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Self-control in childhood predicts success later, study finds

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A child's self-control skills—such as conscientiousness, self-discipline, and perseverance—can predict health, wealth, and criminal history in later life, new research suggests.

These effects held up regardless of the child's IQ or social class, according to Avshalom Caspi of Duke University in Durham, N.C. and colleagues, who carried out the study. They compiled information about more than 1,000 participants in a Dunedin, New Zealand, survey who were followed from birth to age 32.

Drawing on regular assessments by teachers, parents, observers, and the participants themselves, the researchers found that children who demonstrated high levels of self-control at ages as young as three were less likely than children with low self-control to develop common physical health problems, abuse drugs, or experience difficulties with credit and money-management. They were also less likely to raise a child in a single-parent household or be convicted of a crime as adults.

In a second sample of 500 non-identical British twins, the sibling who scored lower on measures of self-control at age five was more likely than the other to start smoking, do poorly in school, and engage in antisocial behaviors at age 12, the scientists reported.

But children whose self-control improved during the study fared better as adults in measures of health, wealth, and criminal history than was otherwise predicted by their initial childhood scores. The authors suggest that early interventions to improve self-control may benefit children in all risk categories.

The findings are reported in this week's early online edition of the research journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.