

## 13 Children's voices, parents' views



Throughout the project, children have sent the Australian Temperament Project team letters, photos, drawings and poems. These have given us glimpses of their lives and insights into their views of the world. For us, this has been a valuable and delightful aspect of the study. We have also found it rewarding and inspiring to read the comments made by parents as they reflect back on their child's life, their experiences as parents, and their participation in the project. We include here a small selection of these letters and comments.

### Children's voices

"I really enjoyed answering your questionnaire. It probably makes me sound like a bit of a goody two shoes. Oh well, I don't care. I *hate* smoking and I *hate* getting drunk. I like to get good grades even if I do get called a square a bit. I sometimes tease and play practical jokes on certain people, but it's only a joke and they don't get offended. I'm a little bit of a dare-devil, and I'd love to do a lot of wild things (only if they're safe). I'd probably chicken out on some of them though. I go on lots of wild rides at fairs etc., but not the ones that go round and round in circles and make you feel sick. Anyway, now you know a bit more about me. I hope this helps with your study." (Girl, aged 13-14 years, 1996)

"I am writing this letter because I want to ask some questions. One thing is, how many people are in this group that I am in? And I want to tell you that when you send those forms to me that I have to fill in, well I like filling them in – it is fun.

And once I remember that when I was in grade three, a lady came to my house and I had to do lots of puzzles and the lady timed how long it took me to do the puzzle. I thought it was a lot of fun. Will someone be coming to my house to do that again? Anyway, that was all I wanted to know. So I'd better go now." (Girl, aged 11-12 years, 1994)

"I'm just writing to let you know that I am enjoying my participation in this survey. I have enclosed a poem that I have written about one part of my life that I wish could just disappear. I have been severely bullied over the last two years. It has been really hard for the people helping me to resolve this situation and sometimes I feel that I would just like to go far away from these girls. Anyway I just thought I would write to let you know that if you get letters from anyone else that is getting bullied, let them know that one day it will all get better if you stay strong. That day hasn't come for me yet, but I'm still hoping it will soon." (Girl, aged 15-16 years, 1998)

## Childrens' voices

"Just thought I'd write a quick letter to tell you a little more about myself. I belong to a volunteer group for people aged 15-25. There are around 10-12 regular leaders and we run holiday programs for kids. We also run a junior leadership program for 11-14 year olds. I'm a member of my school SRC and am in school sports teams. I wish I was playing competitive sport outside of school, but I work as a supermarket deli assistant turned checkout-chick. School isn't something I'd say I look forward to, except to see my friends, but I don't mind going and don't have trouble with the work. I have a cool load of friends. Not all in the same group though (which is a good thing). I always have something to do or somewhere to go. It's cool to get your questionnaires every now and then, and it's no trouble filling them out."  
(Girl, 15-16 years, 1998)

"It has been my meaning to write to you for the last two years that I have received these fantastic questions. I would just like to thank you for trying to understand us. We are a continuing breed, but we do chose to change over the years and I hope you have what you've been looking for. I continue to be pleased to receive anything from you that I may be able to help you with."  
(Girl, aged 13-14 years, 1996)

"I'd like to say that I think the temperament project is a really good idea and could be put to good use. I sincerely hope this information is not just put into storage as 'information'. I would be interested to know exactly what you do and what you plan to do with all the input. I'd also like to say that I enjoy answering the questions and look forward to the next survey."  
(Girl, 15-16 years, 1998)

"Hi, my name is [name] and I am 13. My interests are roller blading, ice hockey and playing computer games. I live in [name] which is a small town in Victoria. It is nice here and I have lots of friends. Kids here play a lot of sport – football and cricket are the main ones . . . I think it's important that adults understand children nowadays, so we don't do anything stupid. My school . . . is a really good school, you don't have to worry about being bullied or anything like that. The teachers are really nice . . . With the questions I was given, I tried to answer as best as I could, but some I'm not sure about. I'd better go now. I am looking forward to more questionnaires in the future."  
(Boy, aged 13-14 years, 1996)

