

Research reveals GCSE results may have far-reaching impact on adult life

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Credit: Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels

Researchers from the universities of York and Leeds have found that General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results have a significant impact on many elements of life at 23 years-old, predicting

factors such as whether an individual had a prestigious job and a good income as well as their level of well-being, and if they had any behavioral problems.

The effects observed in the [study](#), available as a *PsyArXiv* preprint, were independent of having any further educational qualifications, like a [university degree](#).

Key factor

School performance at 16 had the strongest impact on the lives of individuals from less affluent backgrounds, and this suggests that good grades may be a key factor in compensating for family background disadvantages, the researchers say.

Lead author of the study Dr. Alexandra Starr, a researcher in the Department of Education at the University of York, said, "Our study provides evidence of the power of GCSEs to predict who we become in early adulthood, offering important new insight into the often debated role of school grades in 'real life' outside the education system.

"Our findings suggest that if you are from an under-resourced background your grades matter the most. This may be because individuals from more privileged backgrounds have better access to support that can compensate for [lower grades](#), such as greater social networks and connections, and highly educated parents.

"Our results add to a growing body of evidence that suggest interventions that specifically target students from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their school performance are likely to achieve long-term developmental benefits with the potential to disrupt the transmission of family background inequality."

Significant difference

For the study, researchers from the Universities of York and Leeds looked at data from the Twins Early Development Study, a large population study following initially over 15,000 families with children born between 1994 and 1996.

They found that GCSE results strongly predicted whether an individual would go on to achieve further educational success, for example at university. But even after accounting for further education, doing well in GCSEs made a significant difference for securing a prestigious job and earning a good income. Achieving good grades at GCSE made having behavioral problems such as aggression issues less likely and even accounted for a slight boost in the general level of someone's well-being.

Real-life outcomes

Senior author of the study, Professor Sophie von Stumm from the Department of Education at the University of York, said, "The belief that school grades only matter for getting into university, but have little relevance for real-life outcomes beyond educational contexts, does not appear to hold true. Our results suggest that school performance exerts influence on a wide range of life outcomes during the critical developmental period that is young adulthood.

"While GCSE grades most strongly predicted future academic success and occupational prestige, better [school performance](#) also had a link to social and emotional development including better well-being.

"It is possible that adolescents who achieve better grades are more likely to have [personality traits](#) that influence levels of well-being, such as being conscientious, diligent, persevering, motivated and having good

self-regulatory skills. Doing well in GCSEs seems to have a uniquely positive boost on well-being independent of any subsequent qualifications."

More information: Alexandra Starr et al, Do School Grades Matter for Growing Up? Testing the Predictive Validity of School Performance for Outcomes in Emerging Adulthood (2023). [DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/eb5rf](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/eb5rf)

Provided by University of York

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