

Study links responsible behavior in high school to life success 50 years later

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A new study links doing one's homework, being interested and behaving responsibly in high school to better academic and career success as many as 50 years later. This effect, reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, holds true even after accounting for parental income, IQ and other factors known to influence achievement, researchers report.

"Yes, intelligence is important to life success and so is family socioeconomic status; we've known this for a while," said University of Illinois psychology professor Brent Roberts, who conducted the study with Rodica Damian of the University of Houston and Marion Spengler of the University of Tuebingen. "Studies have shown that [personality traits](#) such as conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness also correspond to higher academic and career achievement. But these are traits you're more or less born with. We wanted to know if factors under the control of the individual at a young age might also play a role."

The study analyzed decades of data collected by the American Institutes for Research beginning in 1960 and continuing to the present. The original data set included more than 370,000 students. High school participants were originally tested on academic, cognitive and behavioral characteristics in 1960 and also responded to follow-up surveys in later years. The new analysis looked at the initial student tests and their responses 11 years and 50 years later.

Of the 1,952 participants randomly selected from those who responded

to surveys 50 years later, "those who showed more interest in high school and had higher writing skills reported earning higher incomes," said Spengler, who led the study. "They also tended to have higher occupational prestige than their peers when they showed responsible behaviors as a student." This was in addition to the gains associated with IQ, family income and personality traits such as conscientiousness, she said.

Further analyses revealed that education was likely the factor mediating the relationship between high school behavior and later success in life.

"It seems that these early individual differences are relevant across the life span through the lens of education," the researchers wrote.

While the study kept track of participants over a period of 50 years, the methods used only point to an association between factors and outcomes and do not prove that good [behavior](#) in [high school](#) inevitably leads to career success later in life, Damian said.

"This study does, however, highlight the possibility that certain behaviors at crucial periods could have long-term consequences for a person's life," she said.

More information: How you behave in school predicts life success above and beyond family background, broad traits, and cognitive ability, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/pspp0000185](#)

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