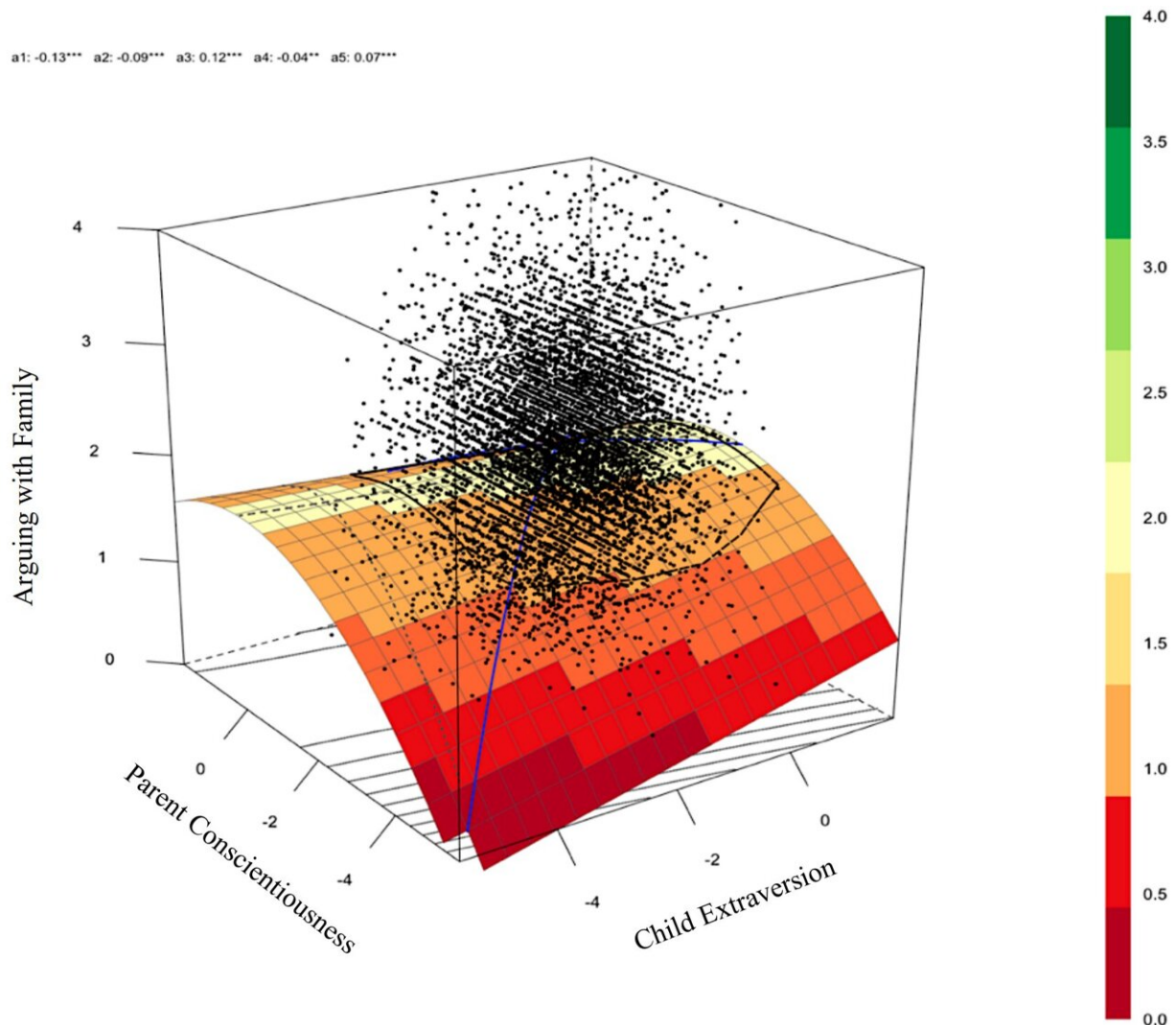


# How parents' personalities shape children's lives

March 27 2023, by Chris Woolston



Plot from Full RSA Model with Child Extraversion and Parent Conscientiousness for Predicting Frequency of Arguing with Family Members. Note. Plot from the full RSA model is shown above. All traits are standardized.

