

# Early prosocial behavior good predictor of kids' future

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Kindergarteners' social-emotional skills are a significant predictor of their future education, employment and criminal activity, among other outcomes, according to Penn State researchers.

In a study spanning nearly 20 years, kindergarten teachers were surveyed on their [students'](#) social competence. Once the kindergarteners reached their 20s, researchers followed up to see how the students were faring, socially and occupationally. Students demonstrating better prosocial behavior were more likely to have graduated college, to be gainfully employed and to not have been arrested than students with lesser prosocial skills.

"This research by itself doesn't prove that higher [social competence](#) can lead to better outcomes later on," said Damon Jones, senior research associate, Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center. "But when combined with other research, it is clear that helping children develop these skills increases their chances of success in school, work and life."

Jones and colleagues analyzed data collected from more than 700 students who were participating in the Fast Track Project, a study conducted by four universities—Penn State, Duke University, Vanderbilt University and the University of Washington. The Fast Track Project is a prevention program for children at high risk for long-term behavioral problems. The individuals studied for this research were part of the control group and did not receive any preventive services. Overall, the sample was representative of children living in lower socio-economic status neighborhoods.

Kindergarten teachers rated students on eight items using a five-point scale assessing how each child interacted socially with other children. Items included statements such as "is helpful to others," "shares materials" and "resolves peer problems on own."

The researchers compared the teachers' assessments to the students' outcomes in five areas during late adolescence through age 25—including education and employment, public assistance, [criminal activity](#), substance abuse, and mental health. Jones and colleagues report

their results online and in a future issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Overall, the researchers found that a higher rating for social competency as a kindergartener was significantly associated with all five of the outcome domains studied. For every one-point increase in a student's social competency score, he or she was twice as likely to graduate from college and 46 percent more likely to have a full-time job by the age of 25.

For every one-point decrease in the child's score, he or she had a 67 percent higher chance of having been arrested and an 82 percent higher chance of being in or on a waiting list for public housing at age 25. The study controlled for the effects of poverty, race, having teenage parents, family stress and neighborhood crime, and for the children's aggression and reading levels in kindergarten.

"The good news is that social and emotional skills can improve, and this shows that we can inexpensively and efficiently measure these competencies at an early age," said Jones. Evidence from numerous intervention studies indicate that social and emotional learning skills can be improved throughout childhood and adolescence.

Jones and colleagues plan to continue this work in order to further understand how social competency can predict future life outcomes, and further understand intermediary developmental processes whereby early social-emotional skills influence long-term adult outcomes.

**More information:** "Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness." *American Journal of Public Health*. e-View Ahead of Print. [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630)

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