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Tips on Temperament

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Every child is born with his own individual way of approaching the world—a temperament. Here’s how you can tune in to your child’s temperament to anticipate how they will react in certain situations.

Generally, there are five characteristics that describe an individual’s temperament:

- Emotional intensity
- Activity level
- Frustration tolerance
- Reaction to new people
- Reaction to change

Temperament is not something your child chooses, nor is it something that you created. A child’s temperament shapes the way he experiences the world. A child who is cautious and needs time to feel comfortable in new situations and a child who jumps right in are likely to have very different experiences going to a classmate’s birthday party. A child who can handle a lot of sensory stimulation will experience a trip to the supermarket differently from a child who has a low threshold for a lot of surrounding noise and action.

Understanding your child’s temperament helps you be a better parent. Recognizing patterns in your child’s behavior that are influenced by temperament can help you anticipate your child’s responses to certain situations. If you know that your child has a hard time making transitions, you can guess that pick-up time at child care might be challenging. You could share this observation with your child’s teacher and talk about how you can work together to make the end of the day easier. For example, the teacher can give your child a reminder that it will soon be time to go home. You might also choose to spend a few minutes helping your child finish what she is doing, rather than move her into the car right away.

Your Child Can Adapt

A child’s behavior and approach to the world are shaped by his experiences and especially by his interactions with you. For example, children who are temperamentally shy can become more outgoing and comfortable in new situations when their parents

help them sensitively and slowly adapt to new experiences.

Also, no matter how consistent a child's patterns may appear to be, sometimes children can—and will—catch you off guard by acting in ways that you do not expect. A child who is usually wary of strangers might fall madly in love with her new teacher. The fact that your child can surprise you is one of the most exciting and even delightful rewards of parenthood.

Culture Matters

Different cultures place different values on behavioral styles. For example, some cultures value children who are quiet and obedient. Others value feisty, assertive kids. One dad, who lives in the inner city, expressed worry that his son was too laid back and not assertive or tough enough. He was afraid that his child would get bullied and taken advantage of by others. What qualities do you value and desire for your child? How might your cultural values influence the way you see your child's behavior?

There is No Right or Wrong Temperament

It's very important for children to be accepted for who they are. It is true, though, that some temperaments are easier to handle than others. A parent with an intense, reactive child or a child who is very shy and slow-to-warm-up will tell you that parenting these children can be a challenge at times. Stefanie, the mother of 2-year-old Danielle, described how she had moved to a new neighborhood and was desperate to meet some other moms. Finally, one day, a mom walked by with her very happy toddler who eagerly sought out Danielle and even offered to share her snack. Danielle, a slow-to-warm-up and intense child, pushed the bag away and then threw a huge tantrum when Stefanie tried to encourage her to play nicely. Stefanie later told her husband that Danielle was going to ruin her social life. (She also describes Danielle as incredibly creative, smart, and passionate.)

Most parents prefer some of their child's temperamental characteristics to others. Frank is shy and slow-to-warm-up. Frank's father sometimes feels his patience dwindling and wishes that his son Frank was the kind of kid who would just get on with it rather than

take so long to settle in. The mother of very feisty Carlos sometimes wishes for a disappearing pill, like the day Carlos' exuberant hug knocked over a friend who hit his head on a chair as he fell down.

Parents struggle with these kinds of feelings for a range of reasons. Your child's behavior may remind you of parts of yourself that you don't like so much and want to change—like being easily hurt by someone's unkindness. Conversely, you may feel discomfort with ways in which your child is very different from you—such as her ease and comfort in new situations when you like to take things slow. It is quite normal that you will like and feel more comfortable with some aspects of your child's temperament more than with others.

Siblings can be (and often are) temperamentally very different. One mother told us, “In our house, we have two kids, and we parent them in two different ways.” If you have more than one child, how are they alike? How are they different? How do you adapt your parenting style to meet each of their needs?

Be Your Child's Champion

Have you ever found yourself feeling isolated from or misunderstood—even put down—by family, friends, and neighbors who disapprove of or judge your child? You are not alone. It can be empowering to see these situations as opportunities to educate others about your child. For example, a father explains to his aunt, who is not getting the warm reaction she wants from her niece, “Sophie, like a lot of other kids, needs time to adjust to new people.” Dad then hands her Sophie's favorite book, helping his aunt learn to approach Sophie slowly.

You can also help others see your child's behavior from a different perspective. Here's how a mom describes her daughter, Tess, to a neighbor who is critical of Tess's feisty nature. “Tess knows who she is and what she wants. She is loving and she is fierce. She puts her whole heart into everything.”

Remember, the goal isn't to change your child's temperament, but to help him or her make the most of her unique temperament—both its strengths and the areas where she may need more support. By watching and learning from your child, you can begin to slowly and sensitively help your child adapt, to expand his world, and to feel more confident about his place in it.