

# Personality Traits in Childhood and Adolescence: Structure, Development, and Outcomes

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## Abstract

Like adults, children and adolescents can be described in terms of personality traits: characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. We review recent research examining how youths' specific behavioral tendencies cohere into broader traits, how these traits develop across childhood and adolescence, and how they relate to important biological, social, and health outcomes. We conclude that there are both key similarities and key differences between youth and adult personality traits, that youths' personality traits help shape the course of their lives, and that a full understanding of youth personality traits will require additional research at the intersection of personality, developmental, and clinical psychology.

## Keywords

childhood, adolescence, personality structure, personality development, life outcomes

The past quarter century has yielded tremendous advances in our understanding of personality traits: individuals' characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Key points of consensus have emerged regarding how specific behavioral tendencies are organized into broader traits (personality structure), how personality traits change over time (personality development), and how personality traits influence important life outcomes. The vast majority of this research has focused on adulthood, likely reflecting the traditional view of personality as a mature psychological phenomenon (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). However, a growing body of research explicitly focuses on personality traits in childhood and adolescence. What does this research tell us about youth personality traits? In what ways are they similar to—and different from—adult traits? We will address these questions by discussing our own research and related studies examining youth personality structure, youth personality development, and the predictive utility of early personality traits for life outcomes. We review this research with an eye toward identifying key points of convergence across studies, key similarities and differences between youth and adult personality traits, and key questions that remain in need of further investigation.

## Youth Personality Structure: Hierarchy and Foundation

Two key points of consensus have emerged from research examining adult personality structure. First, adults' traits are organized hierarchically, with broad, higher-order traits subsuming narrow, lower-order ones (Markon, 2009). Second, the Big Five trait dimensions—extraversion (sociability, assertiveness, energy level), agreeableness (compassion, politeness, trust in others), conscientiousness (organization, industriousness, reliability), neuroticism (anxiety, depressiveness, emotional volatility), and openness to experience (intellectual curiosity, creativity, aesthetic sensitivity)—constitute a particularly valuable, foundational level of the adult personality hierarchy (John et al., 2008). The Big Five traits represent an optimal balance between bandwidth (conceptual breadth), fidelity (descriptive specificity), and generalizability (across samples and measures). They provide a solid foundation that higher levels of the

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adult personality hierarchy rest upon and that lower levels of the hierarchy are organized within.

Do these insights about adult personality structure also apply to children and adolescents? In some respects, the answer is yes. For example, youth personality traits are indeed organized hierarchically (Soto & John, 2014; Tackett, Krueger, Iacono, & McGue, 2008; Tackett et al., 2012). Moreover, youth versions of the Big Five can be measured in childhood and adolescence (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Tackett et al., 2012). In other respects, however, the answer appears to be no. Our own research and related studies indicate that there are important differences between youth and adult personality structure.

Some of these differences concern interrelations among the Big Five. We have conducted large-sample studies of both youth personality self-reports and parents' reports (Soto, in press; Soto & John, 2014; Soto et al., 2008; Tackett et al., 2008; Tackett et al., 2012). When assessed using either method, we have found that agreeableness and conscientiousness relate positively and strongly with each other—much more strongly in childhood and adolescence than adulthood. In parents' reports, we have also consistently found a substantial positive relation between conscientiousness and openness, two personality dimensions that are quite distinct among adults (for similar results in teachers' reports, see Goldberg, 2001). These findings suggest developmentally specific features of youth personality structure. Specifically, they indicate that a higher-order self-regulation trait (representing the general capacity to regulate both social and task-related impulses; DeYoung, 2006) is even more prominent among youths than adults. They further suggest the influence of an overarching mastery-orientation trait (combining intellectual curiosity with work ethic) specific to childhood and adolescence, although this latter trait may be more prominent in parents' and teachers' perceptions than in youths' behavior.

An even more striking potential difference between youth and adult personality structure concerns the foundational level of the trait hierarchy. In a study of parents' youth-personality reports for more than 3,000 children and early adolescents recruited from five countries (the United States, Canada, China, Greece, and Russia), we found that of the Big Five, only extraversion, agreeableness (primarily defined by disagreeable behavior), and openness (primarily defined by intellectual interests and ability) consistently replicated across cultures and age groups (Tackett et al., 2012). This finding calls into question whether the Big Five capture the foundational level of the youth personality hierarchy. But if not the Big Five, then what? One promising candidate is the Little Six structure (Soto & John, 2014; see also Shiner & DeYoung, 2013).

