

# Character is the key to poorer children securing top jobs, says Irish study



**The research called for schools to put more focus on improving personal traits**

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Bright children who lack “grit” and “resilience” are more likely to end up with worse jobs and lower salaries than their classmates with good social and emotional skills, according to a new study.

The research, which called for schools to put more focus on improving personal traits, also found that “character” boosted poorer children’s chances of breaking free of deprivation and going on to get a “top job”.

Children of professional parents are more likely to end up in higher-earning jobs and researchers calculated that 10 per cent of this advantage was due to better character skills.

It was extremely “worrying”, said the report, that poorer children showed worse behavior, self-control and emotional health by the age of three than those from wealthier homes. It called for early intervention to boost children’s social skills before they start school.

Comprising three different studies by the Institute of Education, National University of Ireland Galway and research consultants – the study was jointly commissioned by the Early Intervention Foundation, the Cabinet Office and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.

They called for all those working with children to put more emphasis on character building and warned that schools risk putting too much emphasis on literacy and numeracy and fail to equip pupils with the life skills needed to be happy and healthy. Self-control was the most important skill children should be taught, followed by self-esteem and the belief that their actions make a difference.

The study found social and emotional learning was hugely variable in the youth and education sectors, so although some children and young people received it many did not.

Lucy Atkinson, the deputy headteacher at Highfield Community primary school in Sunderland, which has won awards for its work on character building and emotional skills, believes her school’s programme has had an enormous impact on children’s academic achievements and life chances.

“Our school is in a deprived area and a lot of children were demonstrating difficult behaviour, we had high levels of exclusions, attendance was a concern and academic results weren’t what they should have been,” Ms Atkinson said. “Since we introduced the programme we have seen a dramatic change in pupils’ self-control and regulation.

“Exclusions have dropped to virtually nothing, attendance has improved and academically we are now hitting national averages. Teachers can focus on teaching rather than having to stop lessons because of disruption.”

Baroness Gillian Shephard, the deputy chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, said the Government had been too slow in its response to reducing child poverty and boosting social mobility: “Access to professional jobs is an important measure of social mobility. This research shows the importance of social and emotional skills – independent of academic results – in helping young people into these roles. Yet it also shows the gap in social and emotional skills between those from disadvantaged backgrounds.”

