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## **Children's Behavioral Styles at Age 3 are Linked to Their Adult Personality Traits at Age 26**

By Avshalom Caspi, et al, Institute of Psychiatry,  
Kings College London & University of Wisconsin-Madison

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**Education Consumers Foundation**

1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 700 • Arlington, VA 22209  
[www.education-consumers.org](http://www.education-consumers.org)

# Children’s Behavioral Style at Age 3 are Linked to Their Adult Personality Traits at Age 26

*Avshalom Caspi*

Teachers and parents of a shy, clingy preschooler may hope that their child’s behavior is just a phase. But what they’re more likely to find many years later is a young adult who is hesitant about new experiences and uncomfortable in social situations.

Likewise, young children who appear self-confident and outgoing are likely to display a similar temperament as adults.

But that doesn’t mean children with problem behaviors—such as aggression or irritability—can’t learn how to overcome them, according to the authors of a long-running study of how behavior during the early years can predict personality traits in adulthood.

“If early-emerging behavioral differences did not predict outcomes, behavioral scientists, parents, and teachers could safely ignore such individual differences,” writes Avshalom Caspi, a psychology professor at King’s College London and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who conducted the study with a team of researchers over a 23-year period. “However, because such differences do shape the course of development, information about these individual differences can be harnessed to design parent-training programs and school-based interventions to improve children’s development.”

The study began with a sample of roughly 1,000 3-year-olds living in Dunedin, New Zealand, in the early 1970s. Each child participated in a 90-minute session with an examiner who conducted a developmental test and then rated the child on 22 characteristics.

Those traits were then clustered into five types of children: well-adjusted, confident, inhibited, reserved, and “undercontrolled,” meaning impulsive, restless, and easily distracted. At age 26, the researchers were able to re-examine 96 percent of the original group, conducting various interviews and health exams. Those in the sample were also asked to choose someone who knew them well—an “informant”—who could complete a questionnaire about the person in the study.

The results showed, for example, that children in the undercontrolled category at age 3 grew up to score the highest on the trait of “negative emotionality,” and were described by their informants as disagreeable, tense, and anxious.

Confident children grew up to score low on self-control and to be uninhibited. Inhibited children, on the other hand, showed the highest levels of constraint as adults and scored low on having a positive emotional attitude.

Fifteen years after the original observations, the researchers reexamined the sample--now age 18--finding that the characteristics observed at age 3 were evident just as the children were about to become adults. just as the children were about to become adults.

What is truly remarkable, however, is that these traits would still be obvious at age 26--after the study members “experienced profound life changes,” such as working full time, getting married, or becoming a parent.

Longitudinal studies are rare because they are difficult and expensive to conduct, but these researchers took extra precautions to boost confidence in their findings. First, they used a large sample. Second, they lost contact with only a few subjects over two decades. And third, they avoided the biases that can be created by an exclusive reliance on self-reports.

Of particular relevance to education policy, their findings suggest that parents and teachers shouldn’t assume that children will simply grow out of problem behaviors.

While the authors do not discuss particular educational interventions, their conclusions are at odds with an educational practice that is legally mandated by many states (e.g., CA, OR, and KY). Called “developmentally appropriate practice” (DAP), it is a doctrine that discourages teachers from teaching specific academic or social skills, believing that children will naturally develop them over time. DAP has until recently been considered a “best practice” by early childhood educators and by preschool programs such as Head Start.

According to a 1996 article by J. E. Stone, DAP is a barrier to effective early childhood programs: “In effect, developmentalism discourages teachers and parents from asserting expectations or otherwise acting to induce more mature behavior,” he writes. “Rather than encouraging parents to treat children and youth as individuals responsible for their own behavior, developmentalism encourages tolerance and acceptance of immaturity, irresponsibility, and failure.”

More recently, scientists studying developmental psychology, behavioral psychology, and neuroscience asserted in a 2000 National Research Council (NRC) report, “From Neurons to Neighborhoods,” that effective early intervention programs for young children can absolutely shift “the odds in favor of more adaptive outcomes.”

The NRC report referred to parents and caregivers as “active ingredients of environmental influence” and stated that strong and dependable relationships can help move children along “positive pathways.”

Given the growing doubt about DAP, the law and regulation mandating its use should be reconsidered.

*The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com*