

The downside of being good-looking

June 27 2024



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New research challenges the notion that good looks are the key to happiness. It turns out that an attractive appearance leads to more risky behavior among young people. The more attractive a teenager is, the greater the likelihood that they will party and drink more alcohol than others. According to Professor Colin Peter Green at the Department of

Economics at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), this means that the risk of developing alcohol problems later in life increases.

The work is [published](#) in the *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*.

Boozing, sex, and drugs

In the study "Beauty, [underage drinking](#), and adolescent risky behaviors," Green and his colleagues from Germany and the United Kingdom focus on underage alcohol consumption. The goal has been to investigate how beauty can lead to risky behavior.

The researchers have looked at six types of risky behavior: drinking, [binge drinking](#), smoking, substance use, unprotected sex and unwanted pregnancy. Much of this is risky enough in itself, but can also cause problems later on in life. For example, teenage pregnancy can negatively affect both education and income, and drinking at an early age may lead to alcoholism.

Good-looking—and drinking the most

There is a direct correlation between [appearance](#) and the behaviors in which teenagers choose to engage. This applies to both sexes, but in particular, the most attractive girls are more likely to drink, and drink more, than their less conventionally attractive friends.

"Our main finding is that young people who are perceived to have the most pleasing appearance generally drink more and more often engage in binge drinking, which involves several consecutive days of drinking. The research shows that the risks they take and how they fare later on in life

are linked to their inner confidence and self-respect," says Green.

Affecting life choices

Many studies confirm that having a beautiful appearance is an advantage. The best-looking people among us are more successful in the job market and get paid more. In academia, physically attractive researchers are cited more often. Pretty female professors get better evaluations, and good-looking politicians do better in elections.

Green and his colleagues chose a slightly different approach:

"We wanted to look at how beauty affects the important life choices young people make before they become adults. We assumed that appearance might affect risky behavior that has consequences later in life," explains the NTNU professor.

30,000 young people

This is the first study to investigate the correlation between appearance and risky behavior. The data are taken from the Add Health study (Adolescent to Adult Health) from the United States, the most comprehensive longitudinal study of young people that exists.

The sample consists of more than 30,000 young people, who have been through four rounds of interviews from their early teens until they became young adults. They were asked how often and how much they have drunk in the past month, whether they have engaged in binge drinking, smoked tobacco, or taken drugs. They have also answered questions about [unprotected sex](#) and pregnancy. The answers they gave Add Health when they were between the ages of 24 and 32 reveal whether they have developed alcohol problems, for example.

Beautiful and clever

The mechanisms behind the choices young people make are complex. The best-looking young people are often popular and tend to go more to parties and places with access to alcohol. At the same time, they generally have more [self-esteem](#) than their peers who are deemed less attractive. This can protect them from drinking too much and doing even more foolish things.

It also turns out that the most attractive young people choose risky behavior that is perceived as "cool," but avoid types of [behavior](#) that are considered "uncool." Drinking is cool. Drug abuse and teenage pregnancy are not cool.

Eye of the beholder

The interviewers rated the informants' appearance on a scale from 1, "very unattractive" to 5, "very attractive," and most of the interviewers were women. What is considered beautiful is determined by the eye of the beholder, but the researchers thoroughly explain the scientific validity of this approach. They also explain how they measure popularity, self-esteem/self-respect and [personality traits](#), and how these factors affect young people's actions.

Building self-respect

Green emphasizes that it is generally important to understand what governs young people's choices.

"A young person may appear beautiful and successful, but they may also be carrying emotional baggage that can undermine their [self-confidence](#), such as an unstable home life and mental health issues. This can be a

dangerous combination," says the NTNU researcher.

Among other things, the study concludes that building confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth from childhood is important for promoting young people's health and preventing unhappy life trajectories.

More information: Colin P. Green et al, Beauty, underage drinking, and adolescent risky behaviours, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jebo.2023.09.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2023.09.011)

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Citation: The downside of being good-looking (2024, June 27) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-06-downside-good.html>

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