

Associations Between Mental Health and Attendance Among 6th Grade Students

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Abstract

Maintaining mental health and attending school regularly are important during early adolescence. This period is particularly critical for developmental processes, including the development of a sense of responsibility and other social skills. Recent reviews have indicated there is a positive relationship between anxiety and attendance problems in students. Thus, it is important for researchers to look at how negative mental health symptoms (depression, anxiety, hyperactivity, and attention problems) are associated with various types of school absences (excused, unexcused, and tardies). The hypothesis was there would be a positive relationship between poor mental health and increased absences among early adolescents. Participants included 316 sixth grade students from an urban area in Illinois, who participated in a survey that examined both mental health and attendance rates. Linear regression analyses were conducted in SPSS software to examine the relationship between mental health and types of absences. Results indicated students had high levels of negative mental health symptoms; 27.3% of students displayed clinical levels of depression. Students also exhibited high rates of absences. On average, students missed 3.45 days of unexcused absences. Regression analyses indicated higher levels of hyperactivity symptoms were associated with more unexcused absences ($B = .44, p = .01$) and tardies ($B = .87, p < .001$). Attention problems were also associated with more tardies ($B = .76, p < .001$). No other significant relationships were found. This school and other urban middle schools can use these findings to support student's specific mental health needs to increase attendance.

Keywords: Mental Health, Attendance, Middle School

Associations Between Mental Health and Attendance Problems Among 6th Grade Students

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INTRODUCTION

Concern Between Mental Health & Attendance

Maintaining good mental health and attending school is seemingly important during early adolescence. Previous researchers have found children who have difficulties attending school may be at greater risk for developing poor social skills and developing mental health issues (Dube & Orpinas, 2009).

Mental Health Prevalence

An alarming number of children are diagnosed with behavioral and mental health problems

- 7.1% of children ages 3-17 were diagnosed with anxiety (Ghandour et al., 2018)
- 3.2% of children ages 3-17 were diagnosed with depression (Ghandour et al., 2018)
- 9.4% of children ages 2-17 were diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Danielson et al., 2018)
- These numbers do not account for the number of children who have not been diagnosed or who display high or at-risk symptoms for these mental health and behavioral difficulties

Previous Research

Several studies have found there is a significant association between poor mental health (i.e., anxiety, depression, ADHD) and attendance problems within schools (Finning et al., 2019; Glomb et al., 2006; Guevera et al., 2013; McCarthy et al., 2018).

However, to our knowledge, no studies have looked at these mental health symptoms in relation to various attendance problems among middle school students

Current Study

Our study furthers this area of research to examine what associations exist between negative mental health and behavioral health symptoms (anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, and attention problems) and attendance problems (excused and unexcused absences and truancy) among a sample of sixth grade students.

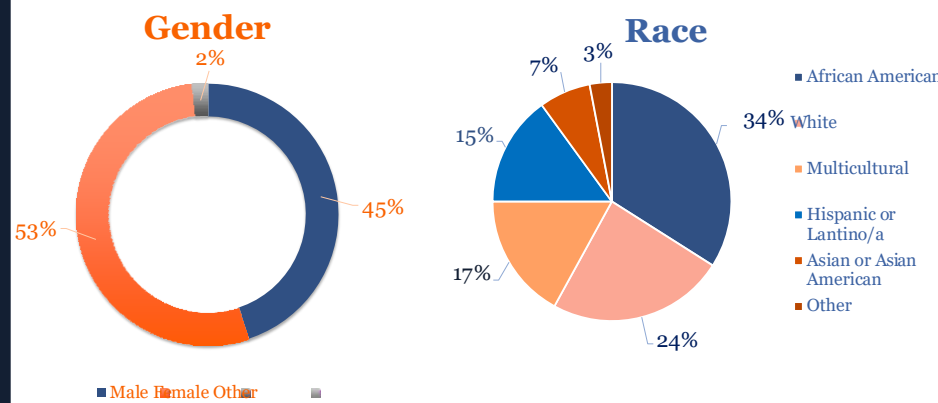
Hypothesis:

It was hypothesized there would be a positive relationship between poor mental health and attendance problems among a sample of early adolescents in the sixth grade

In other words, more mental and behavioral health concerns would be associated with more attendance problems.

METHOD

Participants: 316 sixth grade students from a middle school in an urban area in central Illinois participated in the study. Demographics included:



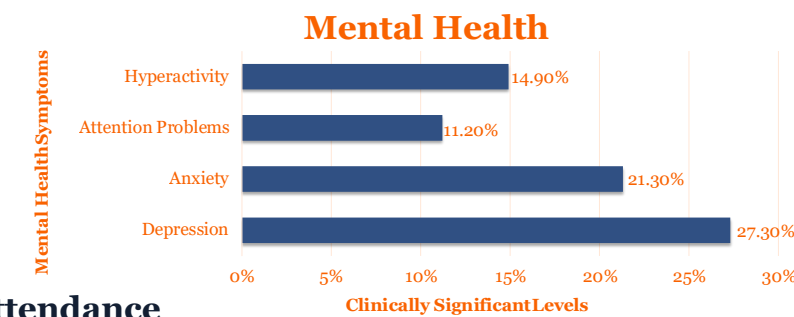
Procedure: Students completed assessments on tablets. An institutional review board approved all study procedures, including obtaining passive parental consent and active student assent.

