

# Foreword

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The ways in which children develop from helpless infancy to fully fledged and well-functioning members of society will always be a matter of fascination. Understanding the processes of this development is crucial to our ability to foster each child's optimal development and this, in turn, is fundamental to the wellbeing of our communities and to society. The Australian Temperament Project, which is described in this book, makes a substantial contribution to understanding the developmental paths of Australian children, and points to ways in which children and families can best be supported. The current federal government has shown its interest and commitment to these issues through its Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

The book provides an intriguing account of the journey through life of a large cohort (that is, the entire sample group) of Australian youngsters and their families, as studied through the first 18 years of the Australian Temperament Project. It investigates patterns and pathways to positive and problematic adjustment, and the contribution of child, family and environmental factors to successful functioning. Beginning in infancy and continuing through to late adolescence, the project covers a wide range of topics. These include, on the problematic side, child and adolescent behaviour problems, learning difficulties and substance use; and, on the positive side, supportive peer relationships, social competence and social responsibility. A strong focus throughout is the contribution of the individual's temperament to these aspects of development. It is an impressive research endeavour of national and international stature and will provide an invaluable resource for parents as well as for researchers and professionals interested in human behaviour and development.

The book has been written by the principal researchers on the study since its inception in 1983: Margot Prior, Ann Sanson, Diana Smart and Frank Oberklaid. Margot Prior and Frank Oberklaid are Professors of Psychology and Paediatrics respectively at the Royal Children's Hospital and University of Melbourne. Ann Sanson is now the Principal Research Fellow in charge of the Parenting and Children Program at the Australian Institute of Family Studies (and currently the Acting Research Manager at the Institute), and Diana Smart is a Research Officer in that program.

Thus the Australian Institute of Family Studies has become a collaborative partner in the study. We look forward with great enthusiasm to being involved in this ground-breaking research as it follows the progress of these young Australians into their adult years.

David I. Stanton  
Director  
Australian Institute of Family Studies

# Acknowledgments

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Colleagues who have played valuable key roles in particular aspects of the research programme include Associate Professor John Toumbourou, Centre for Adolescent Health, at the Royal Children's Hospital, who joined our research team in 1996 and has had a major impact on the direction of our research over the adolescent years; Associate Professor Eleanor Wertheim, Professor Ray Over, and Professor Doreen Rosenthal, all from LaTrobe University; and Dr Jill Sewell and Dr Rick Jarman from the Royal Children's Hospital and Professor Anthony Jorm and Professor Simon Easteal from the Australian National University.

The study has been funded over the years through grants from the National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council, and the Royal Children's Hospital Research Institute.

We have also received grants from the Departments of Psychology at LaTrobe University, and the University of Melbourne; the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation; and the Education Department of Victoria.

A major contribution to the research has come from postgraduate students from LaTrobe and Melbourne Universities who have joined the project team to carry out their masters or doctoral research. Their studies have been invaluable in adding to the richness of the data we have amassed over the years.

Without the loyalty and commitment of the families in the project, of course, we would not have this story to tell. We thank the parents, the young people and their teachers for their efforts.

# Contents

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Foreword	v
Acknowledgements	vi
About the project	ix
About the authors	x
Preface by Professor Fiona Stanley	xi
<b>1. Introduction to the Australian Temperament Project</b>	<b>1</b>
Background to the research	1
Aims and interests of the Australian Temperament Project researchers	1
Temperament – what is it and how does it influence development?	2
<b>2. Beginnings</b>	<b>4</b>
How did we enrol the ATP sample?	4
Method of recruitment of the study sample	4
Some sample characteristics	4
Survey points across age	6
Some figures on unemployment and family constellation in the 1990s	7
Teacher contributions	7
Child self-reports	7
<b>3. Measures</b>	<b>9</b>
Temperament	9
Behaviour	11
Other key aspects of development assessed	12
Adolescent measures	13
<b>4. Structure and stability of temperament in infancy and early childhood</b>	<b>14</b>
Infancy and toddlerhood	14
Early childhood: 3–7 years	14
Stability of temperament	15
Validity of temperament ratings	15
<b>5. Cross-cultural comparisons</b>	<b>17</b>
Comparisons of children across countries	17
Comparisons of project children born in Australia with families from different ethnic backgrounds	17
European and Australian infants and toddlers	18
<b>6. Health and development issues</b>	<b>19</b>
Children born prematurely	19
Children with a chronic health problem	20
Growing pains	20
Children with early language problems	21