The five RSA parameters are presented at the top of the plot. \* p Infant and Child Development (2023). DOI: 10.1002/icd.2395

A new analysis led by Joshua Jackson, associate professor of psychological and brain sciences in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, explores how parents' personalities—boisterous or reserved, agreeable or cranky, concerned or care-free—can shape the lives of their children, for better or worse.

The study involved nearly 9,400 [kids](#) aged 11-17 and their parents who participated in a German survey that has been running since 1984. Researchers considered the so-called "big five" traits psychologists use to describe [personality](#) in broad strokes: Extroversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness and neuroticism.

The survey also included measures of the kids' lives, including their overall health, grades in school, use of alcohol or cigarettes, the amount of time spent on [leisure activities](#)—beyond watching TV or surfing the Internet—and the frequency of family arguments.

The study, co-authored with graduate student Amanda Wright, was published recently in *Infant and Child Development*. Below, Jackson explained the findings and the impact a parent's personality can have on their kids.

## **Can you briefly describe the 'big five' personality traits you studied?**

Extroversion is a measure of how outgoing and energetic a person is. Agreeableness refers to being cooperative and getting along with others. Openness relates to creativity and imagination. Conscientious people are

organized, deliberate and careful. Neurotic people are generally anxious, worried and nervous.

## **What were the major findings of the study?**

We found that parent personalities have a significant impact on a child's life, even after taking the child's personality into account. A child's personality matters, of course, but parents have a special and important impact on their kids.

For example, kids with extroverted parents tended to have [lower grades](#). Kids with neurotic parents scored relatively low on several measures, including grades, overall health, body mass index (BMI), and time spent on leisure activities.

On the other hand, kids were likely to be healthier if their parents scored high on measures of agreeableness or conscientiousness, and they were more likely to stay active with hobbies if their parents scored high in openness.

## **Do you know why certain personality traits are associated with certain outcomes?**

We can only speculate. We suspect that maybe extroverted parents are less likely to emphasize studying and homework. Maybe they are encouraging their kids to socialize instead of study, or maybe the parents are too busy with their own lives to help with homework. But there's no way to know for sure from this data set.

## **Can you say what type of parent personality is most closely associated with successful kids?**

In general, kids do particularly well if their parents are extroverted, agreeable, conscientious and open without being neurotic. That's probably something close to the best-case scenario, but even that combination can have some downsides. As noted, kids with extroverted parents tend to have lower grades.

## **Putting parents aside for a moment, how did the personality traits of kids affect their lives?**

A child's own personality definitely makes a big difference. For example, we found that kids tended to have better grades if they were extroverted, agreeable, open and conscientious, but they had worse grades if they were neurotic. Extroverted kids were more likely to smoke or drink, but being open, conscientious or agreeable had the opposite effect.

## **Were there any parent-child personality combinations that seemed to be especially beneficial?**

There were only a few cases where the personalities of children and parents seemed to work in synergy. It's clearest with family arguments. Arguments are less common when either parents or children score high for agreeability. But when both parents and children are agreeable, arguments dwindle dramatically. Also, we found that the highest grades were achieved by non-neurotic kids who had non-neurotic parents.

There was also some negative synergy. Here's one interesting example: neurotic kids with neurotic parents tended to have the highest BMIs.

## **Do kids generally end up with similar personalities as their parents?**

Lots of people eventually have the feeling that they're growing into their parents. But at least in terms of [personality traits](#), the connection is not strong. For example, it's not at all uncommon for extroverted parents to have introverted children and vice versa. At first, that may seem surprising. But if you have siblings, you know that there can be a lot of difference between people who grow up in the same household. One of the reasons I went into personality research is because my sister and I are completely opposite. If we had absorbed our personalities directly from our parents, we'd be much more alike.

## **Can parents use this information to change their styles and potentially help their kids, or is personality so baked in that the die is already cast?**

That question really gets to the heart of a lot of my work. So much of our personality is really beyond our control. If you're introverted, you can't suddenly become extroverted. But it is possible to change certain daily behaviors, especially if we're aware of the consequences. We found that kids are likely to be healthier if their parents are conscientious. That's very likely because conscientious parents encourage exercise and [healthy eating](#).

It's a good lesson for everyone. Personalities are largely set, but behaviors can change.

**More information:** Amanda J. Wright et al, Is parent personality associated with adolescent outcomes for their child? A response surface analysis approach, *Infant and Child Development* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/icd.2395](#)

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