

Do persistent babies make for successful adults?

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If you parent a child, teach a child, or heck, even know a child, chances are you've heard that grit will make that young person a happier and more successful adult.

Grit, the combination of pluck and perseverance has become the theme of articles and books, and is instilled just as much as it's gained through experience.

But where does it come from?

Gauging persistence in infants may be a first step, University of Washington researchers say. Too young to demonstrate grit, babies nevertheless show varying levels of effort to communicate their needs, capture another person's attention, reach for food and toys, and move from one place to another.

Further study of why infants persist, and to what end, may shed new light on how they learn and what the future yields.

"Whether a baby persists depends on a number of different factors," said Kelsey Lucca, a postdoctoral researcher in the Early Childhood Cognition Lab in the UW Department of Psychology. "We see individual differences in persistence as early as 6 months of age, so it's important to find out what's shaping those differences."

Lucca and psychology professor Jessica Sommerville wrote an article, published Aug. 16 in *Trends in Cognitive Science*, as a call to action to others in the field. Studying persistence can inform what we know about how infants make decisions and identify what they care about, as well as how behavior early in life affects academic performance, job status and even relationship success, the authors write.

There's plenty of research on grit in older children and teens, Sommerville pointed out. But "grit" requires more than persistence; it encompasses the ability to identify and work toward long-term goals—knowledge that is well beyond infancy. Sommerville and Lucca argue that the more scientists examine infant behavior such as

persistence, the more can be learned about the factors that lead to persistence in infancy and early childhood, the range of outcomes that persistence predicts, and the parenting or educational interventions that can be designed to promote persistence from an early age.

Sommerville studies cognition in infants and young children, with a focus on social and moral development. Her 2017 study, for example, examined how 17-month-olds perceive social dominance; other recent research looked at how 18-month-olds will engage in a toddler-esque form of cost-benefit analysis in deciding whether to help an adult. She and Lucca are currently evaluating how [young children](#) respond to parental praise.

Learning about infant behavior such as persistence has the potential to impact the adults children become, Sommerville said.

"Studying infants' [persistence](#) can show us what infants and [children](#) understand about themselves and how their abilities and experiences compare to other people, like parents and siblings," Sommerville said. "Infants have a much more significant sense of their abilities than previously imagined, and they are able to use this understanding to decide when and how to exert effort on a range of everyday problems. This sensitivity is central to learning because it helps [infants](#) tune into social information that is most relevant to them and their current experiences."

Provided by University of Washington

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