

8

Temperament and social competence



It is just as important and interesting to understand how socially competent behaviour develops in children, as it is to explore the pathways to the development of emotional and behavioural problems.

At regular intervals from 9–10 years onwards we obtained measures of social skills from parents, teachers and the children themselves. We report here some summary data from those studies where we measured the factors of assertiveness, cooperativeness, empathy, self-control, academic competence, responsibility, and overall social skills levels.

There was a trend for our children to score more highly, that is to appear more socially skilled, than do children from the US where our measurement scale originated; this was especially the case at the age of 11–12 years. In summary:

- Girls were consistently rated as more socially competent than boys overall, although the differences were generally only in the order of a few percentile points.
- Teachers reported a greater percentage of very socially competent girls (43 per cent) compared with boys (18 per cent). This may reflect the greater maturity of girls at the end of primary school, and the fact that teachers found them more cooperative and socially easy to get along with.
- On teacher-rated academic competence, boys and girls were equivalent at the end of primary school.
- Ratings at 13–14 years provided by parents and from the children themselves showed some shifts in scores. According to parents, the adolescents now appeared to have similar levels of social competence to those in the US. There was a slight trend for teenagers to rate themselves as more competent than did their US counterparts.
- Gender differences were small at 13–14 years, but still in favour of girls on teenager reports. There were similar proportions of boys and girls in the high empathy category but a greater proportion of boys with a low level of empathy (28 per cent) compared with girls (18 per cent).
- Parent report showed a greater proportion of girls (24 per cent) with high capacity for responsibility compared with boys (13 per cent) at 13–14 years.
- There were no differences in the proportion of boys and girls categorised as high, average or low in overall social competence at 13–14 years by parent report.

Prediction of social competence across time

A major question in this research programme concerned the contribution of our measures of temperament and other variables in predicting positive social adjustment or competence. We can look at associations between child and family characteristics at the same point in time and also across time. The research on resilience and coping, as reported later in this chapter, is an example of prediction to competence across time within particular selected groups of children.

Using the whole sample of children, we found high levels of association between both temperament and peer relationship factors with social competence at the 11–12 year age level. The temperament factor of Persistence along with positive ratings of peer relationships were the main predictors of parent or teacher-rated social competence. When we combined reports of social skills from parents, teachers and the children themselves in a predictive analysis, the same factors emerged and were powerful predictors of the combined social competence score. Teacher-rated peer relationships was the strongest predictor, followed closely by parent-rated temperamental persistence.

Longitudinal prediction of social competence at 11–12 years from measures we obtained when the children were 7–8 and 9–10 years was much weaker than when we looked at the same point in time. The best predictor of social competence across these four years of development was mother's overall rating of temperamental 'easiness' at 9–10 years; followed by teacher rating of temperamental task orientation at 7–8 years, mother's rating of child empathy and caringness at 9–10 years, and temperamental flexibility at 7–8 years.

Similar analyses of social competence ratings obtained at 13–14 years showed that the most significant parent-rated predictors at this point in time were the temperamental dimensions of Negative Reactivity and Persistence, and peer relationships. For teenager ratings of themselves, peer relationships and school adjustment were the best predictors of social competence. Pooling together information from both informants indicated that parent ratings of temperamental persistence, along with feelings about family attachment as rated by the teenager, were the most substantial predictors of social competence. Parent-rated negative reactivity in temperament was also influential in outcome to some extent.

These analyses make good sense in showing that positive, easy, flexible, and caring children are likely to develop valued social skills, and to be seen as competent as they mature. Again, it is clear that temperamental features contribute to this positive aspect of development.

Resilience in children

One issue of special interest in many overseas studies and in our project has been the question of resilience in children who experience adversity in their early development. When children grow up in situations of family disadvantage and stress, such as in poverty, or when they lose a parent, or if parents are seriously ill or drug-addicted, what helps them to cope well and remain competent and well adjusted, despite adversity?

Why do some children survive well despite such disadvantage and difficulties, and others develop problems and find it very hard to cope with life? We thought that temperament might be an important factor, and we wanted to know what other aspects of the child or the family situation might be influential in 'protecting' a child from any ill effects of adverse life events and experiences. Two studies were focused on these questions.

(i) Resilience Study One

A small number of families in our project did have severe disadvantages and we made a special study of these families. Jan Smith, the Senior Psychologist in the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Department of Monash Medical Centre, carried out this research for her PhD.

