Individual differences in school performance and other achievement-related behaviors have been a central concern of social and personality theory for more than 50 years. Various theoretical analyses of these differences have been proposed, and a variety of beliefs and perceptions about self and task have been proposed as mediators of achievement-related behavior. Many of these theories focus on individual differences in expectations for success and the subjective valuing of various achievement-related behaviors as the two major predictors of individual differences in achievement. Theorists predict, for example, that doing well in school is facilitated by having high confidence in one’s academic abilities and by placing high value on doing well in school. Similar arguments have been proposed for other domains such as sports and instrumental music (see Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998).

Given that doing well and feeling competent in school, work, and other socially valued domains are important outcomes for success in our society and for good mental health, having measures of indicators that predict these outcomes during childhood and adolescence would be useful to policy makers and researchers. In this chapter, we describe the development of measures for two such indicators: ability self-perceptions and subjective task values. Measurement scales for both indicators, as well as for task difficulty, were initially developed for adolescents (grades 5 through 12). The scales for ability self-concepts and
subjective task values were later adapted for use with younger children (grades 1 through 6).

Ability Self-Perceptions

The construct of ability self-perceptions evolved out of classic expectancy-value models of behavior and the work by theorists to operationalize a definition for expectations for success. Atkinson (1964) provided one of the first definitions of expectations for success on a task, defining expectancy as the proportion of individuals who have succeeded at the task in the past. Other researchers have argued for a more explicit operational distinction between subjective expectancy and task difficulty, arguing that task difficulty, as defined by Atkinson, is just one of several influences on subjective expectancy (e.g., Bandura, 1994; Eccles et al., 1983; Feather, 1986; Heckhausen, 1977; Weiner, 1974). In addition, all of these researchers have stressed the importance of domain-specific measures of expectancies.

In 1983, Eccles and her colleagues laid out a model of motivated task choice and performance that distinguished between one's self-concept of domain-specific abilities and perceived task difficulty. They predicted that these two beliefs would interact in predicting expectations for success in particular school subjects. Self-concept of domain-specific ability was predicted to relate positively to expectancies, whereas task difficulty perceptions were predicted to relate negatively to expectancies. Subsequently, Eccles and Wigfield (1995) demonstrated that domain-specific expectations for success and ability self-concepts load on the same factor and therefore can be treated empirically as the same construct.

Subjective Task Values

Similar discussions have arisen regarding the concept of task value. Atkinson (1964) defined task value in terms of the incentive value of anticipated success (the anticipated pride one would feel in accomplishment). Over the past 30 years, other individuals have offered broader definitions of task value. Crandall (1969), for example, defined task value in terms of the subjective attainment value (the importance of attaining a goal) and objective task difficulty. Rotter (1982) defined task value as the anticipated reward the individual will receive from engaging in the activity. Similarly, Raynor (1974) argued that the instrumentality of a particular task in allowing one to move along a contingent path toward a desired goal would increase the incentive value of the task.

Building on Rokeach's (1980) work on broader human values, Feather (1982) discussed task value in terms of systems that “capture the focal, abstracted qualities of past encounters, that have a normative or oughtness quality about them, and that function as criteria or frameworks against which present experience can be tested. They are tied to our feelings and can function as general motives” (p. 275). In terms of motivational consequences of these value systems, he