

# The Key to Health, Wealth and Success: Self-Control

By [Maia Szalavitz](#)  
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Self-control may be the secret to success, according to a persuasive new [study](#) that followed 1,000 children from birth to age 32: children who showed early signs of self-mastery were not only less likely to have developed addictions or committed a crime by adulthood, but were also healthier and wealthier than their more impulsive peers.

Problems surfacing in adolescence, such as becoming a smoker or getting pregnant, accounted for about half of the bad outcomes associated with low self-control in childhood. Kids who scored low on such measures — for instance, becoming easily frustrated, lacking persistence in reaching goals or performing tasks, or having difficulty waiting their turn in line — were roughly three times more likely to wind up as poor, addicted, single parents or to have multiple health problems as adults, compared with children who behaved more conscientiously as early as age 3.

“This is a great study, mining a huge trove of data to tease apart the relationships among some really important factors that can determine the direction of our lives,” says Martha Farah, director of the Center for Neuroscience and Society at the University of Pennsylvania. “It highlights how incredibly important self-control is.”

(More on Time.com: [The Tiger Nanny: The Missing Link in the Parenting Debate](#))

Dr. Bruce Perry, professor of psychiatry at Northwestern University, agrees: “It’s a very cool study. This is taken from data from what is probably the best long-term study in our field.” (Disclosure: Perry and I have written two books together.)

The new research confirms the findings of the famous [Stanford marshmallow study](#), which found that young children who were able resist grabbing a fluffy marshmallow placed in front of them — for 15 long minutes — in order to get two of them later scored an average of 210 points higher on the SAT than kids who couldn’t wait. About one-third of the 4-to-6-year-olds studied were able to withstand the sweet temptation. As in the current research, the kids with more self-control in the marshmallow trial had better life outcomes across the board.

For the new study, the “Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study” whose results were published Monday in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers led by Duke University psychologist Terrie Moffitt followed 1,000 children in New Zealand for more than three decades.

Moffitt and her colleagues measured children’s self control on numerous occasions, getting behavior ratings from parents and teachers as well as from research staff who worked with the children. “All children have varying attention spans, and all get frustrated now and then,” she says. “But our measures indicated that a child

had low self-control only if the scores from different reporters and on different occasions all added up and pointed in the same direction.”

**(More on Time.com: [Study: ‘Hyper-Texting’ Teens More Likely to Have Had Sex, Tried Drugs](#))**

By adulthood, children in the highest self-control group were significantly less likely to have multiple health problems (11%), compared with kids in the lowest self-control group (27%). They were also much less likely to have addictions to multiple substances (3% vs. 10%, respectively), says Moffitt.

Only 10% of kids with high self-control grew up to have low income — less than \$20,000 per year — compared with 32% of their more impulsive peers. Forty-three percent of the least disciplined children had a criminal record by age 32, compared with just 13% of the most conscientious. And as adults, 58% of kids who had low self-control had become a single parent; this was true for only 26% of the high self-control group.

In previous research, researchers have found that impulsiveness and out-of-control behavior are more common in children who have experienced loss, trauma or violence — factors that tend to affect poorer kids more than rich ones. “If you have adverse experiences, that’s going to turn up the stress response,” says Perry, explaining that stress may affect the proper development of the frontal cortex in children’s brains, which is responsible for self-control and for “putting the brakes” on the brain’s lower brain regions. “If you have lower self-control, you’ll have a harder time in school, you won’t learn as efficiently, you’re more likely to act on frustration, which means more social problems and you might end up with legal problems.”

Although Moffitt’s study found some “concentration of low self-control children in homes with low income,” the author says, the correlation was small. “There were plenty of well-to-do children with very low self-control.”

**(More on Time.com: [More Than 10% of Young Adults With STDs Claim Abstinence](#))**

In fact, poor children who scored best on measures of self-control were more likely than others to become wealthy in later life. “One interpretation of the findings is that children with high self-control who began life in low-income homes ended up as adults with higher incomes,” says Moffitt.

Not surprisingly, many of the lapses in self-discipline that led to the worst life outcomes occurred during the teenage years: teens who had scored lowest in measures of self-control in early childhood were the most likely to make mistakes in the first place. And even those low self-control teens who managed to avoid smoking, pregnancy and alcohol or other drug problems, and stayed in school did worse later in life than their more disciplined peers. “This suggests that there might be a better return on investment from early childhood interventions,” Moffitt says.

“Trial and error is a healthy part of teenage life,” she adds. “But teens with good self-control engage in trial and error strategically, and they appreciate the difference between a useful learning experiment and real danger. I’m convinced that teenagers can be coached on this distinction.”

Interventions aimed at improving self-control and behavior throughout childhood are now being studied, but so far, research has not identified a single best approach. The most effective programs are small and tightly focused on increasing self-control itself — as opposed to fighting bullying, drugs or other problem behaviors — according to Moffitt.

Intriguingly, about 7% of the children in Moffitt’s study dramatically increased their own self-control over the course of the research, suggesting that such change is possible. But researchers don’t know how or why this happened. “Perhaps some of them attended a school that stressed achievement and provided structure. Perhaps

some of them experienced changes in family life, such as parents' changing marital status that brought more structure into the child's daily life. We don't really know," Moffitt says.

"We have deeply held cultural beliefs about self-control — the importance of thinking about the future, persisting with the chores of life — which show up in fables like 'The Ant and the Grasshopper' or 'The Tortoise and the Hare,'" says Farah. "This research shows that there is great wisdom there — delaying gratification and hanging in are aspects of self-control that bring great benefit."

That's probably welcome news to all those tiger mothers' ears. While tiger parenting may err when it veers into harshness, the evidence in favor of teaching the discipline of hard work and repeated practice only continues to grow.