Hello from the Stony Brook University Temperament Study! We hope this newsletter keeps you up to date on our study of children’s temperament, emotions, and their relationship to parents’ personalities. Please let us know what you would like to see in future newsletters. As a reminder, you can find all previous newsletters online at: www.sbutemperamentstudy.org.

**Progress Report & Future Plans**

We are pleased to announce that since the Age 6 Assessment began in September 2007, over 270 families have returned. Of those families, over 90% have completed the second laboratory visit and about 70% have returned the parent questionnaires and child saliva samples. We plan to continue following up with the remaining 300 families over the next year.

**Description of the Study**

The Age 6 Assessment is very much like the Age 3 Assessment you already took part in, but requires less of parents’ time.

*Visit #1: Child is videotaped playing with toys and games, and interacting with our research staff; Parent completes an interview about child’s emotional, social and behavioral development.*

*Visit #2: Parent and child are videotaped working on activities together; Child takes part in an assessment about brain activity (EEG).*

*Questionnaires: Parents complete questionnaires about child and about their own personalities.*

*Cortisol: Parent collects saliva samples from child at home for study of relationship between temperament and cortisol, a hormone that is part of the body’s stress response system.*

**If you have already begun the Age 6 Assessment:**

Please complete and return the questionnaire packets and saliva samples as soon as possible in the self-addressed, stamped envelopes. We even have staff members available to pick up saliva samples from your home! To arrange a time or to request additional materials, please call our Temperament Coordinator, Anna Miller at (631)632-4121.

**If you have not begun the Age 6 Assessment:**

We will be contacting you again when your child is almost six years old.

Even if you have moved out of the New York area, we would still like to have you and your child participate in this phase of the study! Please contact us as soon as possible so we can determine how best to have you take part.

**Moving? New Phone? Questions/Concerns?**

If you have moved or changed your phone number, or have a question for our researchers, please call us at (631) 632-4115. You can also contact us via our email address, psychtemp@notes.cc.sunysb.edu.
Emotions: Helping Children Communicate, Understand, and Manage Their Feelings

As part of an installment series, we plan to address issues regarding child development and temperament in each newsletter. Please contact us if you are interested in learning more about a particular topic.

Like adults, children experience a range of emotions such as sadness, joy, fear, anger, and shame. However, some children may have difficulty understanding and talking about their feelings. Emotions give us important information about how we feel about different situations and relationships, and can indicate appropriate actions when relevant. For example, the feeling of guilt may signal the need to rectify a wrongdoing. Emotions can also help us pursue experiences that are associated with positive feelings and adjust or avoid experiences that are associated with negative feelings. Emotions are often linked to a variety of thoughts, behaviors, and bodily sensations. The more we can help children tune into and be mindful of these feelings, the easier it will be for them to understand and cope with their emotions.

Just as everyone experiences emotions in various ways, individuals cope with feelings differently as well. When feeling sad, for example, some children may withdraw or prefer to be alone, whereas other children may argue with a sibling or throw a temper tantrum. There is no “correct” way to express emotions or manage emotions. However, when we attempt to ignore or avoid our emotions, these feelings usually emerge at some point (and often in ways we do not intend). For example, most of us have felt mad at someone (e.g., a coworker) and unintentionally expressed our anger toward someone else: the clerk at the grocery store, a friend, or a family member. Becoming more aware of our emotions and understanding what they mean is likely to improve our ability to cope with our feelings.

Here are some tips to help your child better communicate, understand, and manage his or her feelings:

Identifying emotions. Help your child learn how to name emotions. Some children need help connecting facial expressions and bodily sensations to different feelings. You can ask your child to think about and describe times he felt different emotions (e.g., happy, sad, afraid, angry). For each situation, your child can try to identify what the feeling was like in his body on the inside and how his face and body looked on the outside. Here are some examples:

- Happiness/joy: smiles, laughter, clapping, lightness
- Sadness: frowns, quivering lips, heaviness
- Fear: tension in the face/body, desire to withdraw or hide (e.g., covering the face, etc.), increased heart rate
- Anger: downturned eyebrows, clenched fists, increased heart rate, feeling like “exploding”

You can also ask your child to name and describe an emotion in the moment. For example, when you notice your child is feeling sad, ask your child to describe her feelings and bodily sensations. You do not necessarily have to find out why she is feeling that way; just helping her to identify the emotion can provide her with useful skills to better understand her experience.

Talking about emotions. Just as you express an interest in your child’s activities and friendships, show your child that you care about her emotional experiences as well. Give your child the time and space to talk about how she is feeling, and, if possible, make these talks part of your daily routine. When you ask your child to talk about his day, for example, ask how he felt during the situations he describes, and how he feels about them now. Allow your child to express a range of feelings (e.g., from remorse to guilt), even when these expressions seem “dramatic” (e.g., I am so mad at my brother and I’ll always hate him!). Your child may feel some relief just by saying what is on her mind. When appropriate, you can also explore with your child why he or she is having a particular feeling. For example, if your child is feeling angry, you can ask various questions: What made you feel angry? What (Continued…)
Emotions (Continued)

do you wish [your brother] did differently? Is there anything you could have done differently?

