

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

Following Lives Through Time: ‘As at 7, so at 70’?

by David G. Myers

[Soto, C. J., & Tackett, J. L. \(2015\). Personality traits in childhood and adolescence: Structure, development, and outcomes. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24, 358–362.](#)

Around the world — across 56 nations and 29 languages in one study (Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, & Benet-Martínez, 2007) — people describe others using approximately five trait dimensions: conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion. These are the famed Big Five (which psychological science teachers and their students can remember with the acronyms CANOE and OCEAN).

Do these traits also define the personalities of children and adolescents? Do personality traits predict behaviors similarly for youth and adults? And do child and adolescent personality traits reliably extend into adult life? In their research and their *Current Directions* essay, Christopher Soto and Jennifer Tackett offer answers.

Do the young and the old share similar trait dimensions? A question for students: If you were a researcher, how might you study the traits of children who are too young to respond to Big Five questions such as “I’m not a very orderly or methodical person” (McCrae, Costa, & Martin, 2005)?

One strategy, used by Soto (2015) in a study of 16,000 3- to 20-year-olds, is to invite behavior descriptions from people who have observed these young people on thousands of occasions — their parents. Parents could rate (using a 9-point scale) their children on nearly five dozen behaviors related to the Big Five dimensions (e.g., “is a talkative person,” “is eager to please”). In addition, Soto measured a trait that differentiates children from adults: *activity* (e.g., “is energetic and full of life”). This last of the “Little Six” personality traits of childhood recedes by

late adolescence, with its physical aspect becoming linked to extraversion and its motivational aspect becoming linked to conscientiousness. (To recreate this trait-assessment method, students could be asked to rate a younger sibling or acquaintance on selected traits or trait-related behaviors. How easy was it? Did it feel the same or different from rating an adult acquaintance?)

Are traits similarly predictive for youth and adults? For children and adolescents, as for adults, personality traits correlate with biomarkers, health, and social behaviors such as friendship and aggression. Traits also predict life outcomes pertinent to youth, including academic success and antisocial or rule-breaking behaviors.

Do childhood personality traits reach into adulthood? Students might ask themselves (and perhaps discuss in small groups) whether they feel like they have always been the way they are now. If they tend to be extraverted or introverted, conscientious or lazy, have they always been so? How did their traits manifest during their childhoods, and how do they manifest now? And is the same stability or change across time true of others in their lives? If they reconnected with an old grade-school friend, would they recognize, from his behavior, “the same-old Jamal — still outgoing, agreeable, and energetic”? Or might they be surprised that their goofball seventh-grade friend, Melinda, is now a conscientious young executive?

The answers highlight two of psychology’s humanly significant findings.

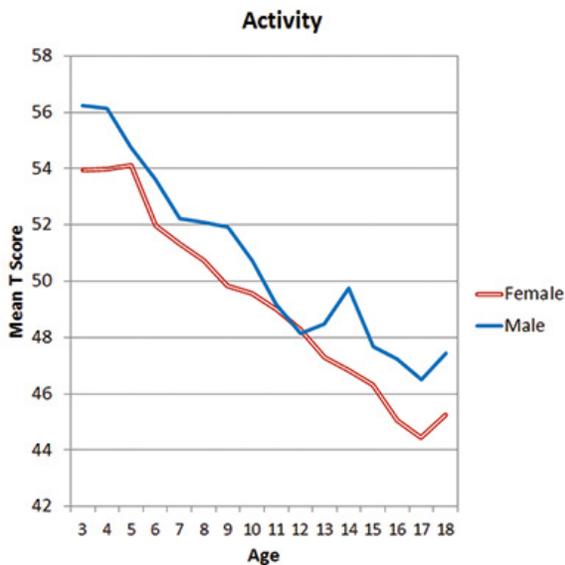


Figure 1. Mean parent-assessed activity, by age and gender. (From Soto, 2015.)

First, *some traits change with age*. From the preschool years to late adolescence, parent ratings of physical activity levels decline. Neuroticism (emotional instability) peaks in the middle school years but then diverges for boys and for girls (who thereafter become more vulnerable than boys to depression). Early adolescence is “the lifetime peak of meanness, laziness, and closed-mindedness,” report Soto and Tackett. But — good news for parents of young teens — thereafter and into adulthood, the frontal lobes continue to mature, and agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability increase (see also Bleidorn, 2015; Orth, Maes, & Schmitt, 2015). These data on personality maturation can inform a quick class exercise: Present the gridlines of Figures 1 and 2, without data, and invite students to make guesses about the trend lines.

Second, *early life traits preview adult traits*. The temperamental 13-year-old may mellow by midlife, yet still be a relatively reactive person. At my 50-year college reunion, I was bemused

that affable Steve could still talk for 10 minutes without interruption; that happy Judy was still smiling and laughing; and that determined, focused Annette was highly accomplished and still earnest. A slew of landmark studies following lives through time confirm the point:

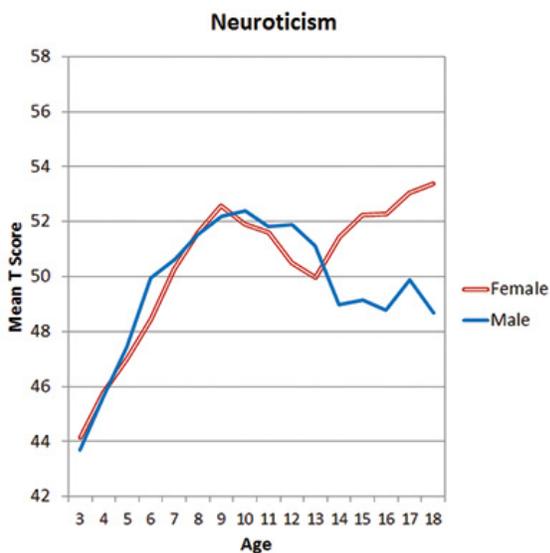


Figure 2. Mean parent-assessed neuroticism, by age and gender. (From Soto, 2015.)

Intelligence: The 1932 intelligence scores of Scottish 11-year-olds predicted their intelligence scores, health, and longevity more than 6 decades later (Deary, 2014).

Self-regulation: Three-year-olds with low self-control are the most likely to become teen smokers, adult criminals, or out-of-control gamblers later in life (Moffitt, Poulton, & Caspi, 2013; Slutske, Moffitt, Poulton, & Caspi, 2012). Hyperactive, inattentive 5-year-olds have required more attention from teachers at age 12 than their less active counterparts (Houts, Caspi, Pianta, Arseneault, & Moffitt, 2010). And 6-year-old boys with conduct problems have been 4 times more likely than those without such problems to be convicted of violent crime by age 24 (Hodgins, Larm, Ellenbogen, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2013).

Extraversion: The extraversion of British 16-year-olds has predicted their happiness as 60-year-olds (Gale, Booth, Möttus, Kuh, & Deary, 2013). Talkative elementary school students tend to still be outgoing 40 years later (Nave, Sherman, Funder, Hampson, & Goldberg, 2010).

Conscientiousness: Even after adjusting for parental status and childhood intelligence, researchers found that the most studious 12-year-olds (as rated by their teachers) became the most occupationally successful adults 40 years later (Spengler et al., 2015).

There is, of course, variability. Some shy children become confident and assertive adults. Some out-of-bounds teens become conscientious civic leaders. Still, who we are tends to endure.

Life is a story of change and stability. Change enables our development, giving us hope for future growth. And stability defines our identities and enables us to know ourselves and understand what to expect from others.

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