

How kids cope with change: New findings on adaptability

Adaptable young people are more likely to participate in class, enjoy school more, and have higher self-esteem, a unique Australian-first study into adaptability suggests.

In a comprehensive analysis of 969 high school students from nine Australian secondary schools, researchers from the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney found that adaptability - the ability to adjust to new and changing situations and conditions - is essential for young people's wellbeing.

The results, published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, show adaptable students were more likely to report greater life satisfaction, and a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

Over a period of two years, the Australian Research Council-funded study assessed students on their adaptability and resilience across academic outcomes, such as class participation and motivation, as well as non-academic benchmarks, including self-esteem and life satisfaction.

The study's lead author, Professor Andrew Martin, says the findings prove that an ability to cope with an ever-changing world is an essential skill for the youth of tomorrow.

"One guaranteed feature of young people's lives into the future is that the world will constantly change on them," he says.

"Young people who can adapt to this change are likely to be most effective at coping and seizing tomorrow's opportunities."

In one of the first known research studies to investigate how students cope with change, Professor Martin and his team found that adaptable young people were able to adjust three things when faced with changing or uncertain circumstances: their thinking, their behaviour, and their emotion.

Although resilience in young people has been studied in the past, this research shows that adaptability was just as important for positive outcomes in young people's lives.

"There is so much focus on resilience - looking at young people's ability to deal with adversity. But there is hardly any research on how young people deal with change and uncertainty," Professor Martin says.

From leaving high school and entering further education and training, to embarking into relationships from the single life, young people face change and uncertainty both inside and outside the classroom. How successful an individual is in navigating these changes and uncertainty will very much depend on how adaptable they are, according to Professor Martin.

"In identifying the components of adaptability and its effects, we are in a good position to help young people deal with their lives. Young people can be taught how to think about things differently, how to modify their behaviour, and how to adjust their emotions. When we help them do these things, we build their adaptability, and their future."

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