**Self-control predicts health and wealth**

**Posted on 25/01/2011**



*Toddler's hand*

Children as young as three with low levels of self-control are more likely to have physical health problems, financial difficulties and a criminal record in later life regardless of background and IQ, according to a new King's College London study funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC).

A team of scientists from the Institute of Psychiatry at King’s, Duke University in the USA and the University of Otago in New Zealand used data from two large studies to investigate how self-control skills might influence children’s chances in life. The Dunedin Study followed 1,000 children, born between April 1972 and March 1973 in Dunedin, New Zealand, from birth to the age of 32. The second MRC-funded study, the Environmental–Risk Longitudinal Twin Study (E-RISK) followed 500 non-identical British twins born between 1994 and 1995 until the age of 12.

Those taking part in the studies completed a range of physical tests and interviews to assess a range of genetic and environmental factors that can shape children's lives. Self-control skills such as conscientiousness, self-discipline and perseverance were assessed by teachers, parents, observers and the participants themselves. Measures included a child’s tolerance to frustration, their ability to stick to a task, their persistence in reaching goals, and the ability to wait their turn.

Scientists observed that those children with low self-control were more likely to have health problems in later life including high blood pressure, weight problems, lung airflow limitation and sexually transmitted infections. They were also more likely to be dependent on substances, such as tobacco, alcohol and harder drugs, rear a child in a single-parent household, have difficulty with money management and have a criminal record.

The research found that children with lower self-control skills tended to leave school without qualifications, start smoking and become a parent of an unplanned baby during adolescence. However, even those who had completed their education, were non-smokers and were not parents still had poorer outcomes at age 32, if they had low-self control as children.

**Early intervention**

The E-RISK data confirmed that despite shared family background, the twin who scored lowest on self-control at age five was more likely to begin smoking, perform poorly in school, and engage in antisocial behaviour at age 12.

Terrie Moffitt, Professor of Social Behaviour and Development at King’s, who led the study said: *'Mastering self-control and managing impulses are some of the earliest demands that society places on children. Our study shows, for the first time, that will power as a child really does influence your chances of a healthy and wealthy adulthood, even accounting for other variables such as background and IQ.*

*'Early intervention to help even small improvements to a child’s self-control could not only reap benefits to individual lives but also reduce a panoply of societal costs, save taxpayers money and promote prosperity.'*

Professor Chris Kennard, chair of the MRC Mental Health and Neuroscience Board, said: *'This research includes data from two cohort studies of people born in different countries, across different generations and provides compelling evidence that an individual’s self control is a key ingredient in their future success in life. By understanding how our childhood behaviour and development shapes our adult life, we can pinpoint windows of opportunity for change. The MRC supports this kind of gold standard research to provide the best possible scientific evidence on which effective health policies can be based.'*

The study was funded by Medical Research Council, the US National Institute on Aging and the Health Research Council of New Zealand*.*

‘A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety’ is published today in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

**Notes to editors**

**King's College London**

King's College London is one of the top 25 universities in the world (2010 QS international world rankings), The Sunday Times 'University of the Year 2010/11' and the fourth oldest in England. A research-led university based in the heart of London, King's has nearly 23,000 students (of whom more than 8,600 are graduate students) from nearly 140 countries, and some 5,500 employees. King's is in the second phase of a £1 billion redevelopment programme which is transforming its estate.

King's has an outstanding reputation for providing world-class teaching and cutting-edge research. In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise for British universities, 23 departments were ranked in the top quartile of British universities; over half of our academic staff work in departments that are in the top 10 per cent in the UK in their field and can thus be classed as world leading. The College is in the top seven UK universities for research earnings and has an overall annual income of nearly £450 million.

King's has a particularly distinguished reputation in the humanities, law, the sciences (including a wide range of health areas such as psychiatry, medicine, nursing and dentistry) and social sciences including international affairs. It has played a major role in many of the advances that have shaped modern life, such as the discovery of the structure of DNA and research that led to the development of radio, television, mobile phones and radar. It is the largest centre for the education of healthcare professionals in Europe; no university has more Medical Research Council Centres.

King's College London and Guy's and St Thomas', King's College Hospital and South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trusts are part of King's Health Partners. King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre (AHSC) is a pioneering global collaboration between one of the world's leading research-led universities and three of London's most successful NHS Foundation Trusts, including leading teaching hospitals and comprehensive mental health services. For more information, visit: [www.kingshealthpartners.org](http://www.kingshealthpartners.org/)