

The Development of Academic Coping in Children and Youth: A Comprehensive Review and Critique

eTale 2022



This review synthesised findings from 66 studies that focus on academic coping among children and youth from 2nd to 12th grade. Process studies suggest several pathways through which coping can contribute to academic success: by promoting persistence, mediating the effects of personal or interpersonal resources, and buffering students' performance from academic risk.

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Source: Skinner, E. A. & Saxton, E. A. (2019). The development of academic coping in children and youth: A comprehensive review and critique. *Developmental Review*, 53,100870, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2019.100870>

This review synthesised findings from 66 studies that focus on academic coping among children and youth from 2nd to 12th grade. Results indicated that multiple approaches to academic coping predict educational performance and functioning, especially motivationally-relevant outcomes. Process studies suggest several pathways through which coping can contribute to academic success: by promoting persistence, mediating the

effects of personal or interpersonal resources, and buffering students' performance from academic risk. At every age, adaptive coping was more likely for students who experienced higher levels of personal and interpersonal assets, whereas maladaptive coping was higher among students with elevated levels of personal vulnerabilities and lower levels of interpersonal supports.

- To fulfil their educational potential, children need to learn how to deal constructively with the challenges and setbacks that they will inevitably encounter in their academic work.
- The notion of a coping repertoire presumes that students can show a range of coping responses over the arc of any stressful episode—from helplessness to comfort-seeking to strategising
- The profile or balance of students' ways of dealing with stressors determines whether their reactions will be adaptive or maladaptive over time.
- Conceptually, research on academic coping is found at the intersection of three large and loosely related fields: coping, education, and developmental science.

Core ways of coping in the academic domain

- *Adaptive*: problem-solving, information seeking, support seeking, self-reliance, accommodation
- *Maladaptive*: escape, helplessness, social isolation, delegation, submission, opposition



The study

The aim of this review was to highlight the importance of research on the development of academic coping. It included 66 investigations that examined academic coping among children and youth. Different ways of academic coping used across studies were classified into approximately 12 core categories.

Research questions:

1. Does coping play a role in students' academic functioning and success, and does this role differ for children and youth of different ages/in different grades?
2. What strategies do students use to cope with academic stressors, and does this pattern change as children and youth get older/move to higher grades?
3. What kinds of personal factors contribute to adaptive and maladaptive coping, and do these differ for children and youth of different ages/in different grades?
4. What kinds of interpersonal and classroom factors contribute to coping, and do these differ for children and youth of different ages/in different grades?



Findings

Does coping play a role in students' academic functioning and success?

- There were positive links between academic performance (such as grade point average) and one type of adaptive coping (problem solving), and for profiles that combine multiple adaptive families of coping.
- Multiple negative connections with academic performance were found for two maladaptive families of coping;

namely, escape and opposition, and for profiles combining several maladaptive families.

- In general, findings indicated that students who utilised coping approaches from several adaptive families (specifically, problem-solving, support-seeking, self-reliance, and profiles that combined multiple adaptive families) showed higher levels of most markers of positive functioning, including persistence and re-engagement in the face of setbacks, self-regulated learning, feelings of effectiveness in dealing with stress, use of deep processing while learning, and life satisfaction.
- Students utilising adaptive coping also showed lower levels of many indicators of poor functioning, especially giving up, burnout, and psychopathology.
- Taken as a whole, the connections between adaptive coping and academic functioning demonstrated a clear pattern of global age/grade differences: most of the significant correlations were concentrated in studies of children in Grades 3–8 (ages 8–14 years).
- Cumulatively, findings suggested that signs of poor academic functioning were more likely to be found among students who utilised coping from three maladaptive families: escape, social isolation, and opposition, as well as profiles combining multiple maladaptive ways.
- Longitudinal studies found evidence that coping can predict changes in academic performance or functioning over time.
- Initial levels of coping from all of the adaptive families (as well as adaptive profiles) predicted improvements in motivational functioning, feelings of effectiveness, and exam performance over time.
- Findings for maladaptive methods of coping suggested that in general, initial levels of maladaptive coping (as well as maladaptive profiles) predicted decline in motivational functioning and feelings of effectiveness.
- Support was identified for the notion that the effects

of coping are exerted on school grades through the impact on students' persistence and whether they give up when they encounter academic difficulties.

