

The Effects of Childhood Social-Emotional Competence Growth Trajectories on Adolescent Mental Health: Mediational Pathways during the Middle School Transition

Background: Adolescent mental health problems are a global public health concern. In general, the transition from primary to secondary school is a critical period for youth well-being, as most young adolescents face heightened mental health risks due to multidimensional changes they undergo. Decades of research have demonstrated that social-emotional competence (SEC) is an important protective and promotive factor of healthy youth development that is also malleable particularly during primary school years. However, the current knowledge base on the development of childhood SEC and its link to adolescent mental health predominantly relies on studies conducted in Western societies.

Objective: Using nationally representative sample data on South Korean youth, the current study aims to address this gap by exploring how SEC develops in elementary school and how it predicts later mental health in middle school.

Methods: Using various structural equation modeling techniques, this study analyzed the five-wave data (2018-2022) of the Korean Child and Youth Panel Survey that followed the same individuals annually from Grades 4 to 8 (N=2,331; Mage = 10 to 14).

Results: Overall, Korean children's self-management and group collaboration, the two key factors of SEC, slightly declined across upper elementary school years (Grades 4 to 6). Three distinct profiles of SEC growth trajectories were identified, distinguished by initial and continued level-differences: Although the rates of growth varied slightly, 55.5% of children had consistently medium levels of both SEC factors, while 17.4% had consistently higher and 27.1% consistently lower levels of both SEC factors. More importantly, the identified SEC growth profiles significantly predicted depression and life satisfaction in Grade 8, statistically controlling for various covariates including the baseline measures of outcome variables. These effects were also found to be mediated through peer relationships and academic competence in Grade 7 (i.e., the first year in middle school).

Implications: The findings of this study can inform societal efforts to prevent mental health problems and promote well-being of Asian adolescents. Promoting SEC such as self-management and group collaboration skills during primary school years might lead to better mental health outcomes in adolescence, by facilitating the fulfillment of young adolescents' needs for peer relationships and academic competence.