

Hard Work Or Hard Times?

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A big part of parenting is teaching kids self-control. Yes, sugary snacks do taste good, but even so we shouldn't eat them too often. Yes, we know that math homework may not always be fun, but it must come before TV. Yes, soccer practice may seem tedious, but it's the road to excellence on the field and beyond. And so forth. No parent disputes this. It's in the manual.

Indeed, we're all expected to take this life lesson on faith. Hard work and effort are virtues worth instilling, and worth having.

But what do we mean by *worth*? Does self-discipline today really pay off later in life—in jobs, paychecks, promotions and bonuses, professional prestige and wealth? Surprisingly, given the importance of employment to well-being and the global economy, the link between self-control and job success has not been thoroughly studied.

Until now. Psychological scientist Michael Daly of the University of Stirling, UK, and his colleagues have for the first time been investigating the link between childhood self-discipline and job success in adulthood. The benefits of self-control in a work setting seem readily apparent. Ignoring distractions, perseverance in the face of difficulty, conscientiousness in general—these traits all make for good workers. Daly and colleagues wanted to see if these benefits begin to accrue early in life and persist into and throughout adulthood.

To test this, the scientists turned to two existing British cohort studies, which followed a total of more than 15,000 subjects over many decades. The first, the British Cohort Study, has followed children born in Britain during a single week in 1970. Attention and perseverance are considered key components of overall self-control in childhood, so teachers evaluated the kids at age 10 with various measures of such traits: “Cannot concentrate on a particular task.” “Shows perseverance.” “Pays attention in class.” And so forth.

The study followed these youngsters as they grew up, keeping track of their work life from age 21 to age 42. The scientists noted the subjects' employment (or unemployment) status at several points during these years, and they also computed total months of accumulated unemployment over these prime working years. They crunched the data together to see how childhood self-control predicted—or not—adult work history.

The results were clear. Children with low self-control at age 10 were more likely to be out of work at ages 21, 26, 30 and 42, and they had more accumulated months of unemployment over time. Indeed, childhood self-control was equal to or better than intelligence in predicting employment in adulthood.

The findings were robust, but the scientists wanted more proof, so they analyzed data from a second study, the British National Child Development Study, which focused on babies born in 1958. The study

included extensive measures of early childhood environment and personal characteristics, and did follow-ups of the subjects at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, 42, 46 and 50. At the adult follow-ups, the scientists noted job status, and they measured total unemployment over the period from 1974 to 2008.

The results, reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, mirrored those from the first study. Self-control at ages 7 and 11 predicted overall unemployment time by age 50—and higher joblessness at 23, 33, 42 and 50. Even when the subjects were in their 30s and 40s—when overall unemployment rate for the group was low—self-control was a powerful predictor of job status.

It appears that poor self-control is a fairly stable aspect of personality, one that brings a host of disadvantages over the long haul. The early measures of self-discipline were varied, including not just attention and perseverance but also carelessness, untidy work, restlessness, poor posture and rule breaking. It's not shocking that adults who never outgrow these traits—who lack concentration, break rules and do sloppy work—find fewer job opportunities.

It gets worse. Daly and his colleagues figured that the link between self-control and joblessness would be most pronounced in hard times—like during a major recession. To test this, they examined unemployment data for subjects who were tracked before and during the 1980s recession in the UK. They found a spike in joblessness among those with low self-control as the economy worsened. These workers' prospects appear particularly vulnerable to macroeconomic fluctuations, suggesting that in difficult times, when employers must cut back, it's those with self-control problems that get the ax.

There's also no guarantee that pink-slipped workers with poor self-control will ever find their way back into the work force, even when the economy brightens. Career interruptions, the scientists say, can have lasting, even permanent, consequences. Skills become obsolete, and workers get derailed. Being out of work also breeds poor habits—lack of sleep, poor nutrition and hygiene, drug and alcohol abuse—especially for those who have self-control problems to begin with.

The scientists offer a glimmer of hope, even with these dreary results. Improving children's basic self-control skills could yield a lifetime of benefits in the world of work—both to the individual worker and to society. The capacity for self-control is somewhat malleable, and may be enhanced with training and practice in young children. Yoga, martial arts, computerized games, meditation—all of these interventions might offer kids a basic psychological tool that could last them a lifetime.

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