

Bar-Ilan University

**An examination of social achievement goals
during elementary school as predictors of risk
behavior in high school**

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Abstract

In Western society and today's technological age, social networks, smartphones, and computers have gained considerable momentum in our daily lives. We can make social connections from anywhere, even when we are alone. In every social situation, there is the possibility of improving our social context, developing within the social system, and developing excellent social skills for ourselves. It is important to emphasize that this is mainly dependent on the approach from which one experiences certain situations, and especially one's willingness to learn from those situations later on (Ryan & Shim, 2020).

One of the theories dealing with social approaches and social learning processes is social achievement goal theory. This theory is designed to test a person's social motivation in certain situations. Three types of social achievement goals are distinguished: (1) social development goal, defined as the desire to learn new social skills and improve existing skills; (2) social demonstration-approach goal, in which the individual displays his or her social skills to receive positive responses from the social environment; And (3) social demonstration-avoid goal, in which the individual chooses to avoid negative reactions by refraining from displaying his or her social skills (Ryan & Shim, 2006; 2008).

The present research deals with the connection between social achievement goal theory and risk behaviors among youth. Risk behaviors include a wide range of behaviors that cause short- or long-term self-harm (Albert & Steinberg, 2011). Also, teens are more likely to adopt risky behavior patterns than adults, especially in the presence of certain social situations (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Loke & Mak, 2013). Teenagers who present a risky behavior, tend to do so due to peer pressure and fear of social rejection among the peer group (Andrews et al., 2019).

To understand what causes risk behaviors among youth, Harel-Fish (2008) introduced the "youth resilience model", which discusses about four factors of resilience that enable healthy functioning in youth: the presence of a significant adult in their lives, positive school experiences, a sense of self-worth, and a healthy social network. A school environment is a central place for implementing a youthful resilience model, and the focus of this study is on teacher support as

significant figures for students. For example, a significant teacher support contributes to students to a significant reduction in youth risk behaviors and contributes to positive consequences in social and academic fields. Thus, a juvenile resilience model leads to research that discusses both the social aspect of students and risk behaviors.

The present study is a longitudinal study **aimed** to examining the predictive ability of fundamental social achievement goals regarding risk behaviors. Can an individual's social motivation be associated with risk behaviors, for example, may a situation where a high-aspirant student gain positive social evaluation be more involved in risk behaviors, such as cigarette smoking, alcohol drinking, and unwarranted school dropouts. Accordingly, the main idea of this study is to direct educators and researchers to make a significant change in education, which focuses on identifying one of the resilience factors for youth in the school environment that can be used to build a prevention program based on this factor in the future.

The central **research question** was about identifying social achievement goals in elementary school and predicting high school risk behavior. More specifically, the first **research hypothesis** is that the purpose of social development goal will predict a reduced chance of risk behaviors. That is, a student who strives to improve social skills will be less concerned about the consequences of social criticism towards him, and thus the likelihood of being involved in risk behaviors will be reduced. The second hypothesis focuses on social demonstration-approach goal predicting high school risk behaviors. This hypothesis is exploratory, as previous studies have indicated positive consequences for children adopting these social goals (Shim & Ryan, 2012; 2020), but there are other studies that have shown negative implications (Horst et al., 2007; Ryan & Shim, 2012). The third hypothesis discusses social demonstration-avoidance goal to predicting more risk behaviors. That is a student who avoids the negative consequences he may receive as a result of presenting his or her social skills will have a higher chance of being involved in risk behaviors.

Because studies have indicated the importance of teachers in both shaping social goals and reducing risk behaviors, an additional control over high school teacher support was added during

the study. It was hypothesized that the relationships would be significant even after controlling the current level of support by the teacher to the student.

Study population: This study is a longitudinal study, and the information was collected in two different periods. At time 1, a participation of 184 sixth graders from three different schools in the center of the country was recorded. Time 2 was conducted five years after Time 1 when students were in the 11th grade (or high school), and information was gathered from two high schools in the center of the country. All participants moved to high school straight from elementary (there was no middle school). Of those participants in Time 2, 82 students were successfully identified who were also tested in Time 1.