Data Analysis: Linear regressions were conducted using SPSS software to examine the relationship between mental and behavioral health (i.e., depression, anxiety, attention, and hyperactivity problems; *independent variables*) and attendance outcomes (i.e., unexcused, and excused absences, truancy; *dependent variables*)

RESULTS

Mental Health

There were high levels of negative mental health symptoms displayed among these students: N=316



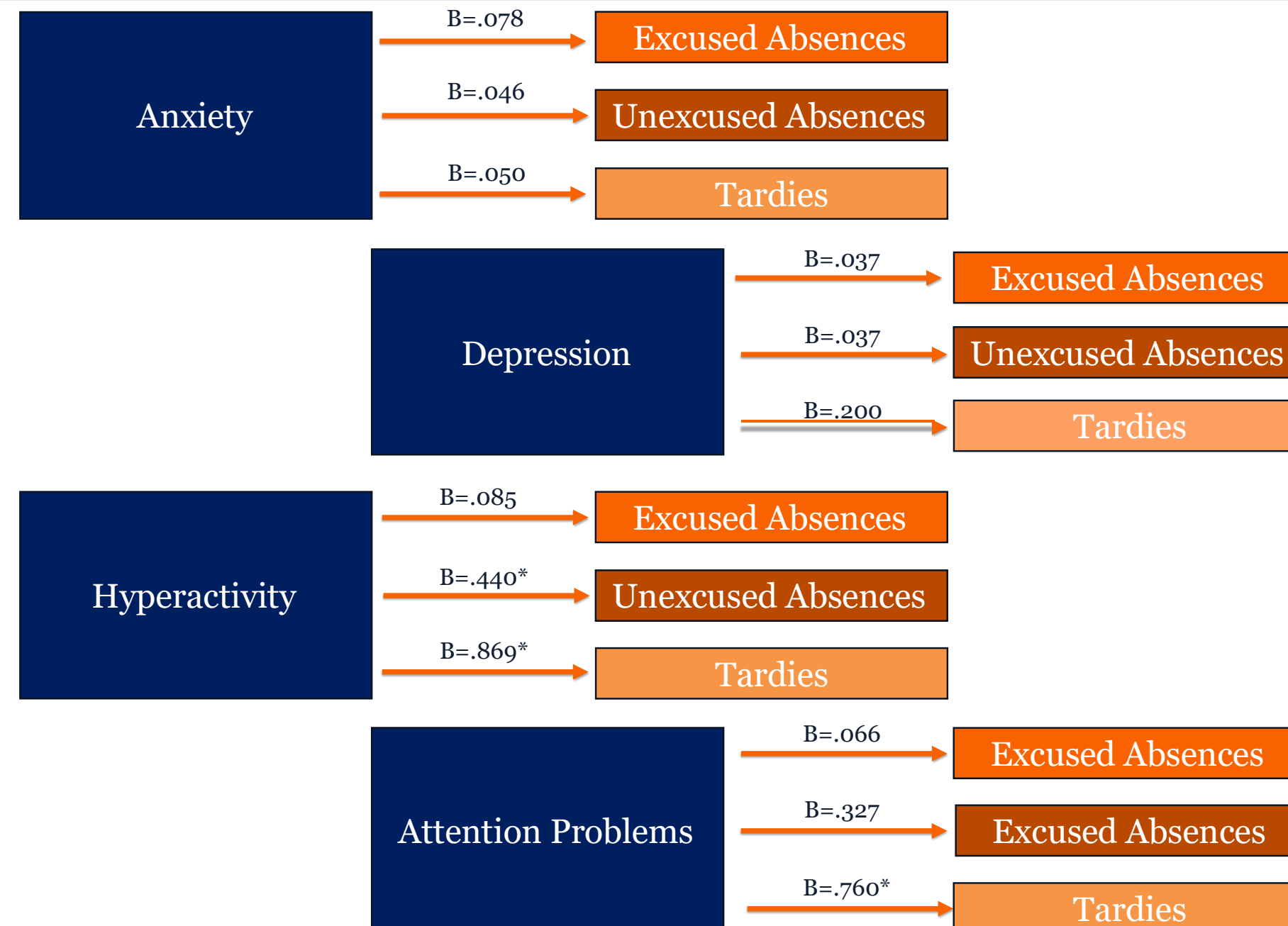
Attendance

The students surveyed exhibited high rates of attendance problems for all categories

- On average students missed 3.45 unexcused days
- On average students missed .75 excused days
- There was an average of 36.70 tardies across all students

Regression Analysis (See Figures below)

- Regression analyses showed that higher levels of hyperactivity were associated with more unexcused absences ($B = 0.44, p = .01$) and tardies ($B = .087, p < .001$).
- Attention problems were also associated with tardies ($B = 0.76, p < .001$)
- No other significant relationships were found



* $p < .05$

Discussion

Findings

Significant relationships were found between hyperactivity, attention problems, and attendance. Anxiety and depression had no significant relationships with any types of attendance problems.

- There may have been limitations that may have impacted the insignificant findings. For example, different types of anxiety were not accounted for (e.g., social anxiety, test anxiety) that may have contributed to attendance problems.
- There is a lack of research with these variables among middle school students, so other significant findings found in the past may be due to age differences.

Limitations

- Cross-sectional study
- Different countries and areas such as rural vs. urban may differ in results
- Results may not be generalizable to all middle school students
- Other variables may exist that impact the relationships found such as social skills, victimization, ethnic differences, safety, and discrimination.

Implications

Middle schools can use these findings to support student's mental health and increase attendance rates by creating resources for students with attention problems and hyperactivity.

Social workers can use this research to broaden their knowledge and implement new skills, ideas and resources into their practice within schools.

It is important to teach kids about this information and provide support in order to prevent poor mental health and attendance problems across development.

Contact Information

For more information on this study, contact:

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