

## What can we learn from the Dunedin Study?



A television series - Predict Our Future: The Science of Us entitled *Why am I?* featuring the Dunedin Study has been aired recently on TVNZ in New Zealand. This four part documentary is fascinating. The extensive data, gathered from over 1000 babies born in Dunedin in 1972 (every two years until the subjects were aged 14, then every six years) shows many trends and patterns that will have impact on how we can choose to view certain groups of people.

The aspects of family violence, mental wellness, poverty and loneliness all impact significantly on the children in our society. Several of the findings affect our educational system and may influence the way we think of young people in the future.

The study makes the links between nature and nurture. People with certain genes who also experience a childhood with neglect and abuse, become perpetrators of violence. The late Celia Lashlie reported that she could identify children as young as three who were headed for a life of violence and incarceration. This study supports that assertion.

Someone's genetic make-up is less able to be changed, but the childhood neglect and abuse is something that is being called for by many groups within New Zealand at the moment.

Whether the abuse and neglect is through poverty, parents with drug addictions, or parents with mental illness, it is something that we can influence on many fronts.

One of the outcomes of the study states that if a child has the behavioural skills of self-management by the age often, they are healthier, wealthier and stay out of prison.

Work in schools like Tokoroa North in New Zealand exemplify the results that are possible when children are taught to be self-managing. No stand downs, suspensions and exclusions for more than 16 years, coupled with the high proportion of students at the Decile 3 school who are at or above

standard academically, demonstrates the results of hard work by staff to model a non-coercive environment and actively teach the skills of self-management.

Based on the work of Dr William Glasser MD, this school has invested in training of staff in Choice Theory, Reality Therapy and Lead Management. The underpinning focus of this work is on internal control and the notion that we can only control our own behaviour. This is articulated in the school values.

- owning our own behaviour
- self-respect, respect for others and property
- solving problems positively
- honesty
- quality learning

We applaud the work of all school personnel in maintaining these wonderful results over such a long period of time. Under different circumstances, some of these children may not be attending school regularly or achieving so well. Seeing these values in action everyday sustains many children in the school, helping them take effective control of their lives.

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