In this example, you may help your child to identify that she did not get what she wanted, which is frustrating, but perhaps she could have asked her brother for the toy calmly, after he had time to play with it. The answers to these exploratory questions can help your child learn more about emotional experiences by clarifying the factors that contributed to these feelings.

Validate your child’s emotions. One of the best ways parents can improve their children’s emotional development is to let children know their feelings are real and okay. Validating children’s emotional experience sends the message that they are entitled to their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas, which is likely to help children feel accepted for who they are and boost their confidence. You can validate by listening to your child and commenting on his experiences and feelings in a non-judgmental way (It sounds like you felt disappointed when...); showing empathy and understanding (That sounds frustrating; I know how you might feel); giving your full attention and patience; and avoiding correcting or debating with your child. It may feel challenging to validate your child when you disagree with her behavior or feelings, but you can acknowledge your child’s experience without excusing misbehavior (e.g., I can see you are angry that you cannot have dessert, but you know this is the consequence when you do not clean up your toys). Even very well-intentioned parents can invalidate their children’s feelings at times, particularly negative emotions. For example, comments such as “don’t cry, you’re fine” or “nice girls don’t get angry” are likely to teach children to feel ashamed of emotions they are experiencing. Although it is very upsetting to witness your child’s negative emotions and it’s often easier to talk about more positive feelings, it may be doing them a disservice to try to diminish negative feelings as quickly as possible.

Set emotional examples. Most parents are very busy and often don’t have time to have lengthy discussions about their children’s emotional experience. In addition, most children pay a lot of attention to their parents’ words and actions (even if it doesn’t always seem that they are!). Therefore, parents can model, or show their children through their own behavior, adaptive and helpful ways to manage and cope with emotions. You can talk with your child about how you feel, which lets children know it’s okay to have emotions (e.g., I’m disappointed that your mom forgot to put more gas in the car). In addition to talking about your feelings, you can also show your child effective coping strategies, such as taking a walk or cooking a meal when you’re feeling sad. In the same way you model how to use “please” and “thank you,” you can communicate how to manage emotions to your child. Modeling effective ways to express and cope with feelings can help your child learn to benefit from positive emotions and tolerate negative emotions.

Understanding complex emotions. Complex feelings, such as guilt and shame, are likely to be confusing to many children. Further, many children may have difficulty expressing these types of feelings – perhaps they don’t have the words to describe these emotions, or they think that talking about them may make them feel worse. In addition, children may have multiple, possibly conflicting emotions all at the same time. For example, when parents divorce, children may experience feelings of sadness, anger, and relief simultaneously. Similarly, a child may appear angry on the outside, but feel sad on the inside. You can help your child with these confusing feelings by explaining situations briefly but clearly, and in child-friendly language. Remind your child you can understand how he is feeling guilty, for example, but that the particular situation is not his fault.

Helping your child understand, communicate, and manage emotions is likely to improve his or her relationships with others and prepare your child for a range of experiences. As you help your child label and understand his emotions, as well as model effective ways to cope, it may be easier for him to communicate what he needs and how he is feeling, and perhaps improve his behavior. For example, a child who can describe feeling angry and frustrated may be less likely to have a temper tantrum. Just as you try to give your children what they need in terms of their physical, social, and educational development, it is as important to provide children with an ability to develop emotionally as well.
Staff notes

Autumn Kujawa joined the lab in August as a first-year graduate student.

Congratulations to our previous Project Coordinator, Keri-Ann Tochka, who gave birth to a baby boy on August 18, 2008! Welcome to our new Project Coordinator, Laura Klein!

For More Information

Our website www.sbutemperamentstudy.org has answers to many frequently asked questions, more details about the Age 6 Assessment, and staff biographies. Take a look and let us know if there is any additional information you would like to see online.

Some parents have expressed an interest in the published literature from our study. We are in the process of writing and submitting a number of articles; however, this can take a long time. We do have a few articles from a small-scale preliminary version of the present study that may be of interest. Please email psychtemp@notes.cc.sunysb.edu for copies.

Resources for Parents and Children

Several parents have expressed interest in reading materials and other resources for parents. We would like to recommend some books that address common problems parents and children may encounter. These books are available through Amazon and most major booksellers:

- “Incredible Years: A Troubleshooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 3 to 8” by Carolyn Stratton.
- “Touchpoints: Your Child’s Emotional and Behavioral Development” by T. Berry Brazelton.
- “Good Friends are Hard to Find: Help Your Child Find, Make, and Keep Friends” by Fred Frankel.
- “How to Behave so Your Children Will, Too!” by Sal Severe.
- “The Emotional Problems of Normal Children” by Stanley Tureki.

Finally, for problems that may require professional attention, please contact your pediatrician or consider the following resources:

- SUNY Stony Brook, Department of Psychiatry 632-8850
- SUNY Stony Brook Psychological Center 632-7830
- Point of Woods Clinic, SUNY Stony Brook 634-7874
- Child & Family Psychological Services, Commack 543-0290
- Brookhaven Youth Bureau, Medford 451-8011
- Pederson Krag MHC, Smithtown 265-3311
- Family and Child Guidance, Deer Park 242-1366
- Family Service League, Huntington 427-3700

We wish you a happy and safe holiday! Thanks again!