Our goal was to learn how emotions and self-regulation relate to children’s relationships with teachers and friends, school participation, and academic achievement.

Since 2012, we:
• Studied 300 children as they progressed from kindergarten through second grade.
• Gathered over 78,000 observations of children’s emotions and engagement at school (the equivalent of 650 hours of data!)
• Collected surveys from parents and teachers to help us learn more about children’s behavior, relationships, and emotions.
• Completed one-on-one assessments with children each semester, learning even more about their feelings about school, peer relationships, self-regulation skills, and performance in math and reading.
• Worked with a subsample of 100 children who wore an Actigraph for six days, which is a watch-like device that measured sleep at night and activity throughout the day.

Key Finding #1: Self-regulation and positive emotion at school are related to higher academic performance and the development of healthy relationships.

Self-regulation, which is the ability to control one’s behavior, emotions, and attention, is a key tool that supports children’s academic success by helping them stay engaged in the classroom, avoid conflict with peers and teachers, express emotions appropriately, and focus on reading and math assignments.

In our study, in kindergarten, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, children with strong self-regulation skills had higher reading and math achievement and received higher grades in kindergarten and 1st grade. Figure 1 shows that there were medium to strong relationships between self-regulation and academic achievement. Self-regulation was particularly important for children who expressed a lot of emotion at school. For emotional children, those with high self-regulation skills were more engaged in class than those with low self-regulation skills.

Children’s positive emotion at school was an important predictor of well-being. Children who expressed positive emotion more frequently and intensely at school were less likely to be rated by parents and teachers as experiencing mild symptoms of depression or anxiety. Additionally, we found that children who expressed more positive emotion in kindergarten were more likely to succeed academically and engage in classroom activities in first grade, partly because they built high-quality relationships with their peers and teachers in kindergarten.

However, Figure 2 shows that children’s expressions of positive emotion in the classroom decreased significantly between kindergarten and 1st grade, indicating that children may need more support at school in order to experience and express positive emotion in the classroom. Positive emotions, such as happiness or joy, support children’s school achievement, academic motivation, and classroom engagement.
Children who build high-quality relationships with teachers and peers are more likely to succeed in school. Findings indicate that early relationships with peers and teachers in kindergarten are critical for the development of later academic and social skills. Moreover, children with certain risk factors, such as early language difficulties, may experience additional benefit from close relationships in the classroom.

Our study found that children who were more accepted by their peers in kindergarten experienced increases in self-regulation and decreases in negative emotion during the academic year.

Building peer acceptance by the spring of kindergarten may be particularly important for children who are struggling with oral language skills. As can be seen in Figure 3, for children with low vocabulary skills, peer acceptance in kindergarten strongly predicted academic achievement in first grade, whereas children who started school with high vocabulary skills tended to have high achievement regardless of their peer relationships in kindergarten. This same pattern was found for engagement.

Findings also support the importance of promoting healthy relationships for children's academic success. Children, who had higher quality relationships with teachers and peers by the spring of kindergarten were more likely to have higher academic achievement and were more engaged in the classroom one year later. These findings illustrate the importance of children's relationship at school for later academic achievement.

Key Finding #2: Relationships with teachers & peers are important for school success.

Key Finding #3: Getting enough sleep helps children with low self-regulation to do well in school.

Sleep is important for school-aged children because it supports many areas of growth and development. The National Sleep Foundation recommends that children between the ages of 6-13 get at least 9 hours of sleep per night; however, 23% of children in the United States receive less than 8 hours of sleep per night.

Project PEERS found that sleep is important for early academic performance, particularly if children struggle with self-regulation skills. As shown in Figure 4, children who experienced poor sleep were at risk for lower reading and math achievement only if they did not have strong regulation skills, whereas children with high self-regulation tended to perform well regardless of their sleep habits. This may occur because children with low self-regulation skills are not be able to attend to information or regulate their behavior in the classroom in order to overcome the challenges of poor sleep on school performance.

Visit Project PEERS website for a complete list of links https://thesanfordschool.asu.edu/peers/parents

A list of social emotional books for kids can be found at: http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/booklist.pdf