

## Educational aspirations and adolescent health behaviour

### In a nutshell

- There is evidence that adolescents who expect to go on to university after leaving school are more likely to take part in health-promoting activities such as exercise and healthy eating and less likely to engage in risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking or sex.
- These findings suggest that it may be possible to improve adolescent health outcomes indirectly, by targeting interventions around future academic aspirations.

### Importance

Adolescence is a critical stage for healthy development and many factors influence both health and educational outcomes during this period. However, finding effective ways to improve adolescent health can be challenging since many factors are beyond the control of the individual, and also because there is a risk of young people ignoring or rejecting health messages that they hear too often.

### What we know

- Previous research from the USA, Norway and Finland shows that children who plan to attend university after leaving school are more likely to exercise and eat well, and to avoid fast food, sex, smoking and other risky behaviours.
- This suggests that encouraging young people to pursue academic success could have a positive effect on adolescent health as well as educational outcomes.
- Academic expectations may be more amenable to public health interventions than other factors which affect health, such as family and social background.



### What the researchers did

- The researchers used data from just under 2,000 pupils in 4th year at secondary school (approx age 15 years) who had taken part in the Scottish Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children survey (HBSC) in 2010.
- Pupils were asked to complete a series of questions about their health behaviours, family life, perceived academic ability and planned destination on leaving school.
- Other questions allowed the researchers to calculate the socioeconomic background of pupils based on where they live as well as the employment status of their parents.

## What they found

- Just over half of the pupils in the sample said that they planned to go to university after leaving school (54%). The figure was higher for females than males (60% v 47%), and for young people from more affluent backgrounds (62% of pupils, compared to 44% from low affluence backgrounds).
- Pupils who expected that they would go on to university after leaving school were significantly more likely to take part in health-promoting activities such as exercise and eating a healthy diet and less likely to engage in health-compromising behaviours such as smoking, taking drugs or drinking alcohol.
- These findings were the same regardless of whether the children came from affluent or less affluent backgrounds and whether their father lived at home with them.
- The researchers suggest that the perceived link between going to university and better long-term health and economic outcomes gives young people a sense of optimism and a sense of control about their future. This in turn leads them to invest in their long-term health.
- This might mean that interventions which motivate adolescents to have long-term academic goals could lead to a broader improvement in their health behaviours.
- Such interventions would also be a way to improve adolescent health without having to repeat messages about health behaviour, and so reducing the chances of young people rejecting, or becoming complacent about, the more direct health messages they are used to hearing.

## Issues to consider

- These findings are based on a representative sample of schoolchildren in Scotland.
- The measures of health, family affluence and future expectations were self-reported.
- The study looked at a single snapshot in time, so it is not possible to say from these findings whether a healthier lifestyle came before or after the decision to go on to university. However other studies suggest that health-protective behaviours are a consequence of having higher academic aspirations.

## What does this mean for my school?

- The ideas presented here are at an early stage, but they suggest that the health of children might be improved by encouraging them to have long-term academic aspirations.
- This positive effect was found to be true regardless of the social and family background of the children and so academic aspiration may offer an alternative approach for health interventions to more traditional public health campaigns.

Based on: **Whitehead, R., Currie, D., Inchley, J. & Currie, C. (2015) Educational expectations and adolescent health behaviour: an evolutionary approach. International Journal of Public Health**  
Full research paper at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-015-0692-9>

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey is a cross-national survey of school students which collects data every four years on 11-, 13- and 15-year-old boys' and girls' health and well-being, social environments and health behaviours. Find out more about the HBSC at [www.hbsc.org](http://www.hbsc.org) and read the Scottish 2014 Survey report at [bit.ly/hbsc-scot-2014](http://bit.ly/hbsc-scot-2014)

Find out more on the SHINE website: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/shine/>

MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit

