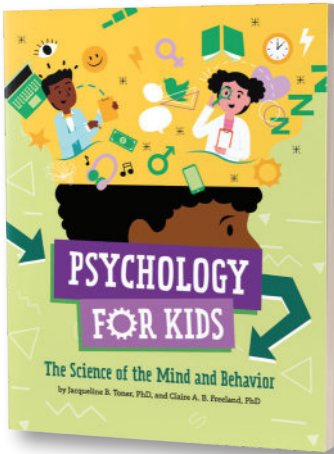




What Makes Me “Me”?

An Excerpt from *Psychology for Kids*



Why do we sleep? What are feelings? How do we make decisions, and how do we learn from them? Psychology helps us ask and answer these big questions about ourselves, others, and the world around us.

Psychology for Kids: The Science of the Mind and Behavior by Claire A. B. Freeland, PhD and Jacqueline B. Toner, PhD, introduces readers, ages middle grade and up, to the science of psychology. This lively and informative book offers chapters on the brain, personality, intelligence, emotions, social relationships, and more. Colorful illustrations of psychology's big ideas and lots of hands-on experiments to try at home provide an engaging dive into the fascinating science of the mind.

Enjoy this excerpt from the book.

Chapter 5: What Makes Me “Me”?

Who are you? Are you the kind of person who enjoys spending time on your own, or do you love being surrounded by friends? Are you a leader who likes to share your ideas, or do you hang back and scope out what others are saying? Of course, however you would answer those questions, it probably doesn't describe you all of the time. But psychologists have studied the ways different people typically act and whether, knowing this, they can predict their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. These individual tendencies are called personality traits.

One of the most famous of these psychologists was Raymond Cattell. He gathered data about a large group of people...Based on his findings he proposed 16 main personality traits that were different from one another and useful in predicting behavior. He developed a test called the 16PF (16 Personality Factors Test) that could be used to help determine a person's personality traits.

Research by later psychologists suggested that Cattell's 16 personality categories were still too many. In fact, most psychologists now focus on “the big five” basic personality traits. A person can be at one end or the other of each of these traits, or they can be somewhere in the middle.

Big Five Personality Traits

- Curious about the world, ready to try new things, adventurous and creative. **Openness** to new experiences. Doesn't like change, prefers things that are predictable.
- Gets things done on time, planful, pays attention to detail. **Conscientiousness**. Dislikes schedules, forgets to do important things, disorganized.
- Outgoing, likes meeting new people, likes being the center of attention. **Extroversion**. Enjoys time alone, finds it challenging to meet strangers, tends to be quiet.
- Cooperative, considerate, helpful. **Agreeableness**. Not that interested in others, doesn't care about other people's problems or feelings.
- Moody, gets upset easily, anxious. **Neuroticism**. Very relaxed and easy going, deals well with stress.

As a trick to remember the "big five," notice that the first letters of each word combine to spell "OCEAN".

Check Out the Research

While personality traits influence how a person acts, it doesn't mean that those behaviors happen all the time. Research psychologist William Fleeson was interested in what would happen if someone pretended to have different personality traits. He knew that extroverted people tend to be happier overall than people who are introverted (the opposite of extroverted).

He had some extroverted and some introverted participants act extroverted during a ten-minute conversation. Not only could all of his participants act extroverted, but they all reported feeling happier after doing so—even the introverts!

Try This!

Most real people don't fall at the extremes of the big five personality traits, but may tend toward one end or the other. On the other hand, fictional characters are often portrayed more simply. Take a favorite character from a book, movie, or TV show that you like. How would you describe them based upon the "big five"? Here's an example to get you started:

Big Bird

This easy-going guy is very agreeable. He's kind and works well with others and is as helpful as he can be. He's also very open to new experiences and eager to learn from those around him. He's pretty extroverted and likes to meet new people but he doesn't try to grab a lot of attention, so he's probably in the middle on this trait.

Oscar the Grouch

Definitely not an agreeable sort. Oscar is grumpy and seems mostly interested in himself, not other people. Oscar is also not very extroverted. It seems sometimes he'd be happiest if everyone left him alone. Notice how there are times, however, when these characters step out of character. While their personality traits are extreme, sometimes circumstances have a big impact on their behavior. There are times when even Oscar the Grouch can be kind and thoughtful!

Check out the table of contents and illustration style of *Psychology For Kids* here.

This Article's Author

Claire A. B. Freeland, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in private practice, working for more than 35 years with youth and their families. With an interest in bringing psychological concepts to a wide audience, she has co-written several books for children and teens on subjects related to emotions and behavior. She lives with her husband in Baltimore, MD. They have two grown children.

Jacqueline B. Toner, PhD, is the co-author of a number of books for children and teens addressing social and emotional challenges. She practiced clinical psychology for over three decades serving children, teens, and families. Dr. Toner lives in Baltimore, MD, with her husband. They have three married daughters and two grandsons.