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OVERCONTROL TENDENCIES AND DEVELOPMENT OF PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

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Self-control is often considered an adaptive trait, particularly with respect to school engagement and academic functioning. However, an excess of perfectionistic tendencies has the potential to cause serious distress and dysfunction over the course of development. This excess is reflected in overcontrol, a temperamental cognitive processing style in which one inhibits and monitors errors in an attempt to avoid making mistakes. For this reason, it is useful to develop ways to identify early behavioral indicators of overcontrol and to understand how these behaviors may predict outcomes of psychopathology. In this study, we observationally coded videos of children at T1 (ages three to five years old) performing the Impossibly Perfect Circles task. From our coding scheme, we developed a composite of overcontrol that included measures of perfectionism, compliance, intensity, and diligence. Regression analyses predicting internalizing (depressive and overanxious) symptoms and social withdrawal at T5 (two years later) demonstrated that overcontrol by itself was not associated with these outcomes. However, when looking at the interaction between overcontrol and inhibitory control, we found that the interaction was significantly associated with a greater onset of depressive symptoms, overanxious symptoms, and higher social withdrawal. Specifically, high levels of overcontrol and low inhibitory control predicted less impairment across outcomes. There was also a trend showing high levels of overcontrol and high inhibitory control predicting worse psychopathology. While self-control may be adaptive to a certain extent, it may lead to more impairment in the context of high inhibition.