The Little Six represent a conceptual union of the most prominent dimensions from the child-temperament and adult-personality literatures. Models of child temperament (biologically based patterns of behavior and emotion that appear within the first few years of life) most commonly include four major trait dimensions: sociability, negative emotionality, persistence, and activity level (De Pauw & Mervielde, 2010; De Pauw, Mervielde, & Van Leeuwen, 2009). The first three of these dimensions resemble Big Five extraversion, neuroticism, and conscientiousness, respectively. These parallels suggest that the basic structure of youths' psychological traits may be captured not by five major dimensions, but six: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience, and activity.

The conceptual appeal of the Little Six is complemented by growing empirical evidence. For example, we recently examined parents' youth-personality reports for 16,000 children, adolescents, and young adults (Soto, in press; Soto & John, 2014). We found that the Little Six structure emerged at every individual year of age from middle childhood through adolescence; in contrast, the Big Five structure did not consistently emerge until late adolescence. Our findings also hint at the developmental process by which basic personality structure may shift from the Little Six to the Big Five. In childhood, Little Six activity is primarily defined by physical energy and motor activity. By early adolescence, these characteristics become less prominent, and the meaning of activity expands to include psychological aspects, such as motivation and competitive drive. Finally, during late adolescence and early adulthood, activity recedes from a major personality dimension to a more minor role, as its physical aspects are integrated into extraversion and its motivational aspects into conscientiousness (see also Eaton, 1994). These findings illustrate the importance of examining personality structure using a developmental perspective. However, additional research is needed to further clarify aspects of continuity and change in personality structure across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

### **Youth Personality Development: Stability and Change**

Research examining adult personality development supports two key conclusions about whether and how personality traits change over time. One is the *cumulative-continuity principle*: In terms of rank-order stability (the ordering of individuals from highest to lowest on a particular trait over time), personality becomes increasingly stable across adulthood (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). The second conclusion is the *maturity principle*: In terms of mean-level development (the average level of a particular trait at different ages), most people become more

agreeable, conscientious, and emotionally stable (i.e., less neurotic) with age (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006).

Several studies have now tested whether these two principles also apply to youth personality development. The cumulative-continuity principle does appear to extend throughout the life span: The average rank-order stability of personality traits steadily increases from infancy through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). In contrast, our own research and other recent studies suggest that youth personality development does not fit the maturity principle. Instead, our findings support the *disruption hypothesis*, which proposes that the biological, social, and psychological transitions from childhood to adolescence are accompanied by temporary dips in some aspects of personality maturity.

Initial support for the disruption hypothesis came from a cross-sectional study of personality self-reports provided by more than 1,000,000 participants, who ranged in age from late childhood through middle age (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). We found that mean levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience declined from late childhood into early adolescence, then inclined rapidly from late adolescence into early adulthood, and finally inclined more gradually from early adulthood through middle age. Although initially surprising, the adolescent dips in personality maturity have been subsequently replicated in a large cross-sectional study of parents' reports (Soto, in press), a longitudinal study of both self-reports and parents' reports (Van den Akker, Deković, Asscher, & Prinzie, 2014), and a meta-analysis combining the results of 14 additional studies (Denissen, Van Aken, Penke, & Wood, 2013). To the chagrin of many parents and teachers, early adolescence appears to be the lifetime peak of meanness, laziness, and closed-mindedness.

Extraversion, activity, and neuroticism also show different developmental trends in childhood and adolescence versus adulthood. Most youths become substantially less sociable and physically active with age, before mean levels of extraversion and activity stabilize during adulthood (Denissen et al., 2013; Soto, in press; Soto et al., 2011; Van den Akker et al., 2014). The development of neuroticism appears to differ dramatically by gender. Boys and girls show similar degrees of anxiety and sadness throughout childhood. During adolescence, however, girls become increasingly prone to negative affect, whereas boys do not. As a result, a substantial gender difference in neuroticism emerges by late adolescence and persists into adulthood (Soto, in press; Soto et al., 2011; Van den Akker et al., 2014).

These findings indicate that childhood and adolescence are key periods of personality development, and

offer a rough sketch of what this development looks like. A more complete picture, however, will require additional work. Studies that begin in the first decade of life (where personality research has been less common), examine development year by year (to capture rapid and curvilinear developmental trends), and continue into adulthood (to further clarify differences between youth vs. adult development) will be especially valuable.

