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PSYCHOLOGY OF PARENTING:
New study finds that mother’s personality measured during pregnancy predicts how well children perform in GCSEs

Babies born to mothers who hold a stronger belief that their fate is in their own hands and not down to luck tend to perform better in their GCSE exams 16 years later. That is the central finding of research by the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) published today.

The study analyses data from the Children of the 90s project, which is tracking the lives of more than 10,000 young people born in the Bristol area in the early 1990s. The data includes a psychological measure of their mothers’ expectations about how much their own actions influence their life outcomes, collected during the first trimester of pregnancy.

This psychological measure – known as ‘locus of control’ – strongly predicts how well the children performed academically in high-stakes exams at the age of 16.

The locus of control measure is designed to capture individuals’ beliefs about whether the outcomes of their actions are contingent on what they do (‘internal control orientation’) or on events outside their personal control (‘external control orientation’).

One of the CEP research team, Warn Lekfuangfu, explains:

‘Previous studies have shown that compared with people who have a strongly external locus of control, people who have a strongly internal locus of control tend to invest more in their education.

‘They also tend to live a healthier lifestyle, as well as search for a job much more intensively when unemployed.

‘Our study provides new evidence that they also tend to make better parents.’

Dr Francesca Cornaglia, an economist from Queen Mary University, says that the influence of mothers’ personality is substantial:

‘Holding other things constant – including family background, mothers’ education and children’s own locus of control – we find that children whose mothers ranked in the top 25% of the internal locus of control scale tend to obtain total GCSE scores around 17% higher than children whose mothers ranked in the bottom 25%.’

Professor Nattavudh Powdthavee, a senior author of the study, says that part of the observed relationship could be explained by the differences in attitudes towards parenting between mothers who have a strongly internal locus of control and mothers who have a strongly external locus of control:
‘Mothers who have a higher perceived sense of control over their life early on tend to believe in a more hands-on approach to parenting.

‘This is simply because they strongly believe that their actions will make a difference in their child’s life.

‘Consequently, they tend to engage their children in more cognitively stimulating activities such as reading and singing, compared with an average mother.

‘This seems to give their children a head start in terms of cognitive development compared with other children.’

The fourth member of the CEP research team, Nele Warrinnier, concludes:

‘One of the longstanding debates in scientific research is what matters more – Nature or Nurture?

‘While our study does not offer a definitive answer to this important question, it suggests that just parents having the belief that Nurture matters could potentially make a significant difference to their children’s lives.’

ENDS

Notes for editors:

The new research report – ‘Locus of Control and Its Intergenerational Implications for Early Childhood Skill Formation’ – was conducted by a team of researchers from the CEP at the London School of Economics, Queen Mary University and the University of Melbourne.

The report is published today as CEP Discussion Paper No. 1293 http://cep.lse.ac.uk/_new/publications/series.asp?prog=CEP

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