

# Evaluating models of the personality–psychopathology relationship in children and adolescents<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Connections between personality traits and psychopathology in children and adolescents have frequently been reported in research studies. However, despite the occurrence of significant and systematic relationships between personality and mental disorders in childhood, a thorough understanding of the cause, nature, and implications of these relationships is lacking. In this paper, a comprehensive taxonomy of childhood personality is used to link research on children with that on adults, as well as provide a framework for discussing the personality–psychopathology relationship. Next, research on children and adolescents is integrated into various proposed models of the personality–psychopathology relationship. Finally, clinical implications and future directions are proposed for research on personality and psychopathology in children.

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Hypotheses regarding connections between personality and psychopathology have a long-standing history, although ideas about the nature of these connections have changed over time (Maher & Maher, 1994). At the root of most of these hypotheses is the idea that psychopathology occurs in individuals within the context of premorbid personality, and understanding the connections between personality and psychopathology can lead to increased understanding of the individual's functioning. Over the last two decades, a growing body of research has attempted to explain the nature of these relationships (see Krueger & Tackett, 2003; Widiger, Verheul, & van den Brink, 1999 for reviews), building on current research investigating the etiology and structure of both personality and psychopathology. However, this work has primarily focused on adult populations, despite the growing evidence for robust associations between personality traits and mental disorders in children and adolescents. In order to promote understanding and further investigation of the relationship between personality and psychopathology, existing work with children and adolescents must be integrated into research on adults to create a broader developmental picture. In addition, use of a common language regarding personality structure and models of personality–psychopathology relationships across various ages will facilitate ultimate understanding of these relationships across the lifespan.

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The goal of the present paper is to review evidence for various proposed models of the relationship between personality and psychopathology in children and adolescents. Before specifically discussing the personality–psychopathology relationship, it is necessary to clarify the personality constructs discussed here. In particular, some continuity in discussion of personality and temperament constructs and structure across ages is necessary to understand and integrate research extending from childhood to adulthood. Questions of personality stability are also discussed as they relate to this issue. Thus, I begin by defining personality and the framework that will be used to organize the personality–psychopathology literature reviewed here.

## 1. Defining personality in childhood and adolescence

### 1.1. *Temperament versus personality*

In adults, individual differences in one's characteristic ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling are typically defined as *personality*. However, in children, characteristic individual differences may be described as *temperament* traits as well as *personality* traits. The study of temperament typically refers to traits or characteristics that are biological in nature and appear very early in life (Frick, 2004; Goldsmith et al., 1987; Rothbart & Bates, 1998). Temperament is often described as a subset of personality, with personality referring to a broader realm of individual characteristics (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000; Rothbart & Bates, 1998; Shiner & Caspi, 2003). Furthermore, temperament is thought to be most directly observable during infancy and toddlerhood (Goldsmith et al., 1987) and to make up the entirety of personality during these early years (Shiner & Caspi, 2003).

As children develop, it is likely that early temperamental traits develop into broader, more inclusive higher-order personality traits as well as increasingly differentiated lower-order traits (Buss & Finn, 1987; Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Lahey, 2004; Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994; Shiner, 1998). Specifically, personality develops as children progress through various cognitive and emotional stages that increasingly allow them to interact with, experience, and respond to the world in more complex ways (Caspi, 2000; Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994). Thus, the structure of personality may change as children gain new skills (e.g., motor or language), the capacity to regulate emotions (e.g., ability to inhibit antisocial responses), and a sense of self (Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994; Shiner, 1998; Shiner, Masten, & Tellegen, 2002).

However, despite growing consensus that temperamental traits make up the core of later personality, a clear understanding of the developmental relationship between temperament and personality is lacking (Halverson et al., 2003; Shiner & Caspi, 2003). One recent study investigated the relationship of an early temperamental trait (inhibition to novelty) to a later personality trait (inhibitory control) over infancy to early childhood, which is considered a key developmental period for later personality traits (Aksan & Kochanska, 2004). Similar work is needed regarding other temperament and personality traits in order to understand the nature of development for important individual differences.

### 1.2. *Measurement of temperament and personality*

The work of Thomas and Chess (1977) is considered the pioneering effort in measuring temperamental characteristics in infancy and childhood. Thomas and Chess defined a model of temperament based on an inductive content analysis of parent interviews about their infant's behavior. The resulting model was made up of nine dimensions that had been identified as behaviors with potential significance for psychological development. While this work was greatly influential in current conceptualizations of temperament measurement, psychometric limitations of the model have since been identified (e.g., Halverson et al., 2003). These limitations (such as a lack of discriminant validity among the dimensions) and debate over the appropriate number of dimensions led researchers to develop alternative models (Rothbart, 2004; Rothbart & Bates, 1998).

Presently, numerous frameworks exist for the structure of temperament and childhood personality, with researchers using various measures of temperament constructs. While research on temperament has increased since the work of Thomas and Chess, there remains a lack of consensus regarding the best framework (Goldsmith et al., 1987; Rothbart & Bates, 1998), which has resulted in a somewhat fragmented literature. However, the apparent fragmentation of temperament research may to some extent reflect a tendency for researchers to give similar constructs different names between models more than it reflects a lack of agreement over the primary constructs to study (Rothbart et al., 2000). Nevertheless, the field of temperament and childhood personality needs a unifying framework to allow organization and integration of

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