

What Childhood Traits Predict Adult Success?

By Herbert J. Walberg, Ph.D. and Edward A Wynne, Ph.D.

Successful people – those with recognized achievements – have been studied for centuries. Walberg and Wynne (1994), distilled the research on successful adults and found five traits that are highly predictive of adult success and eminence. They are:

1. **Hard Work.** The authors describe the notion of “workaholic” and all its negative connotations as an invention of the 20th century and go on to describe how society used to value extremely hard work. Successful adults were children who were unafraid of hard work.
2. **Personal Knowledge.** There is no doubt that successful people are well-informed in a variety of areas and can easily apply knowledge from one field to another. Walberg and Wynne caution against regarding retrieved information as personal knowledge and forward the idea that personal understanding is the ability to make immediate associations from large and varied knowledge bases.
3. **Support and Criticism.** Successful adults had “strong support and significant criticism” as children. Polite, universal acceptance of children’s responses reduces their ability to apply logic and to figure out the world. Children’s views should be challenged. Children should be allowed to test their mettle by close monitoring, criticism and personalized support.
4. **Making and Keeping Commitments.** How do children learn to choose goals they should pursue? Walberg and Wynne stated that “classrooms provide few opportunities for students to commit themselves to wise, arduous goals” and that children need lots of chances to learn how and when to commit their energies.
5. **Successfully Completing Difficult Tasks.** Finishing meaningful work results when one makes wise choices and persists in those choices. The authors made a case for allowing children to develop specialized talents at a young age instead of the popular notion of enduring long periods of school to prepare for “real life.” They encouraged difficult tasks at home and school that require realistic long-term goals.

Herbert J. Walberg, Ph.D. and Edward A. Wynne, Ph.D. at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

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