

Smoothly sailing into elementary school for children with autism spectrum disorder

16 January 2017, by Sarah Nightingale



team have spent the past four years studying 200 children with ASD as they move from pre-kindergarten into [elementary school](#), tracking student-teacher relationships, children's emotional behaviors, and parental support. Children in the study ranged from 4 to 7 years old, with about 85 percent of them having what professionals call "[high functioning autism](#)," meaning they don't also have intellectual disabilities. The results are newly published or forthcoming in five new papers in top journals in the field, including the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*; *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*; and *Remedial and Special Education*.

Educators at UC Riverside recently completed a 4-year study designed to help young children with ASD in their early school years. Credit: ISTOCK

Do you remember a teacher who changed your life for the better? Many people do, and scores of studies suggest that positive student-teacher relationships are one of the best predictors of children's academic success.

But young children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are less likely to develop positive relationships with their teachers than typically developing kids do, according to a new study by researchers at the University of California, Riverside and the University of Massachusetts, Boston. This exacerbates an already challenging transition into elementary [school](#) for these children. The researchers hope that by understanding—and ultimately improving—these relationships, educators can support children with ASD in their early school years and help them make long-term gains in their academic, behavioral, and social adjustment.

This study, "Smooth Sailing," has been supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. UCR's Jan Blacher and her

Blacher, a Distinguished Professor of Education and Director of the SEARCH Family Autism Resource Center in UCR's Graduate School of Education, said that behavior problems and social skills deficits, which accompany many ASD diagnoses, are one reason that students and their teachers fail to build strong mutual relationships. Externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, increase conflict, while internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety, can reduce the closeness between teachers and students.

"When children with autism come to school, they are already struggling to make social and emotional connections, and when that affects their relationships with teachers it feels like a double whammy," said Blacher, who has shown in previous research that many children with ASD feel lonely at school. "A major goal that follows from this research is educating and supporting teachers so they understand how important their interactions with children are during this transitional time."

Blacher's group also noted that one cause of behavior outbursts or other instances of "acting out" during the early school years may be an inability for children to control their anger or emotions. Such poor emotional regulation is common in children with ASD.

Blacher notes: "Many intervention programs used by schools focus heavily on behavior management, but we found that supporting emotional regulation is an important tactic in helping children develop interpersonal relationships and complete school activities. Helping children with ASD take charge of their emotions before they manifest as behavioral problems will go a long way in helping students build positive relationships with their teachers."

Blacher said the team also studied parents' roles in helping children make the transition into school, finding that shared reading increased children's knowledge of contextual language and vocabulary.

"These shared learning experiences are social in nature and help support children as they encounter similar activities in the classroom. Early literacy is a strength for children with high functioning ASD, so this should be encouraged, as it gives the [children](#) something to be proud of. One hopes that increasing literacy skills will also lead to better classroom adjustment and, in turn, to more positive teacher-student relationships," Blacher said.

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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