

Research Paper

Exploring The Role of Temperament as an Early Indicator of Problematic Behavior among Adolescents in India

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study looks at the connection between temperament traits and problem behavior in young people, focusing on adolescents in India. Temperament includes traits rooted in biology, such as activation control, inhibitory control, high intensity pleasure, and shyness. These traits play an important role in shaping how individuals respond emotionally and behaviorally. **Aim:** The research aimed to see if these traits could act as early signs of internalizing behaviors, like anxiety and depression, and externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and impulsivity. **Methods:** A sample of 100 Indian adolescents, aged 11 to 18 years, took part in the study. Data were collected using the Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire - Revised (EATQ-R) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), and analyzed using Pearson correlation. **Findings:** The results showed significant correlations: activation control was positively linked to internalizing behaviors, high intensity pleasure had a negative link with internalizing behaviors, and inhibitory control was negatively linked to externalizing behaviors. **Conclusion:** These findings emphasize the value of temperament in identifying youth at risk and support using temperament-based screening in early intervention strategies. **Implications:** The study offers important insights for educators, parents, and mental health professionals who are working to support the behavioral and emotional well-being of young people in diverse cultural settings.

Keywords: *Temperament, Adolescents, Internalizing Behavior, Externalizing Behavior, Early Indicators, Activation Control, Inhibitory Control, High Intensity Pleasure, Shyness*

Temperament is a biologically rooted and relatively stable characteristic that influences and shapes how adolescents respond emotionally, regulate behaviour, and interact with their environment. Core dimensions of temperament—such as emotional reactivity, self-regulation, effortful control, impulsivity, and negative emotionality—are central to the development of behavioural patterns. Adolescence, marked by rapid growth, is a critical period during which problematic behaviours often emerge. These problematic behaviors are classified into internalizing behaviours (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal, somatic complaints) and externalizing behaviours (e.g., aggression, impulsivity, delinquency, risk-taking).

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Adolescents who have high negative emotionality and low self-regulation, often struggle with stress and emotion management, resulting in increased internalizing issues. For instance, excessive emotional sensitivity without adequate coping mechanisms or supportive environments may lead to excessive worry, withdrawal, or even depressive symptoms. On the other hand, high impulsivity and sensation-seeking traits, alongside with poor effortful control, are associated with externalizing problems such as aggression or substance use, due to impaired regulation and decision-making.

Temperament does not act in isolation; it interacts dynamically with environmental factors including parenting styles, peer relationships, and socio-cultural contexts. Difficult temperaments, along with hostile or neglectful environments, can increase the risk of behavioural problems. Supportive parenting, emotional validation, and compassionate environments, however, can reduce these risks by enabling better self-regulation and adaptive coping among adolescents. Neurobiologically, differences in brain development—particularly in the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and limbic system—contribute to variations in impulse control and emotional regulation. Hormonal fluctuations during adolescence further impact temperamentally sensitive adolescents, particularly those with sensation-seeking traits.

Many empirical studies support the role of temperament as a predictor of adolescent behaviour. A study by Jisha and Francis (2023) found that effortful control negatively correlated with behavioural issues, while surgency was positively associated. Lunetti et al. (2022) found that negative emotionality and low parental monitoring influence internalizing symptoms, while effortful control initially serves as a protective factor. Kapetanovic et al. (2023) studied how parenting styles and adolescent temperament interact to influence substance use, moderated by sensation seeking.

Parenting practices constantly emerge as an important influencing factor. Mokashi (2024) found that rural parental attachment was more strongly associated with lower behavioural issues than in urban settings, where involvement was key. Katsantonis (2024) studied bidirectional effects between parental distress and adolescent behavior, with differences due to gender-specific patterns. Sahithya and Raman (2021) emphasized that permissive fathering and lower sociability predicted anxiety in Indian children. Other studies (e.g., Vachapurath & Onaway, 2022; Imam et al., 2021) identified parental temperament and family conflict as significant correlates of behavioral issues exhibited by children and adolescents.

Temperament is also interlinked with broader psychosocial factors. Mousoulidou et al. (2025) outlined how bullying, social rejection, and hostile attribution bias contribute to aggression, emphasizing the need for early interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent education. Essay and Torre-Luque (2023) showed how poor self-esteem and worry link internalizing and externalizing comorbidities, increasing health service use. Coyne et al. (2021) warned of early problematic media use shaped by high negative affect and surgency in toddlers.

