

Children's willpower linked to smoking habits throughout life

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Scientists from the University of Stirling have discovered a link between childhood self-control and smoking habits across life.

Behavioural Scientist Dr Michael Daly and his team examined 21,000 people from the UK tracked over four decades. The researchers found [children](#) with [low self-control](#) by age 10/11 were more likely to take up smoking in adolescence and had substantially higher rates of smoking as adults, even decades later aged 55.

Dr Daly explained: "We first saw that children with low self-control were twice as likely to smoke as adults compared to their more self-controlled peers. We then examined alternative explanations like differences in parental smoking, intelligence, and social class. Even after taking these factors into account, we found that low self-control, measured early in life before smoking is initiated, predicts a substantially raised risk of smoking throughout adulthood."

Additionally, the study found that children who lacked self-control tended to go on to smoke more cigarettes, had greater difficulty quitting smoking and relapsed to smoking at higher rates when they did manage to quit.

Self-control varies widely between children. The characteristics of those with low (vs. high) self-control in this study were identified using teacher-ratings and included poor attention, lack of persistence and impulsive behaviour. The researchers called for action to support these

young people to increase their life chances.

Dr Daly continued: "Many efforts focus exclusively on educating children about the dangers of smoking. However, our findings suggest that a complementary approach - one which increases general self-control - could have lifelong health benefits. Prior research from our team and others has indicated that raising a child with high self-control is likely to improve school grades, employment prospects, quality of relationships and mental and physical health. We can now add not [smoking](#) to that already formidable list - along with the diverse health and other benefits that non-smokers enjoy."

The participants were drawn from two nationally representative cohort studies; the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS) and the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS), with participants reporting their [smoking status](#) at five time points (ages 26 to 42 years) in the BCS and six time points (ages 23 to 55 years) in the NCDS.

More information: Michael Daly et al. Childhood Self-Control Predicts Smoking Throughout Life: Evidence From 21,000 Cohort Study Participants., *Health Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/hea0000393](#)

Provided by University of Stirling

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