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Stipek study shows good social skills linked to good reading skills

'Please and thank you' lead to improved reading skills

February 10, 2006

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

By Jennifer Harper

The key to raising competent young readers may not lie in fancy tutors, flash cards or computerized phonetic programs. It could be a matter of manners and civility.

Here's another reason to raise a polite child: Good social skills have been linked to good reading skills among the very young, according to a study released yesterday by Stanford University School of Education.

"Children's social behavior can promote or undermine their learning," said lead author Sarah Miles. "And their academic performance may have implications for their social behavior."

She found that those old-fashioned "pro-social skills" -- the first-grader who is helpful or kind to peers, for example -- can predict how well that child will read by the third grade. Alternatively, little ones with low reading skills are more likely to end up with highly aggressive behavior by the time they reach the fifth grade.

Such reasoning is not lost on educators across the country.

The state of Michigan, for example, began offering elementary-school grants this year based on the premise that good behavior leads to good reading. Fifty schools are set to receive portions of the Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative, which trains teachers to coax civility out of their young charges to better the learning environment.

Cole Elementary, a public school in Norwell, Mass., has adopted "buddy time" between kindergarten and fifth-grade readers that "promotes improved behavior and manners, fosters maturity and instills self-confidence to both age groups," said one enthusiastic parent.

Ohio, meanwhile, is exploring what some officials have tagged "the culture of reading," a statewide effort to persuade parents to take a civilized 30-minute reading break as good example for their children.



In her own research, Stanford's Ms. Miles linked behavior and reading skills after gauging reading comprehension skills among 400 youngsters from kindergarten through fifth grade in schools across three states, from 1996 to 2002. In a follow-up, she asked their teachers to evaluate the children's behaviors with a questionnaire:

Were they cooperative? Did they comfort other children or make bullying remarks? The analysis found direct correlations between improved literacy and good behavior.

"Social development and academic development are inextricably connected," Ms. Miles said. "The findings illustrate how problems in one domain at school may lead to problems in another."

Many Americans agree. A recent survey of just fewer than 1,000 people by the Vermont-based Emily Post Institute found 71 percent of respondents think school children should be required to address their teachers as "sir" or "ma'am."

The group also noted, "Respect has to be earned and given back to the children. We can't demand it of children and then not respect them ourselves."
