

Teach your children well: Focused, happier kids grow up to be healthier adults, study finds

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Children who can stay focused and don't sweat the small stuff have a better shot at good health in adulthood -- and this is especially true for girls, according to a new study.

"Certain characteristics already evident early in life are likely to spark positive or negative emotions, and also influence biological and behavioral responses to stress," said lead author Laura D. Kubzansky, PhD, of the Harvard School of Public Health. "Some traits may contribute to developing healthier behaviors and better [social relationships](#), and ultimately more resilience in mid-life.

"Supporting this idea, we found that children who were able to stay focused on a task and react less negatively to situations at age 7 reported better general health and fewer illnesses 30 years later."

These findings are reported in the May issue of *Health Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association.

Kubzansky and co-authors tracked 569 individuals from the National Collaborative Perinatal Project from age 7 to their mid-30s to see if certain personality traits influenced later health. Trained observers rated the 7-year-olds on 15 different behaviors. These behaviors were then assigned to three different personality attributes: attention (the ability to stay focused on a task and persist in solving a problem), distress-proneness (the tendency to react negatively to situations), and behavior inhibition (the tendency toward shyness, acting withdrawn and having difficulty communicating).

To determine adult health, the participants rated their health and reported whether they had any of the following illnesses: heart disease, diabetes, cancer, asthma, arthritis, stroke, bleeding ulcer,

tuberculosis or hepatitis.

For all the participants, superior attention spans and having a more positive outlook in youth affected health the most. These effects were greater for women, the researchers found. The authors suggest that women may be more sensitive to interactions among emotion, behavior and biology and, therefore, be more predisposed to certain health risks, such as heart disease, although additional research is needed to understand this more completely.

The authors found no differences in these effects across race or ethnicity; they also controlled for childhood health and socioeconomic status.

The sample consisted of 60 percent men and 40 percent women; 80 percent of participants were white and 20 percent were black. Of the sample, 76 percent reported good or excellent health and 18 percent reported illnesses.

"This longitudinal study provides more evidence that behavior and emotions generally linked to certain temperaments play a crucial role in long-term health," Kubzansky said. "Fortunately, early childhood characteristics can be shaped and guided by social, family and peer interactions. Interventions can focus on altering certain ways of responding and behaviors that frequently accompany particular traits to prevent certain diseases."

More information: "Early Manifestations of Personality and Adult Health: A Life Course Perspective," Laura D. Kubzansky, PhD, Harvard School of Public Health; Laurie T. Martin, PhD, Rand Corporation; Stephen L. Buka, PhD, Brown University; [Health Psychology](#), Vol. 13, No. 1.

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: [web](#))

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