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## For Success in Life, Character Matters as Much as Academic Skill, Study Says

By [Evie Blad](#) on October 22, 2014 11:58 AM | [No comments](#)

Non-cognitive skills and **character competencies have as much of an effect on success as academic skill**, researchers from the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution conclude in a study released today.

The study focuses on the "performance character strengths" of drive—defined as "the ability to apply oneself to a task and stick with it"—and prudence—defined as "the ability to defer gratification and look to the future." The study's authors emphasize that the helpful non-cognitive skills they explored can be nurtured and developed in students.

The research comes as schools and student advocates increasingly work to emphasize character in the classroom and develop new ways to measure, track, and develop non-cognitive strengths in students.

### How did researchers measure character skills?

The researchers created a composite score derived from the the Behavior Problems Index hyperactivity scale in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. That survey was first administered to mothers of participant children in 1979, when the children were ages 5 or 6, and again when the children were 10 or 11. Mothers assessed their children's ability to concentrate, their impulsiveness, restlessness, and other factors.

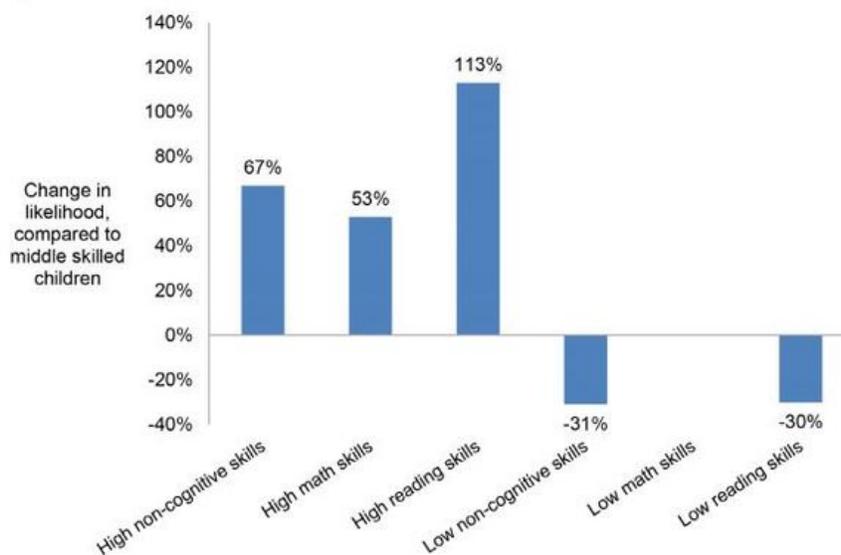
The researchers found that children whose composite scores showed greater character strengths were more likely to graduate high school with a GPA greater than 2.5, less likely to be arrested as an adolescent, less likely to become pregnant as teens, and more likely to graduate from college.

"So: Character matters. Children who learn and can exhibit character strengths attain more years of education, earn more, and likely outperform other individuals in other areas of life," they write, adding that research has shown that character strengths can be developed. "Of course, many other factors matter a great deal, too: most obviously cognitive skills, but also a host of cultural, social and education variables."

And the findings about educational outcomes held true, even after researchers controlled for other factors, such as family income and race.

The correlation between character skills and academic success is comparable in size to the relationship between doing well on math and reading measures—also measured through a composite score derived from the longitudinal study—on educational attainment, researchers write.

**Figure 12: Drive and Prudence Matter as Much as Book Smarts for HS Graduation**



### How could this change conversations about equity?

Researchers noted that certain life factors, such as having a teen mother, correlated with weaker scores on the character index. There are all kinds of conclusions educators could draw from that. One of them: addressing these non-cognitive gaps early could help disadvantaged children get ahead later in life.

From the study:

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"If character strengths significantly impact life outcomes, disparities in their development may matter for social mobility and equality. As well as gaps in income, wealth, educational quality, housing, and family stability, are there also gaps in the development of these important character strengths? Relatively little research has been done on the distribution of character strengths or non-cognitive skills across the income distribution or by class. But what evidence that exists suggests there are quite marked gaps.

As with cognitive skills, gaps in non-cognitive strengths open up at an early age and persist throughout an individual's life. For example, gaps between poor and non-poor infants in behaviors such as paying attention to tasks, adapting to changes in materials, and displaying social engagement are visible as early as nine months of age and widen by the age of two."

I'm sure this study will raise questions and insights from readers. I'd love to hear your thoughts.

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