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What Does Childhood Self-Control Predict?

A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety



Principle

Self-Control as children predicts their health, wealth, and criminality as adults.

Quote

“Following a cohort of 1,000 children from birth to the age of 32 y, we show that childhood selfcontrol predicts physical health, substance dependence, personal finances, and criminal offending outcomes, following a gradient of self-control.”

So What - Application

If self-control in childhood predicts the health, wealth, and criminality of people as adults, then parents should do something to improve the self-control of their children. However, this paper gives no suggestions on how. Instead, it suggests policies that address self-control in general.

It did have one funny suggestion that doesn't improve self-control, but instead avoids the need to use it. Create in your life (and public policy) healthy defaults that exploit the laziness in all of us, so that in order to make the unhealthy choice, we have to put forth some effort.

The Research Story

Thirteen researchers from the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada studied 1,037 children born in Dunedin, New Zealand, and 509 twin pairs born in England and Wales to measure their childhood self-control and their health, wealth, and criminal outcomes as adults.

They used 9 different measured self-control every other year at ages 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11, observing the kids and asking parents, teachers, and the kids themselves. Then at age 32, they measured the health, wealth, and crime outcomes of the participants using health exams, blood tests, personal interviews, record searches, and reports from other informers.. With the twin group, they used self-control data taken when they were 5 years old and then looked at delinquent and academic behavior when they were 12.

They used one combined score for childhood self-control and found it higher for girls than boys, but adult outcomes were similar. They controlled for social class origins and IQ to make sure they weren't predicting the results.

Children with poor self-control had more health problems and more drug and alcohol use by age 32, but not more depression. Just under half of all the kids had become parents and poor-self control kids ended up having more one-parent households. They had fewer financial plans, more credit problems, and said they had more problems managing their money. Children with poor self-control were more likely to be convicted of a crime.

The results followed a line. The more self-control you had as a kid, the more health, wealth, and lack of criminal record you had as an adult. The line held even when they removed kids with ADHD, highest, and lowest scores.

Kids whose self-control improved by the time they were young adults had better outcomes, even if their childhood scores were low. As teenagers, kids with low self-control made more mistakes. Self-control still predicted poor outcomes, but these teenage snares made the outcomes worse. And self-control still predicted the outcomes even if they didn't trip up as teens.

Preschool scores predicted outcomes, but not as well as combine the whole childhood scores. Families have a huge influence on outcomes, so they also found an existing study of twins that happened to use the same self-control measure when the kids were five. The chose just the twins that were the same gender, but not identical. They didn't have adult data, but they did find that by age 12, the twin with less self-control was more likely to begin smoking, do poorly in school, and have more anti-social behaviors.

Moffitt, T. E., Arseneault, L., Belsky, D., Dickson, N., Hancox, R. J., Harrington, H., Houts, R., Poulton, R., Roberts, B. W., Ross, S., Sears, M. R., Thomson, W. M., & Caspi, A. (2011). A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108(7), 2693–2698. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1010076108>