- Problem-solving or adaptive profiles of coping were found to mediate the positive effects of: ongoing engagement, challenge appraisals, positive emotions, classroom structure and peer support, emotion management, and mastery of goal orientations.
- Maladaptive coping was found to be a pathway through which other factors exerted a negative impact on students' performance or potentiated burnout. These factors included high levels of disaffection, negative affect, and avoidance goal orientations, as well as low levels of classroom structure.

What strategies do students use to cope with academic stressors?

- Students typically responded to academic difficulties with adaptive strategies, especially ways of coping from problem-solving families (such as direct action and strategising), support-seeking (such as seeking comfort from parents), and information-seeking (such as going to teachers for help) as well as productive families, such as accommodation (positive reappraisal, commitment) and self-reliance (self-encouragement or positive emotion regulation).
- In general, students were less likely to rely on coping from maladaptive families, but when they did they tended to use escape (especially wishful thinking, but also minimisation and avoidance) or submission (such as self-derogation, self-blame, and rumination). Some methods from other unproductive families were used, such as helplessness, social isolation, delegation, and (most rarely) opposition (blaming others and venting).
- Across the elementary school years of middle childhood, problem-solving was generally high and was shown to

increase. During early adolescence, problem-solving then declined. Starting in middle adolescence, problem-solving again began to increase.

- During the elementary and middle school years, utilisation of support-seeking remained high and relatively stable. Starting in mid-adolescence, support-seeking began to increase and continued increasing to the end of high school.
- Although findings were sometimes scant or inconsistent, evidence was generally found that demonstrated multidirectionality, in that different ways of coping seemed to follow different normative pathways.
- During the elementary school years of middle childhood, most trends indicated a constructive balance of high adaptive and low maladaptive coping, accompanied by some improvements; most notably, increases in problem-solving and decreases in two maladaptive ways of coping—escape and opposition.
- Starting in early adolescence, students' use of adaptive methods of coping (such as problem-solving and accommodation) began to decrease, while maladaptive methods began to increase, especially escape, submission, and opposition.
- By mid-adolescence, these problematic developmental trends ended; most methods of coping plateaued showing stability across high school, and two adaptive ways of coping (problem-solving and support-seeking) again began to improve.

What kind of personal factors contribute to adaptive and maladaptive coping?

- The most consistent correlates of problem-solving were markers of perceived academic competence, including perceived control over stressors, overall academic perceived control, scholastic competence, self-efficacy, and agency for effort and ability.

- Consistent connections with problem-solving were found for markers of motivation, including mastery goals, intrinsic motivation (including preference for challenge and curiosity), and multiple indicators of relative autonomy and value, including introjected and identified self-regulation.
- Markers of belonging or attachment were correlated positively with problem-solving.
- Support-seeking was higher for students who evinced higher levels of autonomy, aspiration, belonging, engagement, positive affect, and appraisal that combined relatedness, competence, and autonomy; lower levels were found among students who reported more catastrophising appraisals, emotional reactivity, and anxiety/fear.
- Profiles of adaptive coping were also positively correlated with appraisals of controllability, perceived competence, mastery and performance goals, intrinsic motivation, value, self-esteem, and positive emotions. They were negatively correlated with attribution of failure to stable causes and work avoidance goals.
- Escape was utilised more often by students who evinced higher levels of negative emotions, lower levels of academic competence/control or higher external control; escape coping was also found to be more likely for students who showed higher levels of stress, disaffection, catastrophising, and neuroticism, and less likely for relative autonomy, belonging, global self-worth, positive emotion, engagement, and the positive personality characteristics of openness and agreeableness.
- Submission coping was higher for students who reported higher levels of negative emotion and lower levels of self-esteem, belonging, and engagement, and (less consistently) lower academic competence and higher maladaptive control. Relative autonomy was consistently lower for students who relied more on submission coping.
- Opposition coping was more likely to be utilised by

