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Understanding and Managing Your Child's Temperament

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Parents often wonder what causes children to behave in such different ways. How much of a person's behavior is influenced by environmental changes and how much is simply "hard-wired" or inborn? How much control do parents have over the way their child reacts to the world? How can two siblings be so different, even when raised by the same parents, in the same home, with the same toys, and with the same values?

It is also common and understandable for parents to compare their child to other children of the same age, noticing how one child prefers books and another prefers bikes. They see that one child enjoys boisterous activities and another gets cranky and over-stimulated by them. One child seems to be in a perpetually sunny mood while another frequently wears a poker face, making it hard to tell how he actually feels. Or one child displays persistence at a difficult task, while another easily acquiesces. Some parents silently wish their child would be a bit different. They may even worry that they caused their child to have a certain type of personality.

Considering Temperament

Early childhood professionals are often asked to provide help regarding the management of a young child's challenging or aggressive behavior. While the components of individual temperament are frequently overlooked by others, these are among the first questions I ask when assessing a situation, with the goal of creating customized, long-lasting solutions. If temperament is not carefully considered as a part of the overall equation, the

selected strategies and solutions may not be a good fit for the individual child so the situation may not become effectively resolved.

Parents also need to get a clear picture of their own temperament traits and try to see where there may be “temperamental clashes” between themselves and their child. Clashes occur when parents’ expectations are solely based on the way they view the world, rather than incorporating the child’s perspective, too. When a child is born with a set of difficult traits, it is the parent who must adjust initially if the developing child is to learn to deal with the world in a less stressful way. Knowing that many behavioral tendencies are inborn is perhaps one of the most important insights parents gain from learning more about temperament.

What is “Temperament”?

Understanding temperament means understanding how your child sees the world; it is the “lens” through which she views stimulus, relationships, events, consequences, etc. It is a child’s style of responding. People process information according to this lens, through their unique cluster of temperament traits they are born with. We can better understand our child’s temperament by observing her actions, by looking at the “how” of her behavior, rather than asking ourselves “why.” For example, “How did my toddler act when I offered her a new food?” (not “Why did she complain about it?”).

Temperament research began in the late 1950s with the New York Longitudinal Study conducted by Alexander Thomas, Stella

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Chess, and associates. According to this and various other studies conducted over several decades, we know that children’s development is influenced by temperament and that each person exhibits varying degrees of nine temperamental traits. The categories are: activity level, regularity, initial reaction to new experiences, adaptability to change, sensory awareness, intensity of expression, general mood, distractibility, and persistence. Temperament is not produced by the environment, and it is not created by parenting—we are born with it. Parents can modify a child’s temperament, but they cannot change it entirely.

The Goal: Goodness of Fit

Studies have found that disturbances are more likely to arise when the temperament of the child and expectations of the adults around him are out-of-sync. “Goodness of fit” has to do with compatibil-

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ity between the child and the environment; the traits themselves are neither good nor bad. “Goodness of fit” means that even though children are born with a certain set of traits, various strategies can deemphasize and soften these traits (creating a good fit), or accentuate and worsen any of the traits (creating a bad fit). What matters,

therefore, is how the environment, and the key people in it, support them. Goodness of fit doesn’t mean absence of stress, but it does allow the child to more effectively optimize his or her ability to cope with problems in socially acceptable and emotionally healthy ways.

Adults who understand a child’s temperament and adjust their techniques accordingly consistently experience fewer behavior problems with the child. That doesn’t mean that they give up on

expecting children to learn to cope with things that are difficult for them. It means that they have learned to combine firm limit setting with sympathetic, expert management of behavior. These adults identify where the child has the most difficulties, temperamentally speaking, and then adjust the environment and their expectations and management of situations.

The Nine Traits

Parents should think of each one of the nine traits below as being on a “continuum,” with one end exhibiting the trait strongly and the other end exhibiting the trait mildly. Many people exhibit these traits “moderately,” however, or more towards the middle of the continuum.

Activity: A person’s overall energy level throughout the day.

- Is the child always moving, even in his sleep, and choosing on-the-go activities? Or, does the child choose more sedentary activities, exhibiting a calmer style?

Regularity: The day-to-day predictability of hunger, sleep, and elimination.

- Is the child regular in his or her daily habits or rather haphazard?

Withdrawal or Approach: A person’s initial tendency for responding to a new experience, new person or new environment.

- Would you describe the child as gregarious, adventurous and outgoing? Or, would you say he or she initially approaches new experiences slowly, with caution?

Adaptability: How easily a person handles attempts to influence what he or she is doing or thinking.

- Does the child adapt quickly to new routines and handle transitions smoothly? Or, does the child have trouble coping with changes, becoming upset and stressed?

Sensory Awareness: How sensitive a person is to sight, sounds, touch, smell and taste.

- Is the child bothered by external stimuli or does the child tend to ignore them?

Intensity of Responses: The amount of energy or “drama” a person commonly uses to express emotions.

- Does the child throw an impressive or a mild temper tantrum? Does the child eat with gusto or very carefully? Does the child exhibit a strong reaction to failure and disappointment or does he or she simply pout and sulk when upset?

General Mood or Disposition: The person’s predominant mood.

