

Academic acceleration has no negative long-term effects on the psychological well-being of gifted youth

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A new longitudinal study published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* from Vanderbilt's Study of Mathematically Precocious

Youth finds that there are no negative effects on the long-term well-being of gifted youth from academic acceleration such as skipping grades, graduating early, or a combination of advanced educational placement methods.

Despite numerous short-term studies that support educational acceleration as a way to meet the advanced learning needs of gifted youth, popular psychology often fuels concerns among parents and teachers, positing the "happy fish, little pond" theory. This idea promotes inclusion in an age-matched group as a better way for gifted learners to experience the positive emotions associated with achievement, like enjoyment and pride. Conversely, it suggests that being with their intellectual peers might increase negative emotions like anger, anxiety, shame and hopelessness.

"The evidence is very clear that educational acceleration for the gifted is educationally efficacious," said David Lubinski, professor of psychology and [human development](#) and holder of a Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair, who, along with Camilla Benbow, Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education and Human Development, and current doctoral candidate Brian O. Bernstein, co-authored the study. Lubinski and Benbow co-direct SMPY.

"However, people worry about long-term effects of acceleration," he said, "and that's where our study is useful."

The longitudinal study looked at similar groups of gifted students identified over a 20- year period and surveyed again at age 50. In the first study, a total of 1,636 participants from three SMPY cohorts identified between 1972 and 1983 were surveyed, each representing a different level of intellectual ability (the top 1 percent, top .5 percent, and top .01 percent). Each participant completed surveys at age 13 (identification), age 18 (after high school) and age 50 (mid-career). Well-

being was measured in terms of personal growth, purpose in life, autonomy, self-acceptance and life satisfaction. The pattern replicated across all three cohorts indicated that participants did not suffer from a decline in psychological well-being at age 50 due to educational acceleration at an earlier age. And this was true for both men and women.

A second study designed to replicate the first consisted of a gender-balanced cohort of 478 graduate students identified in 1992 from top STEM graduate institutions in the United States. Participants were surveyed at age 25 (identification) and again at age 50 (mid-career). The age-25 survey collected information about educational acceleration opportunities participants had experienced prior to high school graduation. The age-50 survey used the same questionnaire as the first study, with the same measures of psychological well-being. Again, the amount of academic acceleration among these highly accomplished STEM graduate students did not correlate with individual differences in psychological well-being at age 50, replicating the findings of the first cohorts for both men and women.

While many fear possible adverse consequences from moving a gifted child to a more advanced group of peers, the research here maintains that it is also important to consider the negative outcomes of holding the child back.

"What we need to do for gifted children is basically operate the same way we do at the post-secondary levels," said Benbow. "If an undergraduate, for example, wants to take a high-level course at a university and approaches the professor of that course, the professor would never ask how old they are. Rather, they would probe whether the student meets or can meet the prerequisites and, if they do, they allow the student into the course," Benbow noted. "It's called appropriate developmental placement. You find out where the person is at, and you

structure the curriculum accordingly.

"There is really no age at which this philosophy is inappropriate. We do this in early childhood education and then again in higher education. Why would we think we need to treat the intervening years differently?" Benbow asks.

"This was research the gifted field has needed for a long time," Lubinski added, "because this is the first study to examine the relationship of acceleration with psychological well-being over an extensive time frame, and we found no evidence for long-term concerns."

More information: Brian O. Bernstein et al. Academic acceleration in gifted youth and fruitless concerns regarding psychological well-being: A 35-year longitudinal study., *Journal of Educational Psychology* (2020).

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