Cross-cultural and developmental perspectives reinforce these findings. Zhang et al. (2022) and Rowland et al. (2021) highlighted temperament's predictive role across developmental stages and nations. Borowski et al. (2021) confirmed that difficult temperament impairs peer competence, although attachment security had a stronger long-term effect. O'Connor et al.

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(2021) emphasized the persistence of internalizing issues from childhood to adolescence, advocating for early prevention.

Taken together, these studies establish temperament as a reliable early indicator of adolescent behavioral problems. Its interaction with parenting, environment, and neurobiological development underscores the importance of early screening and culturally sensitive interventions. Approaches like emotion regulation training, parent-child counseling, and school-based socio-emotional programs can support adolescents in developing resilience and adaptive coping, reducing long-term consequences of internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

METHODOLOGY

Research Objective

The present study aims to explore the role of temperament as an early indicator of problematic behavior among Indian adolescents. Specifically, the objectives are:

- To identify temperament traits associated with problematic behavior.
- To analyze the relationship between temperament and various forms of behavioral issues, including internalizing and externalizing behaviors.
- To evaluate whether specific temperament traits can serve as predictive factors for future behavioral challenges in adolescents.

Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H_0):

There is no significant relationship between temperament and problematic behavior among adolescents in India.

Sample

The study included a sample of 100 adolescents aged between 11 to 18 years, selected from schools across India using stratified random sampling. The sampling ensured representation across different age brackets and gender. Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in school and willing to participate with informed consent from a parent or guardian. Exclusion criteria ruled out adolescents diagnosed with severe psychiatric or neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g., autism, ADHD), or those undergoing behavioral or psychological interventions.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from both adolescents and their guardians. Participants were assured confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point without repercussions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants completed two self-report questionnaires under supervision in a controlled environment to ensure focus and accuracy. The responses were reviewed for completeness, scored according to standardized manuals, and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were used to summarize the temperament and behavioral scores. Pearson Product Moment correlation was conducted to assess relationships between selected temperament traits and internalizing/externalizing behavioral problems.

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Scales Used

1. **Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire – Revised (EATQ-R):** The EATQ-R is a self-report instrument designed to assess temperament in adolescents. It measures traits such as effortful control, surgency/extraversion, and negative affect. In this study, specific subscales analyzed included Activation Control, Inhibitory Control, High-Intensity Pleasure, and Shyness. Respondents rate items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never true) to 5 (almost always true). High negative affect scores suggest vulnerability to internalizing issues, whereas low effortful control may be linked with externalizing behaviors.
2. **Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL):** The CBCL, developed under the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA), is a standardized parent-report tool for identifying behavioral and emotional problems in adolescents. It comprises three major indices: Internalizing Problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal), Externalizing Problems (e.g., aggression, rule-breaking), and a Total Problem Score. Each item is rated on a 3-point scale: 0 (not true), 1 (somewhat or sometimes true), and 2 (very true or often true). Higher scores reflect greater severity in problem behaviors.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Details of the Data.

Variable	Categories	No.	Percentage
Age	11–14	15	15%
	15–18	85	85%
Gender	Male	25	25%
	Female	73	73%
	Prefer not to say	2	2%
Family	Extended	5	5%
	Joint	23	23%
	Nuclear	66	66%
	Single Parent	5	5%
	Other	1	1%

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics – Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD).

Measure	EATQ-R	CBCL
Mean (M)	3.13	2.69
Standard Deviation (SD)	0.71	2.35

Table 3: Correlation Table - Temperament Traits and Behavioral Traits.