<b>7. Temperament and psycho-social adjustment</b>	<b>23</b>
Children of older mothers	23
Rural versus city families	23
Infant temperament and other factors as predictors of adjustment at the pre-school age	23
Stability of behaviour problems	24
Gender differences	25
Prediction of externalising and internalising behaviour problems	26
The development of aggressive and anti-social behaviour	27
Attention deficit hyperactivity problems	28
Temperamental shyness	29
Shyness and the development of anxiety	30
Clinical diagnoses in early adolescence	30
Follow-up in adolescence	32
<b>8. Temperament and social competence</b>	<b>34</b>
Prediction of social competence across time	34
Resilience in children	35
<b>9. School: social and academic issues; peer relationships</b>	<b>38</b>
Learning progress at school, especially literacy	38
Characteristics of children who were reading well at 7–8 years	42
Peer relationships	43
<b>10. Temperament and social responsibility</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>11. Adolescent issues</b>	<b>47</b>
Temperament and personality	47
Pathways to the development of eating problems	48
Pathways to adolescent anti-social behaviour and depression	49
Prediction and patterns of substance use	51
Relationships between temperament, parenting style and emotional and behavioural problems at 13–14 years of age	52
School adjustment during the adolescent years	53
Parent-adolescent communication	54
Year 1999 Family Study	54
Parent-adolescent conflict	55
<b>12. The genetics of temperament and behaviour problems</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>13. Children's voices, parents' views</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>14. Summary: temperament and developmental pathways</b>	<b>64</b>
Does temperament matter?	64
Benefits of our studies	65
<b>15. The future of the Australian Temperament Project</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Australian Temperament Project publications</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Measures and instruments used in the Australian Temperament Project</b>	<b>76</b>

## About the project

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This publication tells the story of the Australian Temperament Project. It provides a concise digest of the many studies within the project, which is designed for readers wishing to access an overview of our research from infancy to adolescence. At the end of each section we indicate (by number) the published papers from the project which report more detail on each topic. References for these papers are listed at the end of the book.

The Australian Temperament Project is a longitudinal study of the psycho-social development of a large and representative sample of Australian children born in Victoria between September 1982 and January, 1983. (By 'longitudinal', we mean a study of a particular sample group of people over a long period of time.) Our team of researchers, specialising in psychology and paediatrics, from the Royal Children's Hospital, LaTrobe University, and University of Melbourne, has followed the growth of these children, so far up to the age of 17–18 years. Our aim has been to trace the pathways to psycho-social adjustment and maladjustment across their lifespan.

Putting the story together in this form was motivated by our feeling that the families whose loyalty has made this research possible deserved an account of the insights gained from their regular contributions. In addition, we needed an overview of the research for the many researchers and colleagues who ask about the project, and request information about our measures and methods.

The story begins with an explanation of temperament, why it is important and how it is measured. We document the early stages of recruiting the sample of children and their families participating in the research. The following sections summarise the findings from the many studies which examine the relationships between temperament and a variety of developmental outcomes.

A major theme throughout has been the influence of child temperament on emotional and behavioural adjustment; investigating questions such as 'how well does temperament in infancy predict adaptation at pre-school age', for example. We have also examined differences in significant domains of development between boys and girls. A further long-term interest of this research has been learning progress at school, and how this affects, and is affected by psycho-social adjustment. Problems which have developed in a small proportion of the children, such as having a chronic illness, aggressive behaviours, attention deficits and hyperactivity, anxiety, depression, and problematic substance use, have been measured over time. This has allowed us to track the pathways in their development from the early years through to adolescence, and to identify some of the short and longer-term influences on outcome.

It is equally important to understand the factors in children, and in their environment, which can contribute to the growth of competence and socially skilled behaviours. Hence we have also analysed the factors that lead to social, psychological, and academic competence in the children as they develop, with a particular focus on temperament. The question of what helps children to remain resilient and coping well when challenge and adversity arise in their environment is also part of this research.

