

From playground to boardrooms: How childhood and adolescence shape future leaders

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The postal code where you were born and raised does more than

facilitate mail delivery; it can also tell us about your odds of becoming a leader. Understanding this can help us understand the early roots of leadership and reshape how we approach talent acquisition, leadership development and corporate social responsibility.

To explain, consider two individuals: Jane and Mike. Jane had a more privileged upbringing, attending an elite private school, socializing at an upscale tennis club and going on luxury family vacations.

Mike, on the other hand, grew up with fewer resources. He attended public school and worked miscellaneous jobs to earn pocket money. The socioeconomic backgrounds of Jane and Mike afforded them different opportunities and obstacles, fundamentally altering pathways to leadership decades later.

While many view the path to leadership as a journey that begins later in life, [our research suggests otherwise](#). We studied the early-life factors that shape potential leaders and found new insights that challenge this conventional understanding of leadership development.

The importance of socioeconomic status

Using data from the [British Cohort Study](#), which tracked over 7,000 people born in the United Kingdom between April 11 and 15, 1970, we examined how early-life factors shape future leaders.

Our analysis revealed that [socioeconomic status](#) is a driving factor of leadership potential. Socioeconomic status reflects more than financial standing—it opens doors to quality education, social networks and increases the likelihood of positive life events occurring. All of this fosters the [cognitive abilities and interpersonal skills](#) needed to succeed in formal leadership roles.

Conversely, growing up in poorer neighborhoods, having inadequate housing and having strained relationships can all hinder personal growth, education and early career success.

Our analysis found that cumulative socioeconomic status from birth through age five impacted two related indicators of leadership success: self-control at age 10, and in turn, [psychological well-being](#) at age 16. Those with higher levels of both self-control and psychological well-being were more likely to hold leadership positions at 26.

The combination of higher early-life socioeconomic status, self-control and psychological well-being sets the stage for leadership success in adulthood. When these factors align, individuals are significantly more likely to step into leadership roles later in life.

The implications of socioeconomic status on [leadership development](#) are profound. This highlights the need for systemic change that supports all children and adolescents, regardless of economic background, and allows them to thrive as adults.

From childhood to leadership

Among the British Cohort Study study participants, socioeconomic status backgrounds were linked with self-control at age 10. Self-control is a learned and voluntary set of behaviors that allows individuals to manage their thoughts, emotions and actions, and avoid or overcome distractions and temptations. These are all behaviors linked to adolescent and adulthood success.

[High self-control is associated with](#) better psychological and physical health, educational attainment, employment and financial well-being. Adolescents with greater self-control are also more likely to have more positive social and family relationships, which enhances their perceived

self-worth in the eyes of others.

According to our analysis, children from affluent families often develop greater self-control. Higher socioeconomic status provides access to resources and environments that support self-regulation.

This is because affluent families can often afford [extracurricular activities](#), structured routines and educational tools that promote self-discipline. Additionally, wealthier parents are more likely to model effective self-control strategies and create environments that encourage these behaviors.

In contrast, because children from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are expected to navigate life's hurdles without abundant resources or safety nets, they are more likely to exhibit lower self-control. Children with [less self-control are more likely to](#) engage in criminal activities and substance abuse, have strained social and [family relationships](#), and have adverse mental health outcomes like anxiety and depression.

Low-income children who grow up alongside more affluent peers, instead of with others from similar economic backgrounds, are also at risk of experiencing a ["double disadvantage"](#) if they don't receive enough support at school. Without the same resources and support their more affluent peers have, these children may experience worse mental health, behavior and educational outcomes.

Cultivating tomorrow's leaders

Is leadership born or made? The roots of future leadership don't just lie in [inherent qualities](#); nor should they lie in something as capricious as one's postal address growing up.

Overcoming societal disparities to achieve an equal opportunity path to leadership is challenging, but organizations can take tangible steps to foster leadership potential across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Organizations can enable change by:

1. Investing in [early childhood development initiatives](#) that strengthen self-control and foster psychological well-being, especially for children from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds. Such investments will help to ensure that children, regardless of their economic circumstances, have the foundational skills to develop into effective leaders.
2. Providing supportive family policies, like on-site childcare and paid parental leave, especially for [parents with lower earnings](#). These policies will not only alleviate immediate economic pressures, but also help to create a stable environment where children can thrive and develop leadership qualities.
3. Rethinking leadership selection criteria to recognize and reward experiences of overcoming adversity and community involvement. By valuing diverse experiences and backgrounds, organizations can identify and nurture potential leaders who demonstrate the qualities needed in leadership roles.

Organizations face a choice: perpetuate a cycle where leadership reflects privilege or foster environments where every child, regardless of postal code, can aspire to lead. How organizations respond can widen the pool of qualified leaders and shape the leadership landscape in the years to come.

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