"Hi, I've just finished the questionnaire and I thought I would write a short letter to tell you more about what I really like doing. I absolutely love reading . . . I love writing too . . . I learn Japanese at school and really love it. *Konnichi Wa!* I take part in Speech and Drama lessons in school and just did an exam (I passed!). My biggest passion in life is my dancing. I learn classical ballet, jazz and I did tap for a while too. I've been dancing for almost ten years. I have proper pointe shoes and the blisters to prove it . . . Anyway, nice to hear from you again – it was a pleasure doing the questionnaire."  
(Girl, aged 13-14 years, 1996)

"I would like to thank you all for letting me participate in this project. I enjoy doing them very much and if I could be of any further assistance I would like to help. Doing your project not only helps you, but it makes me realise what I should be concentrating on in my school and social life."  
(Girl, 15-16 years, 1998)

## Childrens' voices

"The following are my personal observations on teenage problems. I hope it may be of use to you. I go to an all-girls school and one day in one of my classes the teacher asked who smoked, as a part of a study we were doing. Four girls put their hands up, yet I knew there were more. These four girls did smoke and were proud of it – it was part of their image . . . A few other girls

"My parents split up last year and just got divorced. I don't know if that affects anything [questionnaire answers]. It's been really hard 'cos I lost a lot of friends because they didn't know how to help me deal with it. A lot of girls just decided they wanted to hate me, and my best friend at school went off with another girl and ignored me completely. She didn't even tell me she didn't want to hang around with me any more! I was very upset. I think part of the reason was the way I was acting to cope with the divorce, but it was still really horrible of them. I have a few friends now but I'm not really happy . . ." (Girl, 15-16 years, 1998)

who did smoke did not put their hand up as I think they were afraid it would taint their image. These girls try hard at school and do well, but out of the teachers' sight they act rebellious. They lead the life of a perfect student and a rebel . . . We have a semi-formal this year and I have noticed that the majority of the grade are trying to lose weight or tone their body for the semi. I have also noticed that girls with boyfriends are more conscious of their weight than other

girls . . . One girl who wanted to be a model could not become one because of her size. This girl was already slim, but because of the waif requirement of modelling agencies, she was not accepted. Her mother gave her a gym membership for her birthday. She began not to eat. For lunch she would have lettuce. Her school work began to disintegrate and she made new friends. Now she's trying to pick up her school work. She's slowly managing . . . I hope I've helped somehow." (Girl, 15-16 years, 1998)

"With cigarettes, alcohol and even marijuana, I think it was a bit misleading asking if you had been doing it in the last month. You may not have drunk at all in the last 30 days but you may have drunk heaps before that. It would be better if you asked us how much we drink/smoke on average. At this age most people drink for the fun of getting drunk. Very rarely do you come across an 'alcoholic' kid. However, you do come across quite a number of kids who actually are addicted to tobacco, as opposed to the number who are just experimenting. Marijuana is similar to alcohol, although you find that more people just try it once or twice." (Boy, 15-16 years, 1998)



"As far as I understand, I've been a part of this since birth. Will this continue on, and if so for how long? . . . This year's questions were really interesting and definitely thought provoking . . . Keep up the tremendous work that everyone is doing who is involved with the Australian Temperament Project. All the best for the future." (Girl, 15-16 years, 1998)

## Parents' views

"Overall I feel extremely lucky at the way this child has turned out. Compared to others of the same age I feel the problems we have encountered are mild and part of growing up. It has not been a difficult experience [being a parent]. If my child continues to follow the path he is currently taking in life I would be very happy. Both parents have played a big part in this by the rules and boundaries and support given even though we divorced. I am a very proud parent and consider myself privileged to have such a child."

"After all the ups and downs I'm pretty pleased with the way he is going. I think he will be a happy, positive adult and really that's all I can hope for. If he achieves that, I've done my job okay."

"Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the Australian Temperament Project. We found it interesting this time when [son's name] said it was a 'wank' wanting to know if his thighs were too big, was his bottom too big. His comment was 'I couldn't care less – why did they keep harping on it?' Although we could see why, it was hard to explain it to him. Again thanks, because it makes us think as well."

"Even though at times parenting can be very challenging, it can give pleasure, especially at observing our ATP child's progression through stages of life. It can also make one reflective about one's own life."

"As she becomes independent, it gets more complex. She is less difficult but more determined."

"Thank you for the opportunity of answering another of these questionnaires. It provides the opportunity to stop and consider subjects which may easily become buried with the busy lives we lead."

"We were very close when he was younger. We are still close, but not as much. We seem to have more conflict these days – maybe it's because he has grown up and doesn't need me as much, and I feel a loss. Being my eldest, I might be finding it hard to let go."

"Life is certainly not boring living with someone who is about to become an adult!"

"At age 12 and 13, I thought, 'How am I going to get through?' The older she has got the better it has become . . . She is growing into a very likeable adult."

"My daughter is far more critical of what I say and do now, whereas this was not so when she was a child."

## Parents' views

"From a young child through to year 8, he was very close to me . . . Through years 8, 9 and 10 he pulled away to establish his independence and while we were still close, he liked to appear as though he was totally independent and 'cool'. In year 11, I have noticed an increase in his confidence in himself and we are now very close again, and he shares everything with me again."

"She wants to make her own decisions . . . I don't exercise much control over her but I'm hanging in there to be someone to turn to if she needs someone. Rather than exercise control I'm trying to get her to look at the consequences of her actions."

"My son had a terrible time over a two-year period entering high school and I worried for his future. But he has such an inner strength that he came through assuredly and clear on his directions for life."

"As a teenager she has become very determined to do *as* she wishes *when* she wishes, despite what I think is safe. This has led to a lot of conflict . . . I am often very worried about her behaviour."

"Due to his secretive, stubborn attitude, a barrier to free communication is forming, hence our bond is constantly under pressure . . . I guess I am just another frustrated parent experiencing life through the teenage/adolescent cycle."

"I think I have been blessed having such a great boy. Sometimes I think it's hard to raise the kids but when I compare with others, I got an easy lot."

"She is a lovely, caring girl. A little quiet and keeps a lot of things to herself, or shares them with her peers. Very responsible and well-liked. Seems to look for validation of herself, comparing herself to her girlfriends."

"Thank you for the opportunity to take part in this program . . . I hope my daughter will remain in it for many years to come – she takes a great interest in it."

"This questionnaire was so true to what life is like with my teenager now. Is every family the same? Maybe."

"I am most proud of my son as he was such a handful as a younger child and now he is a valued member of his school, his athletics club and his parish."

"My teenager has always been difficult, but at the age of 11, 12, 13 we had a very bad relationship . . . We have come a long way and our relationship is very good now."

"The changes have reflected his growing independence and my learning to let him be independent. Closeness, warmth and conflict are those emotions most tested and stretched in growing up."

"He is very independent and wants to assert that constantly – wanting very little input from me/us."



## Parents' views

"Filling in these questionnaires over the last 17 years is a task that I have enjoyed as it makes me stop and think about elements of our family life."

"Thank you for the opportunity of answering another of these questionnaires. It provides the opportunity to stop and consider subjects which may easily become buried with the busy lives we lead."

"I'm not perfect, he's not perfect, we learn together as we go along, the younger siblings *watching carefully* the decisions we make!"

"He's so much easier now that he's grown up to be a sensible person. As a toddler, he was a terror and quite difficult to handle."

"We, as parents, have found the questionnaires over the years to be very thorough. They have made us think about our children's development, and how they compare with other children and teens of their age group at each particular time. Similarly, the occasional reports of the results have been interesting and useful. I understand that the research will be used and disseminated in the professional and academic sectors, but also hope that Mr and Mrs Ordinary can benefit as they struggle to raise their children with little or no preparation or support of a meaningful nature. I also believe that perhaps a modified form of the questionnaires could be used on a broader scale to actually help parents to be more aware, more observant with regards to their children's growth and development. Just a thought or two!"

"Congratulations on the way you have maintained engagement. I think you have done it very well."