- Does the child typically have an upbeat, cheerful, glass-half-full, sunny disposition? Or, does the child seem more pessimistic, with a serious, glass-half-empty, somber look on his or her face much of the time?

Distractibility: This is about how easily the person’s attention is diverted from one activity to another.

- Is the child frequently or easily distracted from what he or she is doing? Or, can the child typically shut out external distractions and stay with the current activity?

Persistence in Activity/Attention Span: The length of time a person will continue to make an effort, especially when the task gets hard.

- Does the child attempt things that are too hard but insist on trying? Is he or she perceived as “stubborn?” Do temper tantrums last a long time? Or, is the child perceived as more compliant and complacent, moving easily into a new frame of mind, and giving up/in fairly easily?

A Constellation of Traits

A child with a number of traits at one end or the other will likely

show behavior at one extreme or another. According to the research, a person's nine traits typically fall into clusters that make for three general types of temperament. Some children (40%) have a grouping of traits that make for an easy/flexible child. Some (10%) have a grouping of traits that make for a more difficult/active/feisty child. And, some (15%) have a cluster of traits that make for a slower-to-warm-up or cautious child. The remaining 35% are a combination of these types.

How Parents Can Help

Parents of children with traits that register in an extreme way

can sometimes feel embarrassed, angry, depressed, exhausted and guilty. They sometimes get locked into some very negative patterns and the traits become more pronounced, with the child becoming even more fearful, assertive or clingy. The parent's goal should be to surround the child with a supportive environment and to use techniques that soften the edges of the more extreme traits. These techniques will serve to desensitize the child and expand his or her horizons, helping the child to deal with life's typical difficulties with less stress and more success, softening the rough edges of the traits.

Below are some tips for handling typical issues that are often aggravated by extreme temperament traits:

High Activity Level

- Arrange frequent outdoor play and physically active indoor play.
- Don't ask the child to sit still for much longer than he or she can manage.
- Change the pace to balance vigorous with calm play on a daily basis.

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High Level of Regularity

- Stick to a schedule, trying to avoid hunger and naptime meltdowns.
- Bring the child's "loveys" when sleeping away from home.
- Keep snacks handy for unexpected meal delays.

Withdrawal

- Prior to starting a new play group, describe it to your child. Visit ahead of time.
- Don't pressure the child to politely greet others. Ignore any negative reaction; continue your conversation while the child watches and "emerges" on his own timing.
- Break any new challenge into more manageable small steps and offer praise for trying new activities.

Low Adaptability

- Try to plan your day so you are not rushing the child. Allow extra time for things.
- Allow the child to feel good about exploring things visually first.
- Prepare the child for new experiences in advance. Explain the sequence of events to your child, even for daily activities such as bath or cleanup time.
- Establish a daily routine and try to stick to it.

High Sensory Awareness

- Make adjustments to the environment to reduce the harshness of light, color, noise, movement and smells. Reduce any unnecessary sensory bombardment.
- Be strategic about introducing new foods; combine them with existing favorites.
- Avoid overstimulation at bedtime.
- Help the child to identify feelings associated with sensory sensitivity, such as, "I know you feel sensitive to tags. Let's take the tag off with my scissors."

Intensity of Responses

- Don't assume that a child is more upset because he has a loud style of reaction or that a child is less upset because he has a mild style of reaction.
- When a child erupts, try to stay neutral and calm. Don't get caught up in the moment. Acknowledge feelings and maintain consistent limits, even in the face of dramatic reactions.
- Use whispering to calm the child and yourself.

Serious Mood or Disposition

- Don't jump to the conclusion that the child is unhappy because he looks serious. Your child's face may register a solemn mood even when he just feels neutral.
- Point out positive things, such as, "Let's each talk about something good that happened to us today!"

High Distractibility

- Consider feeding your child ahead of time if he is too distracted to eat at family mealtimes.
- Turn off the TV, stereo or iPad when trying to get your child to pay attention to your conversation.
- Use "anchoring" to help your child focus, by putting your hand on your child's shoulder or arm, and looking at him or her directly to maintain attention.

Persistence in Activity/Attention Span

- Use forewarning when planning to change activities, giving the child a chance to prepare mentally for the change.
- Schedule plenty of time for your child's favorite activities, so he or she can finish the play theme in a satisfying way.
- Encourage stick-to-it-iveness by playing with your child, acting as a good role model in trying new ways to use familiar items.

Take Heart

It is gratifying to know that, ultimately, traits that are difficult for parents and teachers to manage in early childhood can serve the child in a very positive sense in the future. For example, those who are highly sensitive may later use their sensory awareness in artistic ways, becoming performers, architects, chefs or designers. If highly active people can focus their energy and drive, they can thrive in various kinds of competition. Those with serious moods may be drawn to law or journalism. And persistent people may find themselves tackling stubborn societal or environmental problems, or pursuing scholarly research. Intense people often become charismatic leaders or performers. Each of these traits, when well directed, can manifest in positive outcomes. Become an expert in creating a good fit for your child at home and school. Be an advocate for your child to those who may not fully understand the impact of temperament. Teach people the best ways to support your child at various stages of development. And, finally, enjoy watching your fascinating child's unique individuality unfold.

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