



# Childhood antecedents of Agreeableness: A longitudinal study from preschool to late adolescence



Silje Baardstu<sup>a,\*</sup>, Evalill B. Karevold<sup>a</sup>, Tilmann von Soest<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway

<sup>b</sup> Department of Child Development and Mental Health, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Norway

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## ABSTRACT

Although the consensus view is that Agreeableness originates from childhood difficulty and regulatory deficits, few studies have investigated such assumptions longitudinally. In this study, we examined this issue by assessing enduring and mediating effects of self-regulation as well as the impact of parenting behaviors on the development of Agreeableness from preschool to late adolescence. Longitudinal data from 965 Norwegian families following children from 1.5 years to 16.5 years were used. Path analyses revealed childhood difficulty at age 4 to be related to Agreeableness at age 16.5; this effect was mediated through emotion regulation in late childhood. However, such mediation effects were primarily found when parents used punitive practices towards their children. Our findings point to personality coherence throughout development.

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## 1. Introduction

Agreeableness is commonly defined as behavioral tendencies reflecting prosocial motivation, orientation, and social responsiveness (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Tobin, Graziano, Vanman, & Tassinari, 2000). In particular, it involves the regulation of emotions in interpersonal contexts (Caspi & Shiner, 2006), and is considerably linked with the psycho-social system of “belonging” that facilitates formation of close bonds and assures social support (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Nikitin & Freund, 2008, 2015). Hence, compared to the other four dimensions in the Five Factor taxonomy, the agreeableness factor is the most associated with interpersonal relationships, reflecting individual variations in communion and prosocial tendencies ranging from warmth and affiliation to hostility and antagonism (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Shiner & Masten, 2008). However, of all the Big Five personality dimensions, next to the openness factor, agreeableness is probably still the least investigated trait with respect to both theory and developmental antecedents (Graziano & Tobin, 2002). Whereas

the majority of the Big Five personality traits have relatively clear counterparts in the temperament literature (extraversion/surgency/sociability, emotional stability/neuroticism/negative emotionality, conscientiousness/effortful control, respectively), less is known about the temperamental equivalents and early manifestations of the agreeableness factor, mainly because this dimension traditionally has been left out of most taxonomies of child personality (Laursen, Pulkkinen, & Adams, 2002; Mervielde & Asendorpf, 2000). Although recent investigations have demonstrated that an agreeableness-like dimension can be found in middle and late childhood (e.g., De Pauw, Mervielde, & Van Leeuwen, 2009; Measelle, John, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005; Mervielde & De Fruyt, 2002), there is scarce knowledge about the developmental antecedents of agreeableness in the toddler and preschool years. However, emerging evidence and theoretical accounts have indicated that adult agreeableness might have its origins in emotional and behavioral regulation as indicated by child cooperation, persistence, self-control, and expressed affect (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994; Caspi, 1998; Caspi & Silva, 1995; Laursen et al., 2002).

The current study aims to increase our knowledge about early childhood precursors of agreeableness, mainly by assessing the role of emotional and behavioral regulation from early childhood and onwards for the development of this particular trait. Given that the agreeableness factor is assumed to be the most malleable

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1094 Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway.

E-mail addresses: [silje.baardstu@psykologi.uio.no](mailto:silje.baardstu@psykologi.uio.no) (S. Baardstu), [e.b.karevold@psykologi.uio.no](mailto:e.b.karevold@psykologi.uio.no) (E.B. Karevold), [t.v.soest@psykologi.uio.no](mailto:t.v.soest@psykologi.uio.no) (T. von Soest).

of the Big Five traits and most susceptible to change in light of environmental inputs (Bergeman et al., 1993; Graziano, 1994; Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997), a further aim was to examine how parents and parental behavior – one of the most important contextual factors in childhood – moderate pathways from early behavioral tendencies in preschool to agreeableness in adolescence. To our knowledge, our study is the first to examine how parenting behaviors moderate developmental processes concerning agreeableness. Because few studies have examined precursors of this trait from early childhood and onward, the present study provides novel information about personality development by examining potential predictors of agreeableness from as early as age 1 1/2.

Knowledge about developmental origins of agreeableness is important as empirical evidence implicates agreeableness in individual adjustment. On one side, high levels of agreeableness have been found to significantly predict positive outcomes within several developmental domains, pertaining to school and career performance, social relations, longevity, and health (e.g., Hampson, Goldberg, Vogt, & Dubanoski, 2007; Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams, & Malcolm, 2003; Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2000). On the other side, low agreeableness is considered a risk factor for the development of adjustment problems (Tackett, 2006), and is associated with increased prevalence of externalizing problems and personality disorders (De Fruyt & De Clercq, 2013; Ehrler, Evans, & McGhee, 1999; Krueger, Caspi, Moffitt, Silva, & McGee, 1996). As such, studying early indices of (dis)agreeableness can provide insight into the etiology of externalizing problems as well as personality disorders, which in turn could facilitate efforts to develop preventive actions at early stages in development.

