



# How Children's Social Competence Impacts Their Well- Being in Adulthood

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## Overview

A 20-year retrospective study, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and published in the July 2015 issue of the [\*American Journal of Public Health\*](#), suggests that kindergarten students who are more inclined to exhibit “social competence” traits—such sharing, cooperating, or helping other kids—may be more likely to attain higher education and well-paying jobs. In contrast, students who exhibit weaker social competency skills may be more likely to drop out of high school, abuse drugs and alcohol, and need government assistance. This brief provides an overview and major findings from this study and implications for further action.

## How the Study Worked

In the early 1990’s, kindergarten teachers from four [\*\*Fast Track Research Project\*\*](#) locations—Durham, N.C., Nashville, Tenn., Seattle, Wash. and central Pennsylvania—rated the degree to which a cohort of 753 kindergarteners demonstrated social competence skills in their classroom interactions using an eight-point scale. The children were evaluated on capabilities such as “resolves peer problems,” “listens to others,” “shares materials,” “cooperates” and is “helpful” on a 5-point scale from “not at all” to “very well.” Eight of these measures of social competence were averaged into a composite score for each child to represent the overall level of positive social skills and behavior they exhibited.

Researchers Damon Jones, PhD and Mark Greenberg, PhD from Pennsylvania State University and Max Crowley, PhD from Duke University then followed these children for the next two decades, examining whether these assessments could predict how these same children would fare by early adulthood.

Using data sources including official records, reports from parents, and self-

reporting from the participants themselves, researchers recorded both positive and negative milestones for all students until they turned 25. They noted whether the students obtained high school diplomas, college degrees and full-time jobs, and also recorded whether students developed a criminal record or substance abuse problems, among other negative outcomes.

Using statistical models, which control for background characteristics, researchers were able to associate the degree to which kindergarten students with higher composite scores in social competence had better outcomes as young adults. The 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

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Overall, research findings show that teacher-rated social competence in kindergarten was a consistent and significant indicator of both positive and negative future outcomes across all major domains: education, employment, criminal justice, substance use and mental health. Study results also showed the greater the difference between students' social competence scores in kindergarten, the more pronounced the difference in their outcomes by the age of 25. Children who scored "well"—at the higher end of the spectrum for social competence—for example, were four times more likely to obtain a college degree than children who scored "a little"—at the lower end of the spectrum.

## A Few Highlights

For every one-point increase on the 5-point scale 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.

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

- 67% higher chance of having been arrested by early adulthood;
- 82% higher rate of recent marijuana usage; and
- 82% higher chance of being in or on a waiting list for public housing.

## Questions for Further Discussion

The fact that early social and emotional skill development is linked to adolescent and adult wellbeing raises important additional questions to consider.

### *Expanding Learning Opportunities*

How can we intervene earlier to help children who are behind in their social and emotional development? How can we scale the successes of existing **programs that have shown a strong track record** of building social competence skills in children?

### *The Role of Screening*

How can educators integrate easy-to-use assessments that measure the social and emotional development of children into classroom instruction? When should we use these assessments?

### *Return on Investment*

What are the implications of these findings for an assessment of the economic return on investment associated with any evidence-based programs that can be shown to improve social competence in children?

## Conclusion

This research study shows us that young children with more developed social competence skills are more likely to live healthier, successful lives as adults—through the education and jobs they attain and their overall quality of life. Building on existing research that shows links between social emotional development and outcomes in adulthood, this study helps make a stronger case for recognizing children’s social competence as an essential building block in any Culture of Health.

## Credits

Funding for this study on social competence came from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The Fast Track Study received grant support from The National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute on Drug, U.S. Department of Education, and The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

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