



Robert Wood Johnson  
Foundation

# How Children's Social Skills Impact Success in Adulthood

Findings from a 20-Year Study on the Outcomes  
of Children Screened in Kindergarten



Research Overview  
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## Research Overview

Imagine that eight simple questions could let you know which children in a kindergarten classroom were on track to end up in prison or in college, addicted or employed, and by extension, sick or well. In a new study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, researchers show how a simple assessment of a child's social competence skills in kindergarten can predict his or her outcomes in early adulthood.

Tracking a cohort of 753 diverse kindergarten students for two decades, Pennsylvania State University and Duke University researchers found that kindergarten students who exhibited traits—such as being more likely to share, cooperate, or be helpful with other kids—were also more likely to be successful as young adults. In contrast, students who exhibited weaker social competency skills were more likely to drop out of high school, abuse drugs and alcohol, and need greater government assistance.

This new research comes on the heels of a growing body of findings, which demonstrate that early learning and development has a significant impact on a child's overall success throughout their lives.

This study makes the case for integrating social and emotional development into early childhood investments. Social competence skills like a child's ability to manage his or her feelings, maintain positive relationships, and set and achieve goals can be developed and learned. Making critical investments in children's social and emotional development now can help ensure all our children achieve and succeed to their greatest potential.

### The Impact of Childhood Trauma

Investing in social competence could have great returns for children who are exposed to early trauma (violence, abuse, or neglect). Early trauma has been shown to harm a child's brain chemistry, which often leads to difficulties controlling impulses, managing stress, trusting others, and staying focused in class. Early intervention to promote healthy social and emotional development, as this study suggests, might improve outcomes for these children over the long term.



# How the Study Worked

Leveraging a two-decade-long research study, Drs. Damon Jones and Mark Greenberg from Pennsylvania State University and Dr. Max Crowley from Duke University investigated whether the social competence skills children exhibit in kindergarten could predict how they fare as young adults. The researchers studied data from the [Fast Track Research Project](#), a comprehensive intervention providing academic tutoring and lessons in developing social skills and regulating their behaviors. The research design followed how children develop across their lives.

In 1991, kindergarten teachers from four Fast Track locations (Durham, N.C., Nashville, Tenn., Seattle, Wash. and central Pennsylvania) rated the degree to which a cohort of 753 children demonstrated social competence skills in their classroom interactions. Students were evaluated on capabilities such as “resolves peer problems,” “listens to others,” “shares materials,” “cooperates” and is “helpful” on a scale from “not at all” to “very well.” Eight of these measures of social competence were then averaged into a composite score for each child to represent the overall level of positive social skills and behavior they exhibited.

Fast Track Researchers then followed these children for the next two decades, recording both positive and negative milestones for all students until they turned 25. Using data sources including official records, reports from parents, and self-reporting from the participants themselves, researchers noted whether the students obtained high school diplomas, college degrees and full-time jobs. They also recorded whether students developed a criminal record or substance abuse problems, among other negative outcomes. Using statistical models, which control for other background characteristics such as early academic ability and family circumstances and income, researchers were able to isolate the degree to which kindergarten students with higher composite scores in social competence had better outcomes as young adults.

Children included in this study did not receive any additional intervention or treatment to improve their social competence skills after kindergarten. For the total sample cohort, 58 percent were boys, roughly 50 percent were European American, 46 percent were African American, and 4 percent were of other ethnic backgrounds.



# Key Findings

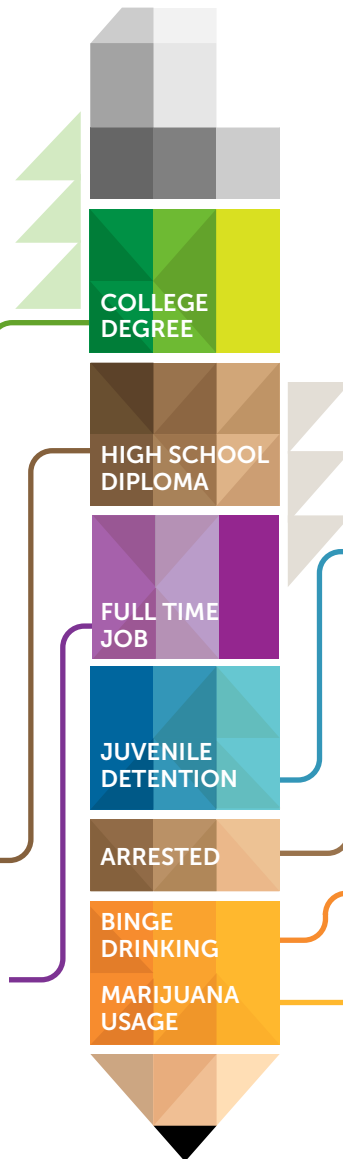


## Social Competence in Childhood Leads to Success in Adulthood

Overall, research findings show that teacher-rated social competence in kindergarten was a consistent and significant predictor of future outcomes across all major domains: education, employment, criminal justice, substance use and mental health.

