



## A Longitudinal Study into the Development of Personal Vulnerabilities and Well-Being in Adolescence

Adolescence is a tumultuous developmental period involving an increase in behavioural and mental health problems. Existing research within Australia has shown that a substantial number of adolescents (19.5%) report externalising problems such as aggressive behaviour and rule breaking, and internalising problems (16.5%) such as anxiety and depression. Research also shows that an estimated 264,000 Australians aged 13-17 report having clinical level problems. As a consequence, these youths fail to thrive and are unlikely to succeed at school, resulting in substantial costs to the adolescents involved and to society as a whole.

We conducted a longitudinal study that sought to identify the temperamental and environmental variables that predict the development of character in adolescence and, in turn, the role that developing character plays in promoting social, emotional, and productive well-being.

The research also aimed to identify the risk factors for declining adolescent well-being and behavioural adjustment, and provide specific suggestions for social and emotional interventions that are tailored to the child's temperament and environment. The study was innovative in that it sought to understand

adolescent development by simultaneously assessing the adolescent at multiple levels, including assessments of family and social environment, and individual differences in stability, change, and biology.

Through initial analyses we have begun to identify the teachable aspects of character that are associated with positive development trajectories. In contrast to past research, we were able to use a longitudinal design to identify variables that are antecedent to positive change, rather than mere consequences or concomitants. This is important because the targets of intervention should generally be antecedents, or factors that actually have a causal influence in the social and emotional outcomes of interest.

Thus far, we have identified several key character factors, including emotion identification skill, hope, self-compassion, acceptance of negative emotions, and commitment to goals in the presence of difficult emotions. We have also identified the key role of parenting styles in character development. Practitioners often have little time to help young people (eg a counsellor may be responsible for many schools and many children).

Therefore it is important that when practitioners are seeking to help a young person, they focus on the key ingredients of change. These findings will allow practitioners to focus on those aspects of character that have been shown to be changeable and have also been shown to promote social and emotional well-being.



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