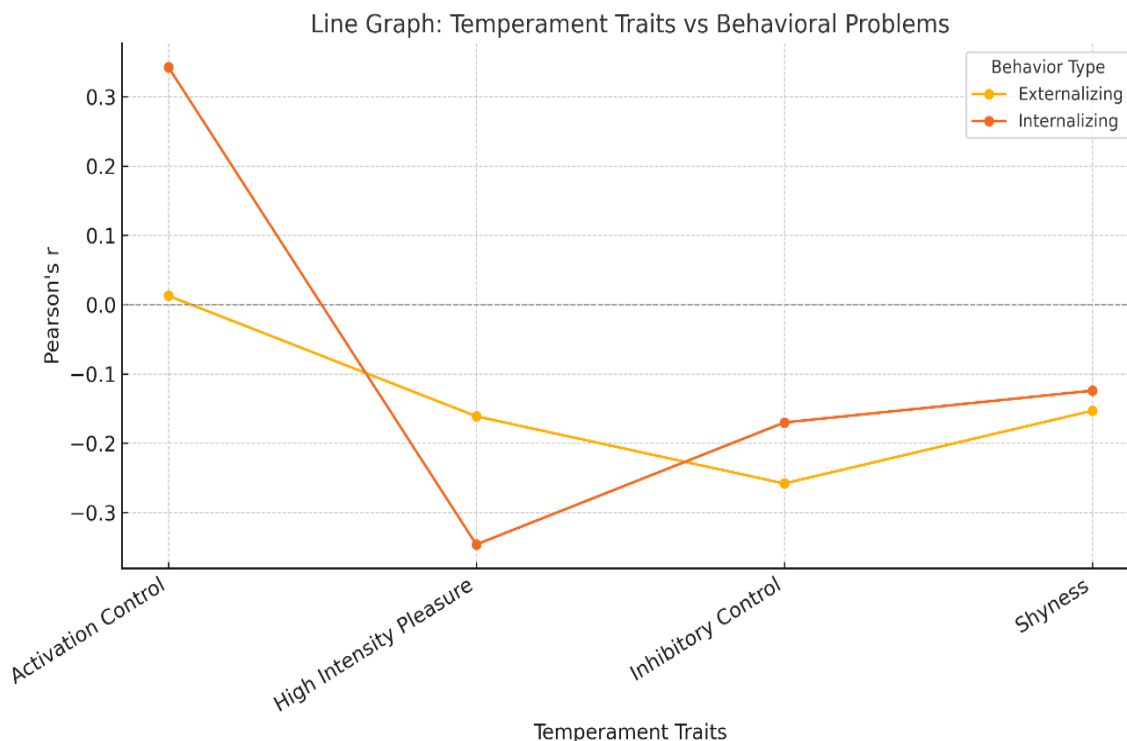
Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson's r	df	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Activation Control	Internalizing	0.343***	98	<.001	0.157	0.505
Activation Control	Externalizing	0.013	98	0.898	-0.184	0.209
High Intensity Pleasure	Internalizing	-0.346***	98	<.001	-0.508	-0.161
High Intensity Pleasure	Externalizing	-0.161	98	0.110	-0.346	0.037
Inhibitory Control	Internalizing	-0.170	98	0.091	-0.354	0.027

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Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson's r	df	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Inhibitory Control	Externalizing	-0.258**	98	0.009	-0.433	-0.065
Shyness	Internalizing	-0.124	98	0.219	-0.313	0.074
Shyness	Externalizing	-0.153	98	0.129	-0.339	0.045

Note. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Graph 1: Showing Correlation between Temperament Traits and Behavioral Traits.



DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the role of temperament as an early indicator of problematic behavior among adolescents aged 11–18 years in India, with a sample of 100 participants recruited from various schools using stratified random sampling. The study tested the null hypothesis (H_0) that there is no significant relationship between temperament and problematic behavior, against the alternate hypothesis (H_1) which proposed that temperament significantly predicts problematic behavior. The findings from Pearson product-moment correlation supported the alternate hypothesis and rejected the null, as several temperament traits were found to be significantly associated with behavioral outcomes. The demographic distribution of the sample showed that 85% of participants were in the 15–18 age group, and 15% were aged 11–14. In terms of gender, 73% were female, 25% male, and 2% chose not to disclose. With respect to family structure, 66% of adolescents lived in nuclear families, 23% in joint families, 5% each in extended and single-parent families, and 1% identified as “other.” These demographics provide a broad representation of Indian adolescents across various backgrounds. Two standardized tools were used in this study: the Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire–Revised (EATQ-R) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). It is critical to note that all subscales from both tools were administered during data collection and considered in descriptive analyses.

