

School engagement predicts success later in life

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Children's interest and engagement in school influences their prospects of educational and occupational success 20 years later, over and above their academic attainment and socioeconomic background, researchers have found.

The more children felt connected to their [school](#) community and felt engaged, rather than bored, the greater their likelihood of achieving a higher educational qualification and going on to a professional or managerial career.

The study from researchers at Menzies Research Institute [Tasmania](#) is published in the *British Educational Research Journal*.

The researchers used data from the [Childhood Determinants of Adult Health](#) study, which collected health-related data from school children aged nine to 13 years, and again 20 years later when they were young adults.

The research team created a "school engagement index" using questionnaire items on school enjoyment and boredom, including items such as motivation to learn, sense of belonging, participation in school or extra-mural activities and enjoyment of physical activity.

They found that each unit of school engagement was independently associated with a 10% higher chance of achieving a post-compulsory school education at some point during the next 20 years, including as a mature age student.

And those who were engaged at school were more likely to go on to a professional, semi-professional or managerial career.

Lead author Joan Abbott-Chapman, University Associate at the Menzies Research Institute Tasmania, said the study was an important confirmation for teachers and educators that what happens in school has life-long consequences.

"If students can be engaged by curriculum, through the mode of delivery, through a rich variety of learning experiences and through the

way teachers relate with students, then this is going to pave the way for achievement in adulthood," she said.

Parents also have an enormous influence over their child's educational participation, Dr Abbott-Chapman said, but they could take heart that even students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds could be encouraged to achieve success.

"If parents are able to co-operate with schools and teachers to help to promote student engagement, then this is likely to provide a springboard, if you like, for future achievement in school and in employment right through to adulthood," she said.

Improving engagement

Senior Lecturer at Flinders University Dr Susan Krieg said the study reinforced the importance of school curricula to promote active, rather than passive learning styles that engage both the mind and body, and involve humour, music and movement.

"It is important to recognise that the patterns of engagement begin very early, much earlier than formal schooling," Dr Krieg added.

Professor of Global Health at the University of Melbourne Rob Moodie agrees.

"The notion that a school should be about sports, music, drama – not only numeracy and literacy – is really important. They enjoy it, they enjoy being there."

Professor Moodie said the link between educational and occupational outcomes also extended to better health outcomes and well-being later in life.

Levelling the playing field at school

Dr Fiona Mensah, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, said children who become marginalised at school often have very negative outcomes.

"Disengagement is strongly predictive of school dropout, delinquency and problem substance use in adolescence and early adulthood – emphasising how critical it is that children remain engaged during schooling as they transition to adulthood," she said.

The next step for this type of research, according to Louise Newman, Professor of Psychiatry at Monash University, is to look at whether a school environment can function as a protective environment for children who are at risk of disengagement.

"So that would look at things like children with family difficulties or children with attachment problems, or children from low socioeconomic areas, or children where a family might not promote or value education."

"Can the school – and to what extent – provide an environment for those [children](#) so they can still develop those sorts of positive attitudes?"

More information: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ...
2/berj.3031/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/berj.3031/abstract)

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