There were 18 families from the project who were identified as severely stressed at the time of this study (early 1990s), and between them they had 40 children of school age. Another 14 families, not from the project but referred to the study by professional

workers, were added to this sample, making a total of 81 children from 32 families. The stresses experienced by the families included such things as chronic illness, low income, drug addiction in parents, marital disruption, housing difficulties, unemployment, single parenthood, and loss of significant family members or friends. We included in this study every child of school age, in each of the families, not just the identified project or referred children experiencing significant stressors. This way we could compare how children in the same family, exposed to similar stresses, were coping.

We assessed each child's temperament, intelligence, behavioural adjustment, performance at school as judged by teachers, and children's own perception of their strengths. We also assessed the mental health of the mothers and fathers; their self-perceived levels of stress and coping, and perceptions of social support; mother's level of warmth and acceptance of their children; and their ratings of family support and 'togetherness'. We found that:

- 38 of the 81 children from these families were judged as resilient in the home environment; that is, they had no adjustment problems at home despite their disadvantages;
- 43 children were judged as having a significant level of difficulty and could be described as not resilient;
- the resilient children were particularly characterised by an easy-going and positive temperament, and a very warm mother-child relationship;
- 51 children were judged resilient according to reports from their schools and these children were characterised by a more easy-going temperament, higher mother-child warmth, fewer negative life events, and lower reported stress levels than in the non-resilient group;
- the level of stress that a mother was experiencing and how well she felt she was coping were related to how many of her children were resilient, especially in the school environment;
- in only two families were all the children resilient;
- in 16 families, none of the children were coping well;
- in the remaining 14 families, between one-quarter and two-thirds of the children were coping well overall;
- it was apparent that there were complex relationships between the factors influencing resilience. The more positive and easy-going children seemed to be able to attract and maintain positive attention and appreciation from their parents, teachers, and others, thus providing happy relationships which diluted the stresses in their lives, and helped them to feel that they were doing well.

(ii) Resilience Study Two

In a different kind of study focused on the same question, we used data from the whole project sample to identify children whose families were suffering from risk factors when they were 9–10 years. These difficulties included factors such as large family size, unskilled or semi-skilled father, many changes of residence, divorced or single parents, and two or more negative life events (serious illness, loss of significant other, major drop in income, etc.). Two or more of these problems were reported in 201 families and, for most of them, the stresses were persistent.

To assess the effects of these adversities over time, we focused on outcome for the children of these families at 13–14 years, that is, 4 to 5 years after the reports of stress. This sample of children could be divided into three groups: those who were coping very

well according to our adjustment and competence measures, despite earlier family adversity; those who were clearly not coping well; and those children who were in the average range. Competence (our measure of coping) was defined as high scores on parent and self-rated social skills including factors of cooperation, assertion, self-control, responsibility, and empathy. We found that:

- the highly competent/coping children had been consistently competent over the period from 9–10 years through into adolescence, that is, coping well was an enduring characteristic;
- the poorly coping children, on the other hand, had consistently more adjustment difficulties and poorer social skills across time; their poorer level of adjustment was persistent;
- temperament factors were important in differentiating these groups. The highly competent children were better at regulating and modifying their emotions and their behaviours in response to environmental demands. They showed greater emotional control, were more task focused, and able to persist with their interests and activities. Their mothers found them easier to live with. They were also more successful academically, their family and peer relationships were better, and their communication skills were also very positive. Poorly coping children were having difficulties in all these domains;
- teachers' ratings of these children in their final year of primary school were consistent with those made by parents and by the children themselves. Teachers reported the high coping group as having more positive temperament features, and good academic and social competencies.

In general, it appeared that the coping skills of the resilient group were present early and consolidated over time, while the poorly coping children fell progressively further behind. Comparisons between the children from adverse family circumstances who were not coping well, and poorly coping children from non-problem circumstances showed no differences on our measures of adjustment. Hence early adjustment difficulties in children in non-adverse circumstances were similar to the adjustment problems characterising those who did suffer from disadvantages.

From the point of view of the importance of temperament in these pathways to resilience, those characteristics which we call temperamental self-regulation (persistence and flexibility) and positive emotionality clearly play a very significant role as 'protective' or supportive factors for individuals experiencing adversity, in helping them to remain well adjusted.

Further reading

See items 46, 47 and 60 in the list of Australian Temperament Project publications at the end of this book.