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The EATQ-R includes traits such as Activation Control, Inhibitory Control, Shyness, High Intensity Pleasure, Affiliation, Fear, Frustration, Aggression, Perceptual Sensitivity, and Effortful Control. The CBCL covers domains like Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn/Depressed, Somatic Complaints, Attention Problems, Rule-Breaking, and Aggressive Behavior. However, for the purposes of correlation analysis, only four key temperament traits—Activation Control, Inhibitory Control, High Intensity Pleasure, and Shyness—were selected from the EATQ-R, and two broad behavioral domains—Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors—were derived from the CBCL, as they are most relevant to the theoretical model of this research. The descriptive statistics for the two primary measures used in this study revealed that the mean score for the EATQ-R, which assesses temperament, was 3.13 with a standard deviation of 0.71. In contrast, the CBCL, which measures problematic behavior in children, had a mean score of 2.69 and a standard deviation of 2.35.

The Pearson correlation results revealed that Activation Control had a significant positive correlation with Internalizing Behavior ($r = 0.343$, $p < .001$), indicating that adolescents with higher self-regulatory drive may also experience higher internalized distress, possibly due to emotional over-control or performance pressure, highlighting that excessive behavioral compliance may not always be psychologically protective. However, Activation Control did not significantly correlate with Externalizing Behavior ($r = 0.013$, $p = 0.898$), showing no relationship with outward behavioral problems like impulsivity or aggression.

High Intensity Pleasure, defined as the enjoyment of and desire for thrilling, stimulating experiences, showed a significant negative correlation with Internalizing Behavior ($r = -0.346$, $p < .001$), suggesting that adolescents who actively seek high-energy or sensory experiences are less likely to internalize emotional distress. This may reflect that such adolescents find emotional outlets through stimulation and novelty, potentially reducing their vulnerability to depression or anxiety. On the other hand, High Intensity Pleasure did not significantly correlate with Externalizing Behavior ($r = -0.161$, $p = 0.110$), implying that thrill-seeking in itself does not necessarily equate to problematic behavioral outbursts.

A particularly important finding was the significant negative correlation between Inhibitory Control and Externalizing Behavior ($r = -0.258$, $p = 0.009$), meaning adolescents with poor behavioral inhibition are more likely to exhibit outward problem behaviors such as defiance, aggression, or impulsivity, aligning with existing developmental research on self-regulation deficits and conduct problems. However, Inhibitory Control was not significantly related to Internalizing Behavior ($r = -0.170$, $p = 0.091$), although the trend suggested a possible inverse relationship. Lastly, Shyness, often presumed to be associated with internalized distress, did not show a significant correlation with either Internalizing ($r = -0.124$, $p = 0.219$) or Externalizing Behavior ($r = -0.153$, $p = 0.129$). This might reflect a cultural nuance, where introversion or reserved behavior is socially acceptable or even encouraged in Indian contexts, and thus not strongly linked to psychological dysfunction.

These findings strongly indicate that certain temperament traits—specifically activation control, high intensity pleasure, and inhibitory control—can function as early indicators of psychological risk among Indian adolescents. Adolescents with high activation control may appear behaviorally composed yet could internalize distress, making them vulnerable to issues like anxiety or depression. Conversely, those with low high-intensity pleasure are more prone to emotional withdrawal and low mood, while reduced inhibitory control is

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clearly linked to externalizing behaviors such as impulsivity and rule-breaking. These associations suggest that temperament screening in Indian adolescents can aid early identification of both internalizing and externalizing difficulties. Given that these traits are relatively stable and observable, especially in structured environments like schools, they offer a practical and culturally relevant pathway for early detection and prevention efforts. Incorporating temperament-focused assessments into adolescent mental health programs can therefore facilitate timely, personalized interventions—especially important in India's diverse socio-cultural and academic landscape.

Taken together, these results support the conclusion that specific temperament traits—namely Activation Control, High Intensity Pleasure, and Inhibitory Control—are significantly and differentially related to internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors, thereby confirming temperament as a meaningful early indicator of adolescent behavioral challenges. These findings emphasize the value of early screening for temperament traits in school or clinical settings, particularly to identify adolescents at risk for internalized emotional suffering or externalized behavioral dysregulation. By acknowledging that temperament interacts with developmental and environmental contexts, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of adolescent psychology and advocates for intervention models tailored to individual temperamental profiles.

