

Early relationships, not brainpower, key to adult happiness

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Positive social relationships in childhood and adolescence are key to adult well-being, according to Associate Professor Craig Olsson from Deakin University and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Australia, and his colleagues. In contrast, academic achievement appears to have little effect on adult well-being. The exploratory work, looking at the child and adolescent origins of well-being in adulthood, is published online in Springer's *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

We know very little about how aspects of childhood and adolescent development, such as academic and social-emotional function, affect adult well-being - defined here as a combination of a sense of coherence, positive [coping strategies](#), [social engagement](#) and self-perceived strengths.

Olsson and team analysed data for 804 people followed up for 32 years, who participated in the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (DMHDS) in New Zealand. They explored the relative importance of early academic and social pathways to adult well-being.

In particular, they measured the relationship between level of family disadvantage in childhood, social connectedness in childhood, [language development](#) in childhood, social connectedness in adolescence, academic achievement in adolescence and well-being in adulthood. Social connectedness in childhood is defined by the parent and teacher ratings of the child being liked, not being alone, and the child's level of

confidence. Social connectedness in adolescence is demonstrated by social attachments (parents, peers, school, confidant) and participation in youth groups and sporting clubs.

The researchers found, on the one hand, a strong pathway from child and adolescent [social connectedness](#) to adult well-being. This illustrates the enduring significance of positive [social relationships](#) over the lifespan to adulthood. On the other hand, the pathway from early language development, through adolescent academic achievement, to adult well-being was weak, which is in line with existing research showing a lack of association between socioeconomic prosperity and happiness.

The analyses also suggest that the social and academic pathways are not intimately related to one another, and may be parallel paths.

The authors conclude: "If these pathways are separate, then positive social development across childhood and adolescence requires investments beyond development of the academic curriculum."

More information: Olsson C et al (2012). A 32-year longitudinal study of child and adolescent pathways to well-being in adulthood. *Journal of Happiness Studies*; [DOI 10.1007/s10902-012-9369-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-012-9369-8)

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