

1 Introduction to the Australian Temperament Project



Background to the research

The Australian Temperament Project (ATP) is a major longitudinal study of the development of Victorian children, which began in 1983 with the enrolment of 2443 families into the project. This unique research has so far studied the development of the children from the first year of life up to the eighteenth year of life. Children in the project are now in the final years of secondary level education or at the beginning of a work career.

This book is designed to give an accessible account of the many studies we have done so that parents and young people involved in the project, and a range of health and education professionals as well as other parents, can overview the study, its methods and its findings. This book is a summary of a large body of research, but at the end of each section we cross-refer our published papers so that those who want to read further may do so by accessing these papers. A full list of our measures and our publications is included at the end of the book.

Aims and interests of the Australian Temperament Project researchers

We have been the first research team to carry out a large-scale longitudinal study of temperament and its relationships with the emotional and behavioural development of Australian children from infancy to adolescence. When we initiated the project, a great deal of the information used to make assertions and recommendations about the social, developmental, and educational needs of our children and their families came from work with children from other countries, predominantly the United States of America. We felt it was time to learn more about the development of Australian children. We know that Australian culture is not the same as US culture, and that we cannot just transfer research findings from one country to another without questioning their relevance and 'truth' for our own communities.

There have been some small scale studies of Australian children, but nothing with a combined comprehensive paediatric and psychological focus like the ATP. The Australian Institute of Family Studies produces valuable sociological and psychological data on Australian families but there is very little pertaining to the youngest developmental stages studied over time. The study most comparable to ours is the Dunedin Multi-disciplinary Child Development Study in New Zealand, which has followed 900 children from the age of three into adulthood. A further NZ study, the Christchurch Health and Development Study, has also reported on many of the developmental and clinical questions of interest to us, with a sample of 1000 children. In some cases we have been able to compare our results to those from our NZ neighbours. Through our research publications we have compared our findings with those from other populations in other parts of the world.

Our early aims were to study the nature of temperament and how it affects a child's adjustment in the family, in school and in the wider social environment. As the children grew older, we could identify ages and stages of particular interest such as the transition to school, and significant aspects of peer relationships. We could study groups of children, such as those who developed problems of one sort or another or those whose families suffered from stress or disadvantage. These interests led to a large number of clinical studies within the larger overall project.

The measurement of temperament in childhood is not a simple matter. Three main methods have been used by researchers, sometimes singly and sometimes in combination. These are: a) using questionnaires or rating scales through which parents, teachers, or children report on characteristic behaviours in everyday situations which represent temperamental styles; b) observation of children's behaviour in naturalistic situations, such as during play; and c) systematic or controlled observations of behaviour in laboratory-based situations.

With such a large sample of children and families in our study we opted to base our research on the questionnaire method. However, while most of our data have been collected by mailing out questionnaires to all the families in the project, we have also carried out a substantial number of more in-depth studies, with smaller sub-samples of children and families addressing questions of particular interest. These studies have focused on selected questions concerned with specific developmental and clinical themes. Our studies of children with learning difficulties provide examples of these kinds of theme-based studies. In the smaller, in-depth research projects, we have visited the families and interviewed the children, and there have been some observational studies.

We have taken a particular interest in some special groups of children such as those born prematurely, those with parents not born in Australia, those who have problems of hyperactivity, aggression, anxiety, or chronic illness, and many other concerns relevant to child and adolescent development.

Temperament – what is it and how does it influence development?

A major focus of the project has been the influence of a child's temperament on health and development in both the short and longer term, and the ways in which it affects pathways to adjustment and maladjustment.

The word 'temperament' is often used in everyday language as if people are confident that they know what they mean by this concept. It seems to represent the characteristic and predictable personality or behavioural style of a child, so that we say, 'she's got a placid temperament', or, 'he has an excitable temperament', or, 'she's always negative about everything'. Temperament has the feeling of permanency, as a known, accepted, and commonly observed style of behaving which makes each individual their own unique self. It is often used interchangeably with the term 'personality'. But when you look carefully at the two concepts it seems that personality includes a broader range of attributes of the person, and is perhaps a more comprehensive description relating to development into a mature person. Personality can include attributes like a person's intellectual level, their motivations and attitudes to work, their social values, and their bank of memories, learning, and life experiences, which go to make up a picture of the characteristics of a mature individual.

There are no clear ways of making distinctions between these terms, but there is reasonable agreement that temperament more closely represents an inborn 'style' of behaving, something which is observable in early childhood, well before an individual has had time to amass enough experience to have formed a personality. So it has a strong

sense of being connected to the biological bases of behaviour, and as having physical expression via the characteristic patterns of nervous system reactivity and regulation which then influence and are influenced by events in one's life.

There is no agreement on exactly how much of temperament is biology and how much is the product of experience. It is now recognised that it is some combination of these influences. What we do agree about is that it is an observable and very significant characteristic (or set of characteristics) of each individual, and that it has powerful effects on the way a person interacts with the world.

Temperament is about the style of behaviour, not the content of the behaviour, that is, *how* children react and behave rather than *what* they do in a situation. For example, it can refer to the way in which children show their likes and dislikes (for one child, definitely and intensely, and for another, quietly and gently) rather than whether they do or do not like something. A well-accepted definition of temperament is: *individual differences in attentional, emotional, and behavioural self-regulation, along with the relative level of emotional reactivity, which together give a unique flavour to an individual.*

Temperamental style tends to remain similar for an individual across life, but it is nevertheless modifiable, not fixed. One research interest in this domain is to discover what kinds of experiences help children to modify less socially adaptive or difficult temperament characteristics so that they can adjust more happily to their environments.

Temperament plays a very important role in how children develop, especially in the social and emotional area, and it has long-term effects on how well they adjust to life in the family, at school, and in the wider environment. For instance, a child who is persistent in temperament, and stays with a new activity or task until it is mastered, may learn new skills more effectively than a child who is easily bored or frustrated by a challenge, and changes activity as soon as things get difficult. Children who can regulate, or manage their own natural reactions and emotions may adjust more easily to demands of parents and teachers (at least in our culture) than those who loudly protest when things are not going their way. People in a child's environment react differently according to the temperament of the child they are interacting with, and are likely to be warmer and more positive about a cheerful, sociable child, than they are about a negative, withdrawing one. So temperament affects the way other people shape and modify their relationships and reactions to an individual child. These patterns continue across the life span.

A negative and difficult temperament may be a risk factor for ongoing difficulties in relationships in the family and the wider world. On the other hand, a positive and engaging temperament may protect children living in situations of deprivation and adversity, by allowing them to grapple with and overcome obstacles, and to maintain positive relationships and self-esteem even in difficult times.

In our project, we planned to investigate whether children with particular kinds of temperaments were at higher risk for developmental and behavioural problems. Further, we wanted to see whether children with easy and positive temperament characteristics had an easier passage through development, and were 'protected' in their adjustment to life, against the negative effects of any difficulties they might encounter.

Further reading

See items 8, 11, 32, 33, 41 and 60 in the list of Australian Temperament Project publications at the end of this book.