CONCLUSION

This research examined the relationship between temperament traits and problematic behavior among Indian adolescents, with the goal of assessing whether temperament can serve as an early indicator of internalizing and externalizing issues. Using Pearson correlation analysis, the study found that specific temperament traits are indeed significantly related to behavioral patterns. Activation control showed a significant positive correlation with internalizing behaviors, suggesting that adolescents who are highly task-oriented and self-disciplined may also experience greater emotional distress, possibly due to internalized pressure or overregulation. High intensity pleasure, on the other hand, was negatively correlated with internalizing behaviors, indicating that adolescents who actively seek out stimulating experiences are less likely to exhibit signs of withdrawal, sadness, or anxiety. Inhibitory control showed a significant negative correlation with externalizing behaviors, meaning adolescents with poorer behavioral restraint are more likely to display outward problem behaviors such as impulsivity or defiance. No significant correlations were found between shyness and either internalizing or externalizing domains, nor between activation control and externalizing behavior. These findings clearly support the alternate hypothesis, affirming that temperament is significantly related to behavioral issues in adolescents. More importantly, they suggest that specific temperament traits—particularly activation control, high intensity pleasure, and inhibitory control—can function as reliable early indicators of psychological risk in Indian adolescents. For instance, adolescents with high activation control may mask internalized emotional struggles beneath behavioral composure, while low inhibitory control is linked to more observable externalizing issues like aggression or defiance. Similarly, diminished high-intensity pleasure may indicate vulnerability to mood-related challenges. Since these traits are relatively stable and measurable from early adolescence, they offer a practical and culturally relevant opportunity for early detection and intervention.

Recognizing these traits can enable educators, caregivers, and mental health professionals to design more targeted interventions aimed at preventing or reducing problematic behaviors

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during this critical stage of development. Integrating temperament-focused assessments into early adolescent mental health practices in India could significantly enhance the effectiveness of screening, early identification, and support strategies. While the study was limited in its scope and generalizability, it provides strong preliminary evidence supporting the predictive utility of temperament in guiding adolescent behavioral health planning.

Limitations

While the present study offers meaningful insights into the relationship between temperament and problematic behavior among adolescents in India, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences. While correlations indicate associations between temperament traits and behavioral issues, they do not establish directionality or long-term effects. Second, although standardized tools like the EATQ-R and CBCL were employed, the reliance on self-report questionnaires introduces the possibility of social desirability bias or inaccurate reporting, especially when dealing with sensitive psychological traits and behaviors. Third, the study's sample size of 100 adolescents, though sufficient for correlation analysis, may not be representative of the broader adolescent population in India. Fourth, participants were drawn solely from school-going adolescents, excluding potentially high-risk groups such as school dropouts or adolescents in institutional care. Fifth, while the sample included a basic range of family types, it did not systematically account for adolescents from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Socioeconomic status is a key environmental factor that can significantly influence behavioral development and emotional regulation, and its absence in stratified analysis is a limitation. Lastly, even though all subscales from both the EATQ-R and CBCL were administered during data collection, only four temperament traits and two behavioral domains were analyzed using Pearson correlation, which may have excluded other important temperament-behavior relationships that future research could explore more comprehensively.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it reinforces psychological models linking biologically based temperament traits to emotional and behavioural outcomes, showing that traits like activation control and inhibitory control are significantly associated with internalizing and externalizing problems. Practically, it emphasizes the value of temperament screening in early school-based mental health assessments. Adolescents with low inhibitory control may be at risk for impulsivity and aggression, while those with high activation control may face internalized stress or anxiety. Early identification can help tailor interventions to individual temperamental profiles. The study also stresses the need to consider cultural context, especially in India, where emotional norms differ from Western standards. These insights can guide intervention planning, socio-emotional curriculum design, and training for educators and school psychologists.

Future Scope

The study opens several avenues for future research. Longitudinal designs should be used to track temperament and behavioural changes over time, helping to determine if early traits predict long-term outcomes. Future research should also involve larger and more diverse samples, including adolescents from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, regions, and educational or social contexts, especially those outside formal schooling. Incorporating multi-informant data from parents or teachers alongside self-reports can offer a more comprehensive view of behavioural patterns. Additional variables like parenting style, peer

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influence, media exposure, and academic stress could be examined to understand how they mediate or moderate the link between temperament and behaviour. Intervention-based studies testing temperament-specific programs would further clarify their effectiveness in reducing behavioural issues and promoting adolescent well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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