In the more recent years of the life of the project, many individual children have written to us and sent poems, drawings and photographs of themselves. With their permission, we include a selection of these personal contributions.

In the final part of the report, we summarise the main contributions of the Australian Temperament Project and suggest how this research will be valuable in furthering our understanding of the ways in which social and emotional development may be enhanced in children. In particular, this story teaches us much about the role which temperament plays in intra and inter-personal development across the span from infancy to adolescence.

## About the authors

**Professor Margot Prior** is Director of Psychology at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, and is a member of the Departments of Paediatrics, and of Psychology, at the University of Melbourne. She is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia. Formerly a professional musician, she began her career in developmental and clinical Psychology in the 1970s, and has taught Psychology at LaTrobe, Monash and Melbourne universities. She has published books on Learning Difficulties, and on Hyperactivity, as well as many book chapters and papers in international journals. She is regularly invited to speak at national and international conferences. She has held visiting Research Fellowships at the Universities of Padua, Italy; London, UK; Oregon, USA; and Otago, New Zealand.

**Associate Professor Ann Sanson** is the Principal Research Fellow leading the Children and Parenting research program, and Acting Research Manager, at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. She is also an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Melbourne, where her teaching and research have been in the areas of developmental psychology, developmental psychopathology and conflict resolution. She has published numerous book chapters and papers in international journals and been invited to speak at national and international conferences. She is a fellow of the Australian Psychological Society, and has had leadership roles within the Society, including terms as Vice-President and Director of Social Issues. She is a member of the Committee for the Psychological Study of Peace, and has acted as a consultant for the Christian Children's Fund in conflict situations (for example, East Timor and Kosovo).

**Mrs Diana Smart** studied Psychology at the University of Melbourne, completing a Master of Arts degree and Diploma of Education. She held positions in the Victorian Department of Education's Curriculum and Research Branch and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's Education Unit before joining the Australian Temperament Project in 1988 as the Research Manager. Since that time she has overseen the day-to-day running of the project and managed the various data collection waves. She has presented results from the study at national and international conferences and published papers in international journals.

**Professor Frank Oberklaid** is the Director of the University of Melbourne's Centre for Community Child Health, located at the Royal Children's Hospital. He is an internationally recognised researcher, the author of two books, numerous book chapters and over 100 scientific papers on various aspects of paediatrics. In addition to undertaking editorial duties for a number of international journals, he is the Founding Editor of a series of five national child health publications directed to general practitioners, pharmacists, community nurses, hospitals and child care centres. Professor Oberklaid has received state, national and international awards, lectureships and visiting professorships, including a Medal in the Order of Australia in 1998.

# Preface

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In the late 1970s, when planning for the Australian Temperament Project began, rigorous research in the psycho-social area was rare. Biomedical research reigned supreme and social epidemiology was undervalued and not understood. Although some notable national or large cohort studies had been conducted in Great Britain, USA and New Zealand, in Australia it was novel to bring cohort methodologies to address important questions about temperament and its impact on children and their families.

There is now a blossoming of excellent research in psycho-social arenas. The wider research community is more informed and appreciative of the importance and value of research which aims to elucidate the variety of causal pathways to the heterogeneous group of child and adolescent behavioural problems. That there is a global epidemic of these problems means that we are even more desperate for data such as the Australian Temperament Project provides to inform possible preventative strategies. All this fans our admiration for those with the vision and foresight to establish the Australian Temperament Project.

This study is recognised as a flagship. Acknowledged nationally and internationally, the data have been used to describe the profiles and natural history of temperament in infants, children and adolescents. The researchers have identified important developmental trajectories and how they are influenced by various family, social and other environmental factors. And, as importantly, those factors which enhance the resilience of the child and its family have been identified as a basis for intervention to improve outcome.

This ongoing activity has been a multi-disciplinary research success. Psychologists, developmental paediatricians and allied health professionals have worked together to enable this important cohort to be followed regularly, with little attrition. The output in papers and presentations, added to by research theses (Masters and PhDs), has been an outstanding contribution to knowledge.

The most important winners, however, are families with children. With this publication, we and they can acknowledge and salute the Australian Temperament Project.

Professor Fiona Stanley  
Director, TVW Telethon Institute for Child Health Research  
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