Susan Damico, M.A.



Exciting new research substantiates that a child's social and emotional strengths and skills in early childhood predict their future success in school and life. Let's be clear...researchers have been demonstrating this connection for decades, and so, DECA Program users may be wondering what is so new and exciting about this recent publication. The exciting element of the highlighted study is that the DECA was the tool used to measure the social and emotional health of preschoolers whose academic success through grade 5 shows the predictive validity of DECA scores.

Research Highlights

Large and diverse sample: The study included a large and ethnically diverse sample. There were 33,717 children in total and including 59% Latinx, 34% Black, and 7% White/other. With respect to socioeconomic status, the children were largely from low-income families. The fact that the sample represents a predominantly low-income, ethnically and linguistically diverse group supports research that includes important and underrepresented groups.

The unique contribution of social and emotional skills: The study explored the extent to which cognitive, language, fine motor, gross motor, and socioemotional skills at age four are related to GPA, standardized test scores, the likelihood of retention, and the likelihood of suspension in Kindergarten and key grades through Grade 5. While all of these dimensions of school readiness are correlated with achievement, scores from the DECA provided a unique contribution separate and apart from the other areas of school readiness. The authors write, “Of note, social skills were consistently, significantly related to academic outcomes through Grade 5, controlling for the academic readiness skills and demographic factors.”

Consistent results across time: Preschool social and emotional readiness skills were consistently related to outcomes from Kindergarten to 5th grade. In fact, teacher perceptions of behavioral concerns, as measured by the DECA, were more strongly related to Grade 5 GPA than language, fine and gross motor skills. Based on this data, the authors write, “Additionally, our findings imply that when interventions like high-quality early childhood education, and/or positive parent-child interactions boost a child’s school readiness skills, they are also increasing that child’s chance of overall success later on...Further, the significant impact of social emotional skills above and beyond academic skills suggest that programs aimed at boosting readiness should include social emotional programming in addition to traditional academic skills.”

If your early care and education program is implementing the DECA, or if your program is considering doing so, the results of this study support that this is a wise and important use of your limited time, energy, resources and overall capacity. It has never been more important for overburdened and overwhelmed staff to have guidance and direction about what matters most for children’s long-term health and happiness. Based on this latest research, DCRC calls for programs to prioritize what the DECA results are saying about children’s social and emotional skills, and use that information to promote self-regulation, initiative and healthy relationships. It has never been more clear – what you do NOW has implications FOREVER.

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