### 1.1. Manifestations of agreeableness in preschool years

Theories on personality development in childhood and adolescence suggest that individuals start out with biologically based individual differences in reactivity and regulation of emotions and behavior, which become elaborated into more differentiated personality traits with increasing age (Rothbart, 2007; Shiner & Caspi, 2003). These early behavioral and emotional regulation tendencies thus represent the core around which subsequent personality dimensions develop. Research supports this by indicating that agreeableness-related characteristics emerge as genetically-influenced regulatory dispositions early in development. For instance, children are found to exhibit moderately stable prosocial tendencies by the age of 3 (Knafo & Plomin, 2006a, 2006b). Similarly, children vary in their displays of both physical and relational aggression towards others already during the preschool years (Crick, Ostrov, Appleyard, Jansen, & Casas, 2004; Tremblay & Nagin, 2005). Given that prosocial, hostile, and aggressive tendencies are central features of the agreeableness dimension, these findings imply that at least some aspects of this Big Five dimension are present early in life. Along with this notion, there has been a consensus view that low levels of agreeableness are related to what has been termed “childhood difficultness” (see, Graziano, 1994; Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Graziano & Tobin, 2009). Thus, one of our primary goals was to examine this particular assumption of links between high difficultness in preschool and low agreeableness in adolescence.

The term “difficult” was first introduced by Thomas and Chess (1977), and this concept has been the subject of much debate. Some have argued that “difficultness” is similar to temperamental emotionality (Rothbart & Bates, 1998; Sanson & Prior, 1998). Others have argued that childhood difficultness represents a more general disposition than emotionality, in terms of comprising multiple aspects from several temperament dimensions including manifestations of uncooperativeness, high reactivity, tractability, impulsivity, anger proneness, negative emotionality, and poor

self-control (Bates, 1980; Graziano, 1994; Kochanska & Kim, 2013; Lee & Bates, 1985; Maziade, Cote, Boutin, Bernier, & Thivierge, 1987). Our perspective of the difficultness term is in line with this latter notion of difficultness as a more global disposition. It thereby represents a broad set of age-specific behaviors that are indicative of disagreeable and under-regulated tendencies in early childhood that parents often find challenging. The behavioral tendencies comprised within our difficultness term largely resembles characteristics listed under the childhood personality factor Benevolence of the Hierarchical Personality Inventory for Children (HiPIC; Mervielde & De Fruyt, 1999, 2002), which is the childhood dimension most aligned with the adult agreeableness trait, involving aspects of low irritability and dominance, and high compliance (see, Mervielde & De Fruyt, 1999, 2002). Like the Benevolence dimension, our difficultness concept holds manageability of the child from the perspective of parents as one of the most central aspects, which also is in line with Thomas and Chess’ use of the concept.

So far, only two studies have provided indications that indices of childhood difficultness in the preschool years are precursors of agreeable-like characteristics later in development. Longitudinal investigations by Caspi and colleagues (Caspi & Silva, 1995; Caspi et al., 2003) have demonstrated that children who displayed under-regulated behavioral tendencies at age 3 (e.g., difficulty sitting still, rough and uncontrolled in their behavior, labile in their emotional responses, and short attention span), were more likely to display aggressive, impulsive, hostile, and interpersonal alienation tendencies as adults than more well-regulated children. Similarly, characteristics representative of low agreeableness in middle childhood (i.e., high aggression, and low compliance and self-control), have been found to distinguish high-agreeable adults from low-agreeable adults (Laursen et al., 2002). In light of this, we hypothesized that childhood difficultness in preschool would act as a precursor of agreeableness in adolescence.

### 1.2. The mediating role of regulation on the difficultness – agreeableness link

The concepts of difficultness and agreeableness are both related to regulatory abilities. Difficultness encompasses behavioral problems indicative of emotional and behavioral regulation as indicated by low self-control, cooperation, and persistence, and high expressed affect in childhood (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994; Bates, 1986). Similarly, theoretical accounts have consistently listed regulation of emotion and behavior as core aspects of the agreeableness dimension (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994; Caspi & Shiner, 2006; Denissen, van Aken, Penke, & Wood, 2013; Hennecke, Bleidorn, Denissen, & Wood, 2014; Shiner & DeYoung, 2013). This theoretical assumption has received substantial empirical support. For instance, agreeableness has been concurrently associated with self-regulatory abilities and internal locus of control among preschoolers, adolescents (Abe, 2005; Abe & Izard, 1999), and adults (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002). More specifically, individuals at the high end of agreeableness are found to be more adept at controlling immediate and short-term impulses and emotional pressures than their less-agreeable peers (Tobin & Graziano, 2006). In contrast, individuals at the low end of agreeableness often display behavior problems as well as interpersonal difficulties (see, Laursen & Richmond, 2013, for an overview), which in turn are suggestive of emotional and behavioral regulation deficiencies.

Signs of individual variability in self-regulation can be detected as early as within the first six months of development (Calkins, Dedmon, Gill, Lomax, & Johnson, 2002), and there is a high degree of stability in such regulatory capacities over time (Gerrard, Anastopoulos, Calkins, & Shelton, 2000). Research has demonstrated that children with poor emotional and behavioral control

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