

Study finds strong link between childhood opportunities and educational attainment, earnings as a young adult

September 26 2024



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

The number of educational opportunities that children accrue at home, in early education and care, at school, in afterschool programs, and in their communities as they grow up are strongly linked to their

educational attainment and earnings in early adulthood, according to new research. The results indicate that the large opportunity gaps between low- and high-income households from birth through the end of high school largely explain differences in educational and income achievement between students from different backgrounds.

These findings come from a 26-year [longitudinal study published](#) in the *Educational Researcher* journal. The research was conducted by Eric Dearing (Boston College), Andres S. Bustamante (University of California–Irvine), Henrik D. Zachrisson (University of Oslo), and Deborah Lowe Vandell (University of California–Irvine).

Their study is the first to directly document opportunities and [opportunity](#) gaps as they accrue across early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence in multiple key areas of child development.

Using a 12-point index of opportunities, the authors found that about two thirds of children from [low-income households](#) experience no more than one opportunity between birth and high school. Most high-income youth experience six or more opportunities.

The strength of the relationship between opportunities and early adult outcomes was strongest for low-income children. Moving from zero to four opportunities increased the odds of low-income children graduating from a four-year college from about 10% to 50% and increased annual salaries by about \$10,000 per year.

"For the first time, we are able to directly measure how large opportunity gaps are and how seriously they impact outcomes of low- and high-income students," said study co-author Eric Dearing, a professor at Boston College and executive director of the Mary E. Walsh Center for Thriving Children. "These gaps are very large and appear to be a primary explanation for large gaps in attainment for children born into low-

versus high-income households."

The authors found that the opportunity gap was a more powerful predictor of [educational attainment](#) than early childhood poverty.

The study was part of the National Institutes of Health's NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, in which 814 children from low-, middle-, and high-income families were followed from birth through age 26 with frequent gold standard measurements of their developmental contexts and experiences from early childhood through adolescence, between 1991 and 2017.

For educational institutions and their leaders, Dearing stressed that educational initiatives that tackle children's lives inside and outside of the classroom offer uniquely powerful chances to narrow cumulative opportunity gaps.

"Beyond what schools are able to do, narrowing gaps in attainment will likely require comprehensive public policies that offer systemic changes to the children's chances of educational opportunities," Dearing said.

More information: Dearing, E. et al. Accumulation of Opportunities Predicts the Educational Attainment and Adulthood Earnings of Children Born into Low- Versus Higher-Income Households, *Educational Researcher* (2024). [DOI: 10.3102/0013189X241283456](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X241283456)

Provided by American Educational Research Association

Citation: Study finds strong link between childhood opportunities and educational attainment, earnings as a young adult (2024, September 26) retrieved 27 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-09-strong-link-childhood-opportunities-young.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.