

# **'Baby-boomer' study shows importance of childhood**

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Experiences in your childhood shape your health and wealth as an adult according to Britain's longest-running baby-boomer research study, funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC), which celebrates its 65th birthday today. The life-long study, which has followed 5,000 men and women since their birth in the same week of March 1946, has revolutionised health and education policy and practice for over half a century.

Launched less than a year after the end of the second world war and before the establishment of the NHS, key findings from the National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD) have provided the evidence base for widespread education and health reform. The NSHD evidenced the argument to retain health visitor services by showing that social class differences seen in birth weight and infant survival persisted well into childhood. It also demonstrated the importance of parents being involved in their child's schooling; providing the evidence that equally able children from poorer families had fewer educational opportunities, which contributed to government action to improve the quality of education, encourage better communication between schools and parents, and, ultimately to introduce comprehensive education.

Amongst the many early findings of the study, NSHD showed that babies who had a lower birth weight tended to have higher blood pressure in adulthood. Those of the lowest birth weight who grew faster post-natally, or had an earlier puberty, have been shown to have a higher cardiovascular risk (in terms of obesity, higher blood pressure and

diabetes). Heavier baby girls were more likely to go on to develop breast cancer and those with a history of poorer growth and cognitive development had an earlier onset of menopause as adults.

The study influenced the design of the NHS and shaped the law, allowing midwives to give pain relief to women in labour parental and improving visiting rights for children in hospital.

As the [baby boomers](#) now enter retirement, newly collected data from the study will provide evidence about the prevalence of health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis and mobility problems. In today's ageing society, the new data will be crucial for those planning future social and health care services.

Professor Diana Kuh, director of the MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing which runs the National Survey of Health and Development, said:

“The MRC 1946 ‘baby-boomer’ study is the jewel in the crown of life-long research studies. As the UK’s longest running study, we owe huge thanks to the study members whose dedication will benefit medical research and human health for many generations. The research would not have been possible without them, and I wish them a very happy 65th birthday.

“Cohort studies have a pivotal role in painting a picture of the health and wellbeing of society and are essential sources of data for a whole host of diseases and health challenges for the population today. The new data we are collecting provides unrivalled opportunities to extend the findings into the seventh decade and to understand how to maintain quality of life in the later years.”

Participants were assessed by a health visitor or a teacher at school every

two years throughout infancy, childhood and adolescence and then every few years throughout adulthood and middle age. Over seven decades they have been weighed, measured, scanned, questioned and tested, building up an invaluable cache of information on the human life course.

Three thousand 'baby boomers' still remain in the MRC National Survey of Health and Development. To mark their 65th birthday and thank them for their immense contribution to medical research, the MRC is holding birthday events and launching a nationwide exhibition, taking the findings of the study around the country over the next four months.

A brand new MRC-supported birth cohort, announced this week, will follow in the footsteps of NSHD – drawing on findings from this baby-boomer study to learn more about child [health](#) and wellbeing in the 21st century.

Provided by Medical Research Council

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