students reporting lower levels of perceived control or competence and higher levels of unknown and external control, lower self-esteem, and higher negative emotions. Opposition coping was also related to higher levels of boredom, catastrophising appraisals, and disaffection, and lower levels of mastery goals, task value, belonging, positive affect, engagement, and (less consistently) relative autonomy. Similar patterns were identified for helplessness, social isolation, and delegation.

- Students with motivational assets (such as higher levels of perceived competence, intrinsic motivation, valuing school, relative autonomy, belongingness, and engagement) were more likely to use adaptive methods of dealing with challenges and setbacks and less likely to rely on maladaptive methods of coping.
- Students with motivational or personality vulnerabilities (such as higher levels of disaffection, threat/harm appraisals, catastrophising, external control, emotional reactivity, or neuroticism) were more likely to rely on maladaptive methods of coping and less likely to cope adaptively.
- Girls used higher levels of support-seeking than boys.

What kinds of interpersonal and classroom factors contribute to coping?

- Problem-solving coping was more likely to be utilised by students who perceived goal structures as more mastery-oriented and who reported more teacher support expressed through more supportive teacher-student relationships, more teacher involvement, structure and autonomy support, and higher levels of classroom structure.
- In terms of parenting, problem-solving coping was higher for students whose parents held more mastery-oriented goals and whose families and parents provided more support for learning and motivation, and where parents

were authoritative.

- Support-seeking was more likely to be utilised by students who reported more positive relationships with their teachers, higher levels of classroom structure, more family support for motivation and learning, peer support for learning, and more general peer support.
- Higher levels of escape were identified for students whose teachers were considered more likely to hinder their motivational need, whose classrooms were organised around ability goals, whose teachers and parents were more focused on performance goals, and whose mothers were more controlling and provided either positive or negative opinion that was conditional on their academic success.
- Lower levels of escape were identified for students who experienced greater structure from their parents and teachers and more support from their peers.
- Students who utilised higher levels of submission coping viewed their teachers and parents as more likely to prioritise performance goals. Moreover, they perceived their teachers to have more behaviours likely to hinder their motivational needs, and their parents as providing less structure and more positive opinions that were conditional on academic success.
- Students who showed higher levels of opposition coping viewed their parents and teachers as more focused on performance goals, and their teachers less focused on mastery goals, more likely to obstruct their motivational needs, and with less warmth.
- Students who relied more on opposition coping viewed their parents as more neglectful and less authoritative.
- In general, studies indicated that students who experienced support in school (via close student-teacher relationships, positive teacher context, high classroom structure, teacher provision of involvement, structure, and autonomy support, or teacher mastery goal orientations) or at home (via positive parenting

contexts, parental involvement, structure, autonomy support, authoritative parenting, parental mastery goals, or support for learning) as well as from peers were more likely to use adaptive coping profiles, especially problem-solving and information-seeking, and to some extent support-seeking.

- They were also less likely to rely on maladaptive profiles of coping, especially escape and opposition, and to some extent, submission.

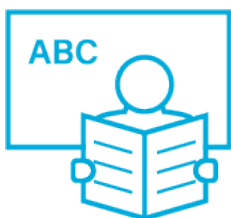
Summary

- Students who scored higher on two indicators of adaptive coping (problem-solving and adaptive profiles) that combined multiple constructive methods of coping, were more likely to achieve higher grades and achievement test scores. They were also likely to demonstrate better academic functioning, including higher levels of engagement, interest, feelings of effectiveness in dealing with school-related stress, adjustment to school transition, use of deeper learning strategies, pro-school behaviours, persistence, optimism, well-being, and life satisfaction.
- Students who scored higher on four indicators of maladaptive coping (escape, social isolation, opposition, and maladaptive profiles) were more likely to demonstrate lower academic performance and were more likely to evince poorer academic functioning, including higher levels of disengagement, effort withdrawal, feelings of ineffectiveness, difficulty adapting to school transitions, use of surface learning strategies, giving up in the face of difficulties, school-related burnout, and suspensions from school. (These connections held across grade levels and ages.)
- Students generally responded to stressors with adaptive

