

# Take control to become a better parent

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Most parents will agree that children present a never-ending series of behavioral challenges. Tantrums, picky eating and poor sleeping behavior are often cited as the more stressful part of raising a child. How parents deal with these challenges determines a child's physical, psychological and emotional development. But could something as

simple as your outlook on life determine how you deal with and overcome these parenting challenges?

This question has been asked by a new study, published in the open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology* and found that a parent's outlook on life can have a profound influence on the behavior of their [child](#).

"We find that the greater the degree of externality (the belief that there is little or no connection between what we do and what happens to us) rather than internality (the belief that what happens to us is connected to what we do) of parents before children are born, the greater the likelihood that children will have greater difficulties in behaving, sleeping and eating during their first five years of life", says Stephen Nowicki, Professor of Psychology at the Emory University, Atlanta, USA. "This can be explained by the behavior of internally controlled parents, which are characterized by what is called the Big 5; that is their (1) persistence, (2) feeling of responsibility, (3) pursuit of information, (4) ability to tolerate a longer delay of gratification, and (5) resistance to being coerced."

This study took advantage of the detailed information collected on over 10,000 preschool children and their parents taking part in the ALSPAC study in the UK, also known as 'Children of the 90s'. Professor Jean Golding, co-author of the study, and her team from the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom, sent questionnaires to thousands of pregnant women to obtain information about their personalities and attitudes.

They followed this up by asking these women about their prenatal preparation and the behavior of the child between 6 and 57 months old. Professor Golding's team acknowledge that this research could not have been undertaken without the voluntary cooperation of all the participants and the funding from the John Templeton Foundation.

Initially the researchers found that women with external traits, who believe there is little or no connection between what they do and what happens to them, were less likely to attend parenting classes, less likely to breast feed and less likely to ensure their child was fully immunized by 6 months of age.

In addition, the researchers examined the personality and attitude of the father, to see if this had any influence. "Being able to assess the impact of internality and externality of each partner helps to identify the relative impact and contribution of mothers' and fathers' prenatal locus of control to their child's future adjustment", explains Professor Nowicki. "It is apparent from our findings that it doesn't matter which parent is internal, if one of them, father or mother, is internal then it increases the positive effect on children's social, eating and/or sleeping behavior."

It is hoped these findings will guide programs to reduce externality and increase internality in parents, enabling them to interact more positively with their children and reduce problems in behavior, eating and sleeping. "We believe that prenatal education programs need to educate parents on how to become more internal before the child is born" says Professor Nowicki.

Further research hopes to examine if these effects are seen in older children. "The next logical step is to see if prenatal parental locus of control continues to influence children's lives when they begin to attend school. If we find that the degree of prenatal parent externality is related to children's social and academic adjustment, then it suggests intervention at the school level might be helpful to change children toward internality, which is known to protect against psychological stresses. It can also provide teachers with structured programs of instruction within which externals have been found to operate more effectively", concludes Professor Nowicki.

For further information on this interesting topic, Professor Nowicki has written a book, *Choice or Chance*, in which he describes how the locus of control (a person's external or internal viewpoint) develops and its impact on personal, social, academic and athletic performance. In *Choice or Chance*, he presents a review of what is known about how to help change the locus of control orientation in [children](#) and [parents](#). Since this is learned and not fixed, we can apply what we know about how it originates and develops to changing or strengthening locus of control.

**More information:** Stephen Nowicki et al, The Impact of Prenatal Parental Locus of Control on Children's Psychological Outcomes in Infancy and Early Childhood: A Prospective 5 Year Study, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00546](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00546)

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