



# Kids Predict Personality Using Behaviors Better Than Trait Terms



Emotion Development Lab

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## Background

- Children predict behavior from a trait word better than from behavior examples.<sup>1,2</sup>
- ...but not before age 4.<sup>2</sup>
- We looked at kids' abilities to predict behavior using trait words vs. 3 behavior examples across the Big Five Personality Inventory.

## Hypothesis

- Children as young as 3-years-old can predict trait behaviors of a character if they understand the concept being tested.
- Younger children can predict behaviors more consistently if given examples of behavior instead of trait words.

## Procedure

Participants (N=236; 120 F) ages 3-8 played a storytelling game. Children were asked to predict behavior, and were randomly assigned to one condition:

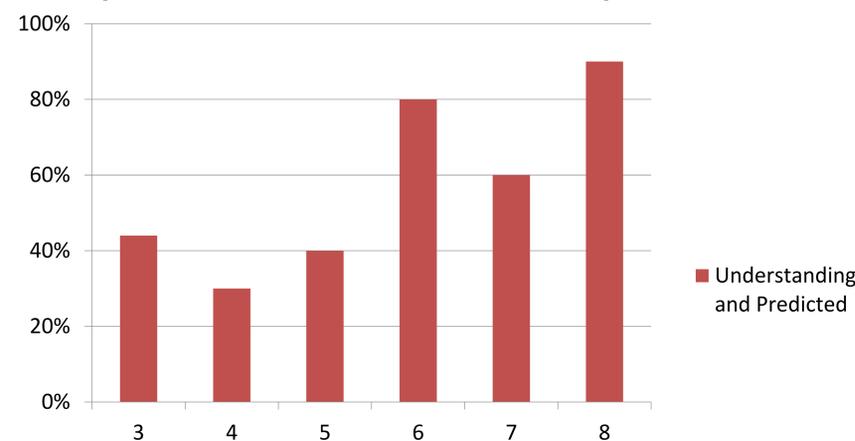
- Word Condition: **Vince is lazy. What is something Vince would do if he was lazy?**
- Behavior Example Condition: **Vince lays on the couch and plays video games for hours. Vince's room is always messy. When Vince is running through the house, he knocks stuff over and doesn't even notice.**

Dependent Variable: **During class time, is Vince ready for the activity or not paying attention?**

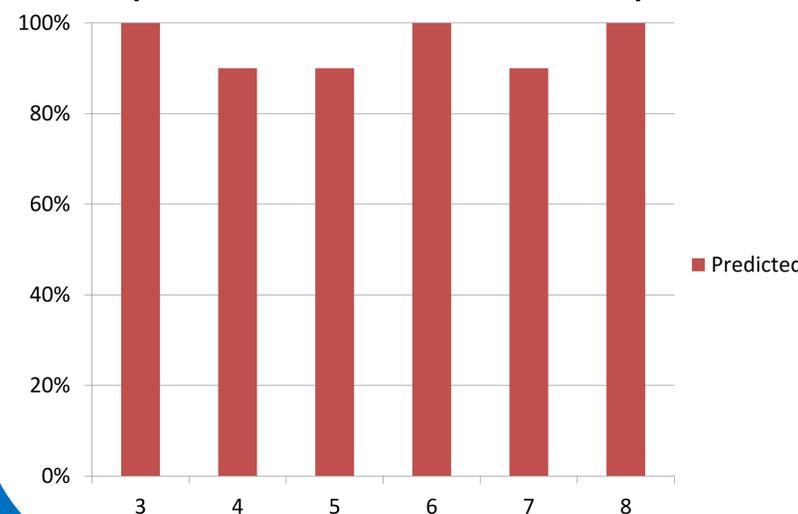
## Results

- Children improved significantly with age in the Word Condition across traits (except Agreeableness and Agreeableness-Reverse).
- Children improved significantly with age in the Behavior Example Condition for only 3 traits: Extraversion, Openness to Experience-Reverse, and Extraversion-Reverse.
- Children as young as 3-years-old in the Behavior Example Condition were significantly greater than chance for Openness to Experience, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness-Reverse, and Agreeableness-Reverse, but were at chance for every trait in the Word Condition.

**Word Condition  
(Conscientiousness-Reverse)**



**Behavior Example Condition  
(Conscientiousness-Reverse)**



*Correlations of Age and Big Five Personality Inventory Trait Responses*

	Vocabulary Condition	Behavior Example Condition
Openness to Experience	.259*	.136
Conscientiousness	.287*	.045
Extraversion	.481***	.467***
Agreeableness	.237	.178
Neuroticism	.335**	.185
Openness to Experience-Reverse	.318*	.265*
Conscientiousness-Reverse	.356**	.017
Extraversion-Reverse	.356**	.273*
Agreeableness-Reverse	.201	.006
Neuroticism-Reverse	.387**	.120

Note: \* $\alpha < .05$ , \*\* $\alpha < .01$ , \*\*\* $\alpha < .001$

## Conclusions

- For some traits, 3-year-olds predict behaviors from examples of a trait, but not from the word.
- For 7 of the 10 Big Five traits and their Reverse, children across ages predicted behavior from behavior examples better than from trait words.

<sup>1</sup>Yuill, N. (1992). Children's production and comprehension of trait terms. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 10(2), 131-142

<sup>2</sup>Liu, D., Gelman, S. A., & Wellman, H. M. (2007). Components of young children's trait understanding: Behavior-to-trait inferences and trait-to-behavior predictions. *Child Development*, 78(5), 1543-1558.