## Correlates and Consequences of Youth Personality Traits

Personality traits help shape the course of people's lives through their associations with many important biological, social, and health outcomes (John et al., 2008; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). This is true not only in adulthood but also in childhood and adolescence. For example, youth personality traits show meaningful associations with biomarkers including psychophysiological indices, neural correlates, and neuroendocrinological functioning (Shiner & DeYoung, 2013; Tackett, Herzhoff, Harden, Page-Gould, & Josephs, 2014). Such evidence points to continuity between the biological bases of youth and adult personality.

Beyond biological variables, youth personality traits are linked to a variety of social and environmental factors. For example, youth personality is associated with both positive and negative aspects of interpersonal relationships, including friendship, parenting quality, and social aggression (Smack, Kushner, & Tackett, in press; Tackett, Kushner, Herzhoff, Smack, & Reardon, 2014). Some associations between youth traits and social outcomes are straightforward, whereas others involve moderation effects (i.e., interactions) between youth personality and parent behavior. Moreover, the traits that predispose youths toward a particular outcome are not necessarily the same traits that moderate parental influences on that outcome. For example, we recently found that youths higher in neuroticism and lower in agreeableness and conscientiousness are more likely to engage in social aggression (Tackett, Kushner, et al., 2014) but that youths low in extraversion and openness are most susceptible to the impact of inconsistent parental discipline on their social aggression (Smack et al., in press). Similarly, youth personality traits have been systematically linked with the frequency of life stressors (e.g., academic problems, interpersonal conflicts) and may moderate the effects of these stressors on life outcomes (e.g., Chen & Miller, 2012; Kushner, in press).

Youth personality traits also show robust associations with psychopathology and health. For example, youths low in agreeableness, low in conscientiousness, and high in neuroticism show higher rates of externalizing psychopathology (characterized by antisocial, aggressive, and

rule-breaking behaviors), whereas youths low in extraversion and high in neuroticism show higher rates of internalizing psychopathology (characterized by anxiety and depression; Tackett, 2006). In part, these personality-psychopathology associations reflect common genetic factors that affect both youth personality and psychopathology (Tackett et al., 2013). However, personality and psychopathology also reciprocally influence each other over time: Youth traits predict subsequent changes in psychopathology, and youth psychopathology predicts subsequent personality change (e.g., De Bolle, Beyers, De Clercq, & De Fruyt, 2012). Moreover, youth personality traits can provide a powerful psychological context that moderates the links between biological factors and psychopathology. For example, researchers have often hypothesized a link between higher testosterone levels and more aggressive behavior. This expected association has proven elusive in the youth literature, but this may be because the connection between testosterone and aggression depends on youth personality. Specifically, we recently found a clear association between testosterone levels and aggressive behavior, but only among youths low in the self-regulatory traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness (Tackett, Herzhoff, et al., 2014). Such evidence suggests that youth personality traits can serve as psychological endophenotypes: constructs that connect the biological disposition toward a particular disorder with the behavioral manifestations of that disorder.

These lines of research confirm that youth personality traits are robustly associated with important life outcomes and move beyond simply cataloging trait-outcome associations. They show the usefulness of youth personality traits for integrating multiple levels of analysis—biological, psychological, and social—in understanding the development of behavior. They also emphasize the dynamic nature of youth personality traits. Youth traits both influence and are influenced by biological and environmental factors; they also moderate biological and environmental influences on behavior. We therefore propose that researchers interested in understanding youth behavior and outcomes—whether in terms of biology, social relationships, or psychopathology and health—would benefit from assessing youth personality traits.

### Conclusions: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

The evidence reviewed above—both our own work and related research—supports four key conclusions about youth personality. First, youth and adult traits are similar in important ways (e.g., in their hierarchical organization and cumulative continuity). These similarities show that youth and adult traits have much in common, such that many concepts from the adult

personality literature can be extended to childhood and adolescence. Second, youth and adult traits also differ in important ways (e.g., in their foundational level and mean-level age trends). These differences show that youth traits are not merely child-sized versions of adult traits; in addition to the aspects that they share with adult traits, youth traits also have distinctive aspects that should be studied from a developmental perspective. Third, youth personality traits matter. They concurrently and prospectively predict a variety of important biological, social, and health outcomes. Finally, much work remains to be done. Recent studies have only begun to demonstrate the potential of youth personality research. Future work will particularly benefit from collaboration across personality, developmental, clinical, social, and other areas of psychology. We encourage and look forward to it.

### Recommended Reading

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### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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