For example, for every one-point increase in a child's social competence score in kindergarten, he/she was:

- Twice as likely to attain a college degree in early adulthood;
- 54% more likely to earn a high school diploma; and
- 46% more likely to have a full-time job at the age of 25.



## Lower scores in kindergarten were also able to predict greater negative outcomes later on.

For example, for every one-point decrease in a child's social competence score in kindergarten, he/she had:

- 54% higher chance of having negative interactions with the police;
- 64% higher chance of having spent time in juvenile detention;
- 67% higher chance of having been arrested by early adulthood;
- 82% higher chance of being in or on a waiting list for public housing;
- 52% higher rate of recent binge drinking; and
- 82% higher rate of recent marijuana usage.



Study results showed that the greater the difference between students' social competence scores in kindergarten, the more pronounced the difference in their outcomes by the age of 25. For example, children who scored "well"—at the higher end of the spectrum for social competence—were *four times more likely to obtain a college degree* than children who scored "a little"—at the lower end of the spectrum.



# Implications For Action



Above all else, this research shows that social competence has a greater impact on future outcomes than scientists previously understood. It also shows that brief and low-cost assessments can be used to measure a child's social competence skills. How can these insights be used to help ensure that more children have the opportunity to thrive?

## **Social Skills Can Be Learned and Taught**

The study shows that young children with more developed social competence skills are more likely to live healthier, successful lives as adults. The good news is that children's brains are highly "plastic" and often in the best state to develop these skills. That means that caretakers can help foster social and emotional well-being in children, both before and after kindergarten. Though many social and emotional developmental [programs have a proven track record](#) of building social competence, they are not in widespread use. It is going to be important to make these tools available to more families and more schools, especially during a child's early years—the peak time for absorbing new information. By working together, communities could ensure that all children have a strong foundation for healthy social and emotional development as early as possible.

# Implications For Action

## Make Screening More Widespread

In today's world, it is normal for children to be measured and monitored for both their physical health and academic progress. Countries like Canada and Australia have developed a standardized “checkup” for a child's social and emotional development.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing comparable in the U.S.

This research shows how a simple measure of a young child's social competence skills can serve as a reliable predictor of their future outcomes across many different domains. This study warrants serious consideration by educators, policymakers, parents and other stakeholders to explore the possibility of screening for and investing in all children's social and emotional development in schools.

## Intervene Early to Save Taxpayer Dollars

Levels of social competence have major cost-benefit implications for individual children and families—and for the nation as a whole.

Consider just one of the outcomes measured in this study: high school dropout. [If the U.S. were to reduce the annual number of high school dropouts](#) by 700,000, it would generate \$90 billion in tax revenue per year because those high school graduates would be significantly more employable.<sup>2</sup> In just 11 years, that adds up to nearly \$1 trillion in revenue. The cost-savings aren't only for the government, though. By staying in school, young people grow up to live longer, healthier lives and incur fewer health costs; findings show a high school graduate is [50 percent less likely to use Medicaid](#) than a dropout.<sup>3</sup>

Action to address social and emotional development becomes even more imperative when we add in the potential savings we would reap from a reduction in incarceration rates, drug and alcohol treatment services, and government supports like housing, unemployment benefits and food stamps.

At a minimum, the savings from avoided costs could easily offset a meaningful investment in social and emotional development of our nation's children.





Building the social competence of our children is an essential part of building a Culture of Health in America.



# Conclusion

Building the social competence of our children is an essential part of building a Culture of Health in America. Common sense tells us that social and emotional development is important to success in school, work and life. This research tells us precisely how much is at stake when our children have or lack the necessary social and emotional skills. Because it is practical and cost-effective to teach those skills, our nation should do everything it can to provide all children with a strong foundation for social and emotional development from the start. Doing so would not only improve the life trajectory of millions of children each year; it would put our country on a path to a far more prosperous future.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Engle P, Fernald L, Kariger P and Raikes A. *Examining Early Child Development in Low-Income Countries: A Toolkit for the Assessment of Children in the First Five Years of Life*. The World Bank, 2009. [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCY/Resources/395766-1187899515414/Examining\\_ECD\\_Toolkit\\_FULL.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCY/Resources/395766-1187899515414/Examining_ECD_Toolkit_FULL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Levin H and Rouse C. “The True Cost of High School Dropouts.” *The New York Times*, January 25, 2012. [www.nytimes.com/2012/01/26/opinion/the-true-cost-of-high-school-dropouts.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/26/opinion/the-true-cost-of-high-school-dropouts.html?_r=0).

<sup>3</sup> *Well and Well-Off: Decreasing Medicaid and Health-Care Costs by Increasing Educational Attainment*. The Alliance for Excellent Education, July 10, 2013. <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/well-and-well-off-decreasing-medicare-and-health-care-costs-by-increasing-educational-attainment/>.

## CREDITS

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