

Happy children make happy adults

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Being a 'happy' teenager is linked to increased well-being in adulthood, new research finds.

Much is known about the associations between a troubled childhood and [mental health problems](#), but little research has examined the affect of a positive childhood. For the first time, researchers from the University of Cambridge and the MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing have analysed the link between a positive adolescence and well-being in midlife.

Using information from 2776 individuals who participated in the 1946 British birth cohort study, the scientists tested associations between having a positive childhood and well-being in adulthood.

A 'positive' childhood was based on teacher evaluations of students' levels of happiness, friendship and energy at the ages of 13 and 15. A student was given a positive point for each of the following four items - whether the child was 'very popular with other children', 'unusually happy and contented', 'makes friends extremely easily' and 'extremely energetic, never tired'. Teachers also rated conduct problems (restlessness, daydreaming, disobedience, lying, etc) and [emotional problems](#) (anxiety, fearfulness, diffidence, avoidance of attention, etc).

The researchers then linked these ratings to the individuals' mental health, work experience, relationships and social activities several decades later. They found that teenagers rated positively by their teachers were significantly more likely than those who received no

positive ratings to have higher levels of well-being later in life, including a higher work satisfaction, more frequent contact with family and friends, and more regular engagement in social and leisure activities.

Happy children were also much less likely than others to develop [mental disorders](#) throughout their lives – 60% less likely than young teens that had no positive ratings.

The study not only failed to find a link between being a happy child and an increased likelihood of becoming married, they found that the people who had been happy children were actually more likely to get divorced. One possible factor suggested by the researchers is that happier people have higher self-esteem or self-efficacy and are therefore more willing and able to leave an unhappy marriage.

"The benefits to individuals, families and to society of good [mental health](#), positive relationships and satisfying work are likely to be substantial," said Professor Felicia Huppert, one of the authors of the paper and Director of the Well-being Institute at the University of Cambridge. "The findings support the view that even at this time of great financial hardship, policymakers should prioritise the well-being of our children so they have the best possible start in life."

Dr Marcus Richards, co-author of the paper from the MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing, said: "Most longitudinal studies focus on the negative impact of early mental problems, but the 1946 birth cohort also shows clear and very long-lasting positive consequences of mental well-being in childhood."

For the study, the researchers adjusted for social class of origin, childhood intelligence and education.

More information: The paper 'Do positive children become positive

adults? Evidence from a longitudinal birth cohort study' was published in the January print edition of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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