Adolescents spend more time in school than in any other context (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000), and substantial research suggests that feeling connected to one’s school during adolescence promotes concurrent and long-term positive youth development (Resnick et al., 1997), including fewer behavioral problems, greater emotional well-being (Eccles et al., 1993), and better academic outcomes (Osterman, 2000). Students who feel connected to school like going to school, they like their teachers and fellow students, and they are committed to learning, completing their assignments, and doing well. While most elementary school students feel connected to their schools, school connectedness generally begins to decline in middle school (Eccles et al., 1993). By high school, as many as 40–60% of all youth—urban, suburban, and rural—report being disconnected from school (Klem & Connell, 2004), indicating that they do not like their teachers, lack interest in school, and do not find schoolwork meaningful or engaging. This diminished connectedness to school places students at risk for maladaptive development, both in adolescence and into adulthood. Consequently, there is strong need for preventive interventions that maintain and increase levels of school connectedness in middle schools and high schools, thus promoting long-term positive development.

In the academic literature, school connectedness is known by various other phrases, such as school attachment or school bonding (Blum, 2005; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). In general, school connectedness consists of two primary and interdependent components: (a) attachment, characterized by close affective relationships with those at school; and (b) commitment, characterized by an investment in school and doing well in school. This social bond to the school influences youths’ behaviors through the establishment of a student’s “stake” in conforming to the norms and values of the school (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996).

With this conceptualization in mind, this article briefly reviews the literature on school connectedness, focusing on three areas: (a) the implications of school connectedness for youth development, (b) predictors of school connectedness, and (c) the importance of school connectedness as a focus of prevention.

**IMPLICATIONS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

School connectedness is associated with a number of behavioral, emotional, and academic outcomes in adolescence. In general, researchers tend to view school connectedness on a continuum, with higher school connectedness associated with good outcomes and lower school connectedness associated with poor outcomes. With respect to behavior in adolescence, youth who feel connected to their school are less likely to engage in delinquent or violent behavior, to drink alcohol, and to use drugs. Moreover, youth who feel connected to their school are less likely to initiate sexual activity at earlier ages, a risk factor for teen pregnancy and contracting sexually transmitted infections (see Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Catalano et al., 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004).

School connectedness is also linked to mental health and emotional well-being during adolescence. In general, individuals who report low school connectedness are at risk for a number of mental health problems (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Students who feel connected to school report lower levels of physical and emotional distress during adolescence compared to youth with less school connectedness (Resnick et al., 1997). Youth with strong school connectedness report fewer depressive symptoms in late adolescence and are also less likely to experience suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide (Resnick et al., 1997; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998).
Finally, as would be expected, adolescents who feel more connected to their schools show better academic outcomes. Feeling connected to school in adolescence is associated with higher levels of academic motivation and lower levels of classroom misbehavior (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Students with high school connectedness also have higher grades and are more likely to graduate from high school (Lonczak et al., 2002; Osterman, 2000).

While there is substantial evidence that school connectedness is related to behavioral, emotional, and academic outcomes, it is often difficult for research to determine cause and effect in these associations. Longitudinal research helps provide more conclusive evidence that school connectedness, in fact, predicts positive development. Longitudinal studies measure school connectedness at a time point prior to the developmental outcomes of interest, which are assessed months or years later. While not a definitive proof of causality, a longitudinal study design provides more cogent evidence of a causal link.

Longitudinal evidence of the positive effects of school connectedness has been documented in both middle and high school. In one study, middle school students who reported low school connectedness showed increases in conduct problems, such as delinquent behavior, one year later (Loukas, Ripperger-Suhler, & Horton, 2009). Another study showed that low school connectedness in late middle school was associated with greater anxiety/depressive symptoms and marijuana use in high school and one year post high school, and middle school students with low social connectedness were less likely to complete high school (Bond et al., 2007). Research from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative study that follows nearly 60,000 students (grades 8 through 12), found that a sense of belonging to school predicts lower depression and social rejection, fewer school problems, greater optimism, and higher grades one year later (Anderman, 2002).

The fact that school connectedness is directly linked to positive outcomes and acts as a buffer against other risks makes it an important target for prevention. Yet, while there is substantial evidence from longitudinal studies that high levels of school connectedness are linked to subsequent positive outcomes, some research does suggest that the association between school connectedness and youth adjustment is also bidirectional. For example, one study (Loukas et al., 2009) found that lower levels of school connectedness in grades 6 and 7 were associated with greater subsequent conduct problems one year later, but the opposite was also true: greater conduct problems at grades 6 and 7 were also associated with lower school connectedness one year later. This suggests a feedback loop between school connectedness and problem behavior. Low school connectedness increases the chance that students develop conduct problems, which further lowers a sense of school connectedness, which in turn leads to more conduct problems. If this is the case, measures that prevent a disconnection from school may serve to break this cycle.

There is also evidence that school connectedness can help promote positive development in the face of other life stressors. For example, it is well documented that low-quality relationships with parents in early adolescence (grades 6 and 7) are associated with behavior problems such as fighting, lying, and cheating. However, among youth with high levels of school connectedness, low-quality relationships with parents are not related to subsequent behavioral problems (Loukas, Roalson, & Herrera, 2010). This suggests that school connectedness can act as a buffer against other risk factors to promote positive youth development. The fact that school connectedness is directly linked to positive outcomes and acts as a buffer against other risks makes it an important target for prevention.

**PREDICTORS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS IN ADOLESCENCE**

Targeting school connectedness with preventive efforts requires knowing the mechanisms that contribute to higher levels of school connectedness. By targeting these mechanisms with preventive interventions, we can work to increase school connectedness, and in turn, impact subsequent development. The school environment clearly impacts students’ feelings of connectedness, but parents and peers play important roles in encouraging strong school connection among adolescents as well (Steinberg, 1996).

Several characteristics of schools and classrooms have been shown to promote feelings of school connectedness: (a) high academic standards coupled with strong teacher support; (b) an environment in which adult and student relationships are positive and respectful; and (c) a physically and emotionally safe school environment. Positive classroom management, opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, tolerant disciplinary policies, and small school size have also been linked to increased school connectedness among students (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Teaching methods including a combination of proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning have been found to increase school connectedness of students (Abbott et al., 1998). In contrast, lack of safety in school,
developed approaches to school connectedness may play an especially important role in promoting positive youth outcomes. These findings are consistent with prior research that indicates school connectedness predicts positive youth development and can also buffer against risk to promote positive development.

Results from these two RHC intervention studies suggest that levels of school connectedness can be improved—and that these increases can lead to subsequent positive development in multiple domains. An important message of these interventions is that a comprehensive approach that targets teachers, parents, and youths works to produce better outcomes. In addition to making changes
in the school environment that promote positive school behavior (i.e., increasing teacher effectiveness and setting high standards for all students), parents can also increase connectedness to school by stressing the importance of school, and peers can influence school connectedness by their own behaviors and beliefs. That is, parents, peers, and teachers can independently and jointly make active changes that will increase students’ connectedness to school and promote positive development across adolescence and into adulthood.

CONCLUSIONS

By high school, a large proportion of youth are disconnected from school which can lead to a broad range of behavioral, emotional, and academic problems. Improving school connectedness is, therefore, an important issue for schools and a target for preventive efforts. The U.S. Department of Education (2005) has made online training in this area available to school administrators (see http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/connect/). Tested and effective preventive interventions aimed at increasing adolescents’ feelings of connection to their schools are available and make it possible to promote positive behavioral and emotional adjustment while also improving academic outcomes.

References