strategies, primarily from the families of problem-solving, information-seeking (help-seeking), and support-seeking (comfort-seeking), as well as from other productive families such as accommodation (positive reappraisal) or self-reliance (self-encouragement).

- Students were less likely to rely on coping from maladaptive families; however, when they do they tend to use escape or submission (self-blame), and sometimes helplessness, social isolation, or delegation, and (most rarely) opposition, such as blaming others.
- From ages 7–11 years, children demonstrated high and steady levels of adaptive coping, with some indications of improvement toward the end of elementary school. At the same time, children showed relatively low levels of maladaptive coping, which may decrease even further as students reach the end of childhood.
- Early adolescence (ages 11–14 years) brings disruption in smooth functioning and adaptive coping declines. At the same time, reliance on maladaptive coping increases.
- During middle and late adolescence (ages 15–18 years), both adaptive and maladaptive coping seem to stabilise.
- In general, students cope more productively when they evince higher levels of perceived competence and control, relative autonomy, belonging, self-esteem, engagement, and mastery goals as well as lower levels of catastrophising appraisals, disaffection, and feelings of stress, anxiety, or threat.
- Students cope more adaptively when they see their peers, teachers, and parents as more focused on mastery goals; view their relationships with teachers as positive and with their parents and teachers providing higher levels of motivational and learning supports; experience their parents as authoritarian while providing unconditional positive regard; and their peers providing higher levels of support for learning and general support.
- Compared to boys, girls tend to utilise more support-seeking when they encounter academic difficulties.

- Academic coping has the potential to buffer students' academic outcomes from the otherwise deleterious effects of some stressful life experiences.
- Adaptive coping may provide a motivational advantage (including increased persistence or coping efficacy) whereas maladaptive coping may act as a motivational liability that contributes to discouragement and withdrawal of effort.
- Students' coping can predict changes in their academic performance and functioning over time; for example, adaptive coping predicts increased persistence and reduced likelihood of giving up.
- The most constructive ways to cope can be found among members of the problem-solving family, most likely because academic stressors are typically controllable and amenable to tactics such as acting directly, strategising, and exerting effort.
- Other adaptive ways of coping (such as information-seeking and self-reliance) are consistent correlates of good academic functioning.
- In terms of maladaptive families, the most consistent connections with poorer functioning are found with the methods of coping utilised least often at every age; namely, those from the 'opposition' family.



Implications

- Middle or late elementary school may represent important developmental windows for interventions to enhance students' personal motivational resources and to prevent the decline in coping for early adolescents over the

transition to middle school.

- Researchers and practitioners should examine the 'deep structure' of classroom culture closely to understand how schools typically frame and respond to academic 'problems' and 'failures' in relation to coping.
- Reconsideration of all aspects of the student experience is advised, including the messages children and youth receive about learning goals, the creation of a sense of common purpose, the nature of the academic work students are assigned, penalties for mistakes and failure, the role of social comparison and competition, whether assignments and exams can be retaken, and how to build the trust and quality of students' interpersonal relationships with teachers, friends, and classmates.
- A developmental approach to coping suggests that interventions should not aim to shield children and adolescents from academic stressors. Instead, educational and intervention programmes should be designed to carefully expose students to demands and challenges that are developmentally calibrated and individually manageable in nurturing contexts where multiple supports are available.
- Academic stressors can provide opportunities for students to build their 'coping muscles', developing a flexible repertoire of effective tools for dealing with problems and setbacks while also learning how to coordinate coping with situational requirements and the support of social partners. This may be especially important for students to learn how to recover and benefit from failures.