

# Children overcoming adversity: Aim high but have a plan

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Making a plan can be the difference in overcoming a difficult childhood, while just thinking about those difficulties can drag down the child.

A set of four new studies from researchers at USC and Southwest University in China suggest, contrary to prior belief, children in difficult situations need to do more than dream of a happier and successful [future](#) self: They need a strategy for becoming that person.

Two of the studies found eighth graders performed better in school if they had strategies for becoming their future selves, as well as several options for becoming the self that they envision. The other two studies showed that the mere thought of an unhappy childhood was enough to dampen the optimism and the ability of children to plan their escapes.

The set of studies were published online in the *Journal Of Adolescence* on Aug. 28.

## **'Left behind' children**

The scientists had focused on a population with profound social and economic challenges: rural Chinese children labeled "left behind" and usually left in the care of grandparents because their parents have left them while seeking higher-paying urban jobs far from home.

These parents do not take their children with them because Chinese law requires that children attend school in the area where they were born, said Daphna Oyserman, Dean's Professor of Psychology and Co-director of the USC Dornsife Center for Mind and Society.

As a result, an estimated 40 percent of all Chinese children in rural areas - as many as 61 million - are left behind, according to the All-China Women's Federation.

"Their parents, like parents everywhere, sacrifice the present for hopes for the future. I started the studies wondering if calling a child 'left behind,' would have negative consequences with the implication that 'no

one loves me," Oyserman said. "Or are the parents able to instill in their children this narrative?: 'We are doing this so our family can move forward.'

"That is what we found: Like their peers, 'left behind children' who focus on their possible future selves and especially on strategies to attain these possible future selves, fulfill their parents' 'moving forward' narrative," Oyserman said. "Their academic performance improves, they have fewer problems at school and feel better."

The narrative could apply to children anywhere, Oyserman noted. American children, for example, may face homelessness, separation from a parent through divorce, or endure the instability of foster care placement.

Oyserman and Southwest University professor Chongzeng Bi conducted four studies with four separate groups of children, all around 14 years old, ranging in number from 124 to 176 students, in the Chongqing region of China. Many of the teens reported that their parents had left them when they were young as 5 years old.

The researchers gauged the students' feelings about being left behind, their future and fatalism, and sought to determine what helps children rise above difficult circumstances.

## **'Pull yourself up'**

Through a combination of experiments, final exam results and behavior reports, the researchers found:

- Study 1: The thought of being "left behind" had a negative effect on the teens' optimism for the future, and it increased their fatalism.

- Study 2: The thought of being "left behind" increased the teens' fatalism. Having feelings that their fate and future were not in their control dampened the number of images students had of their future selves, as well as the number of strategies they had to become their future selves, Oyserman said.
- Study 3: Students with more images of their future possibilities scored higher on the exam. Researchers also found that left-behind students who had more future self images were more likely to have behavior problems in school - unless they had strategies for attainment, Oyserman said.
- Study 4: Researchers found that left-behind students who had more strategies to attain their possible selves scored better on their exams a year later, controlling for their prior test score, and they were less likely to be depressed, Oyserman said.

Prior research has shown that left-behind children experience a higher rate of injury and illness compared to others, Oyserman said, while they face discrimination by teachers, their communities and the media.

"Part of why I wanted to look at this particular group is that China is an enormous piece of the world, both in terms of population and in terms of future trends, and Chinese parents, like any parents, are willing to sacrifice an awful lot in the hope that things will turn out better for their kids," Oyserman said.

"In our studies, even though [children](#) who are left by their [parents](#) are clearly emotionally stressed, they are not doing worse academically than the others in their classes," Oyserman said. "They seem to have gotten this message: 'Life is hard. Pull yourself up.'"

**More information:** *Journal Of Adolescence* ,

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