Research Tools: Self-report measures in the study included: Social Achievement Goals Questionnaire (Ryan & Shim, 2008), Risk Behavior Questionnaire (Harael-Fisch et al., 2013), and Teacher Support Questionnaire (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007).

Research Procedure: In the first part of the study, sixth graders answered a social achievement goals questionnaire. In the second part of the study, which included the participation of 11th-grade students, they answered a risk behavior questionnaire and teacher support questionnaire five years after the first part. Both parts of the study received the approval of the Chief Scientist of the Ministry of Education.

Research findings: To test the research hypotheses, binary logistic regression analyzes were performed. Consistent with the first study hypothesis, students with social development goal reported fewer high school risk behaviors related to cigarette smoking ($\text{Exp}(B) = -0.60, p < .05$) and excessive alcohol drinking ($\text{Exp}(B) = -0.47, p < .05$). Surprisingly, when controlling for teacher support for high school students was studied, it was found that elementary students with social development goal had more emotional ($\text{Exp}(B) = 0.17, p < .05$) and academic ($\text{Exp}(B) = 0.19, p < .05$) support from high school teachers. The second research hypothesis was explored exploratory, and no statistical relationship was found between students with social demonstration-approach goal and risk behaviors. However, it was found that students with social demonstration-approach goal received less emotional support from high school teachers ($\text{Exp}(B) = -0.18, p < .05$). The third

research hypothesis was not confirmed; No statistical association was found between social demonstration-avoidance goal and risk behaviors. Also, sixth-grade students with the purpose of social demonstration-avoidance goal received less academic support from high school teachers ($\text{Exp(B)} = -0.17, p < .05$). The specific findings about teacher support showed that students who received more emotional support from teachers were less likely to smoke cigarettes ($\text{Exp(B)} = -1.27, p < .05$). Accordingly, students who receive more academic support from teachers report less alcohol binge drinking ($\text{Exp(B)} = -0.73, p < .05$).

The findings of the present study indicate the importance of the relationship between teachers and students, both in terms of social motivation and risk behaviors. Throughout the study, it was evident that there are reciprocal teacher-student interactions; one of the models showing this interdependence is called mutual determinism (Bandura, 1997). Accordingly, teachers and students are constantly influencing each other; elementary students with a high level of social expertise receive more emotional and academic support from high school teachers, compared to students with a goal of demonstrating social access and social avoidance that receive less support from teachers. This finding may be related to the fact that a student with a social purpose goal perceives himself as having good social skills, and consequently the teacher also perceives the student in the same way, giving the student more emotional and academic support. Similarly, the less positive perception of students with the purpose of demonstrating social avoidance causes teachers to perceive these students in the same way, and it is evident that teachers give less emotional and academic support to these students.

The limitations of the study are: First, self-report questionnaires are measured only on a self-report basis, and we do not have objective measures of social behavior and student risk behaviors, such as parent and teacher reporting questionnaires. Second, this study represents a specific part of the Israeli population; teens living in a large city in the center of the country, who speak Hebrew and belong to middle to high socioeconomic status. Third, there may be other intervening factors that were not considered, such as social interventions between two different periods that could have influenced students' social achievement goals toward high school, students'

relationships with parents and teachers, and more. Another limitation is that not all participants who completed the self-report questionnaires at time 1 also filled them in at time 2. It should be noted that there were no statistical differences in the variables included in the study between those who were detected and those who were not. Furthermore, it should be noted that this study was about predicting and not causation, as it is unknown what is predictive and what is predicted.

The novelty of the present study is that it is a longitudinal study that examines the predictability of social achievement goals for long-term risk behaviors. The importance of the present study focuses on the need to raise awareness of teachers' reactions to all students who came from elementary to high school with more positive charges and those who came with less positive charges.