It is back to school time, but rather than waxing nostalgic about our memories (those smells of chalk, mixed with industrial strength cleaning fluid, those endless echoing halls, stacked-up lockers and glimpses of friends who seemed transformed by summer) or worrying about how your children are going to fare (do they have the right classes and extra-curricular activities, what will their teachers be like?), we should be paying attention to the findings of a study from New Zealand:

The best back-to-school message comes from this four-year old study: Self Control=Success.

A landmark study you may never have heard of
The Dunedin Multidisciplinary Heath and Development Study hasn't gained the ubiquity—the enormous public awareness and name recognition—of Walter Mischel's Marshmallow Test, but it should!
I see it as a landmark study because it is comprehensive, it's rigorous, and it's longitudinal, following more than 1000 children born in one city in one year through the age of 32, with a 96% retention rate! Even more important, has findings that are quite practical.

In sum, the study team, led by Terrie E. Moffitt of Duke University, found that children with more self control were healthier and wealthier in their 30s, regardless of their own families' background. This is a truly stunning finding.

How was self control measured?
The researchers used nine different measures of self control. When the children were 3 and 5 years old, the researchers observed the children. When they were 5, 7, 9 and 11 years old, the researchers asked their parents and teachers to report on whether the children could pay attention, could manage their aggression and behavior, and were persistent. All of these measures of self control were strongly statistically related to each other and could be turned into one measure that tapped self control.

How was self control linked to health?
When the children turned 32, the researchers measured their health through physical exams and laboratory tests that included cardiovascular health, respiratory and dental problems, and weight. They found that the children who had higher self control were healthier as adults even when the researchers accounted for their social economic class and IQ.

In addition, the researchers looked at substance dependence (smoking, drinking or other drugs). Again, the findings showed the adults who had better self control were less likely to have drug or alcohol problems.

**How was self control linked to wealth?**
Not surprisingly, those who were more advantaged as children were more advantaged as adults. But, over and above these differences was self control. Children's self control was predictive of the positions they achieved as adults and how much money they earned.

Put another way, those with less self control as children were less likely to save for the future, and had fewer financial resources (like home ownership, investments funds, etc.). They also had more financial and credit problems.

**How was self control linked to crime?**
Again, the findings point to self control. Children with better self control were less likely to have been convicted of criminal offenses.

**Does self control change over time?**
Yes, it can. Although this was not a study that taught the children the skill of self control, the researchers found that the children who gained more self control as they grew up fared better as adults. In fact, they found that the preschool years and the teen years are prime time when children are particularly open to learning self control.

**So how do you promote self control?**
It may not be how you think—that is, having kids sit still and pay attention. Self control is best promoted by:

- Watching what they do to calm themselves down when they are little and doing more of the same;
- Playing active games where they have to pay attention and follow the rules, like Simon Says, Mother May I, Red Light/ Green Light, etc., especially where you change the rules, such has having the red light mean stop and then changing to rules so that the red light means go;
- Helping children come up with their own plans for dealing with temptations and distractions; and
- Helping children set goals and follow through on them.

Helping your children learn self control is the best back to school take-home message there is!