

When Smiles in Childhood Photos Lead to Future Happiness

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The Wall Street Journal:

“Smile!” It’s the word that millions of children hear just before a bright flash freezes their features for posterity in the American school ritual of Picture Day. I was recently reminded of this when my 7-year-old son donned his colorful collared shirt and combed his hair in the mirror in preparation for the event. I couldn’t help saying, “Now be sure to smile!” Who doesn’t remember being encouraged, begged or admonished to do the same?

My son’s eagerness prompted me to crack open my own yearbooks, stored deep beneath the blankets in the hallway closet. I wear a confident expression in junior high, but by my sophomore year in high school, I see a pimple-faced kid whose insecurities are plain to see. Yet in each instance I see that unmistakable me-ness, something apart from my distinguishing physical features, in each portrait. Do photos of ourselves only reveal who we are at the time they are taken, or is it possible that they also tell us something about our future selves?

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Nor do photos only predict success and failure in marriage. A 2001 study by LeeAnne Harker and Dacher Keltner in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that women flashing bright, warm smiles in their college yearbook photos reported experiencing less anxiety, sadness and despair in the 30 years after graduating. In comparison to their more stoic-looking classmates, women smiling brightly reported being more socially connected to others and having more fulfilling lives.

In a study published in *Psychological Science* in 2010, researchers Ernest Abel and Michael Kruger even showed that professional baseball players who smiled warmly in photos taken in the early 1950s lived, on average, until the age of 80, compared with age 73 for their non-smiling counterparts. That advantage is even bigger for Willie Mays, the “Say Hey Kid,” who was known for his contagious smile and is now 82.

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