



Child & Family Services of Saginaw

Enhancing Your Physical & Emotional Harmony

E- Newsletter

How can I better understand my child's temperament?

Some children are "easy." They are predictable, calm, and approach most new experiences in a positive way. Other children are more difficult, not able to manage their emotional experiences and expression with ease. When a child's personality doesn't quite fit or match that of other family members, it can be a challenge for everyone. Of course no child is one way all the time, but each has his own usual type.

The ease with which a child adjusts to his environment is strongly influenced by his temperament - adaptability and emotional style. For the most part, temperament is an innate quality of the child, one with which he is born. It is somewhat modified (particularly in the early years of life) by his experiences and interactions with other people, with his environment and by his health.

By the time a child has reached the school years, his temperament is well defined and quite apparent to those who know him. It is not something that is likely to change much in the future. These innate characteristics have nothing to do with your own parenting skills. Nevertheless, the behavioral adjustment of a school-age child depends a lot upon the interaction between his temperament and yours, and how others respond to him - how comfortably he fits in with his environment and with the people around him.

Characteristics of Temperament

By being aware of some of the characteristics of temperament, you can better understand your child, appreciate his uniqueness, and deal with problems of poor "fit" that may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

There are at least nine major characteristics that make up temperament:

1. Activity Level: Active or Quiet

- Is your child's body usually calm or in motion?
- Is he on the go all day?
- Does he fidget and squirm, or is he able to relax and sit still for long periods of time without protest?

Your child's not in constant motion just to annoy you; an internal clock sets his pace. Take advantage of this by giving an active child plenty of time and space, every day, to "let off steam." Look for creative ways to funnel that energy. Try sports activities, or even create obstacle courses in your backyard. Healthy energy outlets will help your active child be calmer when he needs to be.

Patience and planning are important, too. Don't expect an active child to sit through a lengthy restaurant dinner, a long church service, or any other stationary event: Such unrealistic expectations run contrary to the way your child is made and will only end in frustration. Keep a bag of quiet activities on hand just in case you do find yourselves in such a situation, and be willing to take a fidgety child for a walk.

With a quiet child, allow extra time for her to get organized. She may need more time for simple tasks, such as tying shoes or dressing. Be practical: When you're in a hurry, save yourself some stress and tie those shoes yourself. She can practice lacing later.

2. Intensity of Emotion: High or Moderate Intensity?

- Does the whole world know when your child is happy or angry?
- Does he have intense responses to life and display his emotions without reserve?
- Or is your child more thoughtful and mild?
- Do you find that you often have to guess at your child's feelings?

When a child reacts with high emotional intensity in any given situation, the parent typically responds in kind. For example, a child who is screaming in a temper tantrum or shouting in anger usually causes a parent to raise her voice to an equal volume. But this doesn't teach a child how to control his own emotions and often escalates the situation. As difficult as it may be, thoughtful action and reasonable voice are the best responses. Over time, enough parental modeling can help an intense child learn to control himself.

Try the "Stop-Space-Regroup-Redo" technique:

Stop: When you begin to feel angry, stop. Stop talking. Stop moving. Defuse your own emotions first so you can help your child.

Space: Put some distance between yourself and your child. If your child is a baby, toddler, or preschooler, put her in a safe spot (in her crib or the arms of another person). If your child is older, remove yourself from the situation with a good exit line: "I'm going to the bathroom. Be right back."

Regroup: Take some deep breaths and think over the situation. Calm yourself down and decide how you will handle things. This is far better than simply reacting in the heat of the moment.

Redo: Come back to your child with a clear idea of what you are trying to accomplish.

You may think that a child with moderate emotional intensity is the easier to raise, but this isn't always the case. These children are often very hard to read. They mope, sulk, or hide when they are having strong feelings. These children need help expressing themselves.

Approach a child like this gently and offer a guess on her feelings to open up discussion: "It seems like you're feeling sad because you couldn't go with Daddy today." This isn't a one-time tactic - you must keep talking and listening right on through the teenage years. It can be a lot of work, and you'll feel sometimes that letting her mope is easier than drawing her out. If you can help her understand and express her feelings as often as you can, however, she'll be a much happier person.

3. Adaptability: Flexible or Unyielding?

- Does your child "go with the flow"?

- Does she change her routine or plans easily and without complaint?
- Or is your child comfortable with and dependent on routine and more likely to fight change or disruptions?

Clearly, a child's flexibility makes life easier. On the flip side, this easygoing type may tend not to finish anything, rather gleefully flitting from task to task without concern for completing whatever he leaves behind. This child rarely follows through without plenty of parental reminders, and can benefit from written routines – a simple poster for a toddler's bedtime ritual or a more complicated daily chore chart for an older child. The key: Keep your reminders pleasant, and refrain from nagging and complaining.

What about the unyielding child? She functions best when she knows what to expect. Being aware of what's upcoming for the day, week, month – even the year – can help her feel more in control and therefore more relaxed and accommodating. So, don't abruptly announce, "Time to go – get your shoes on!" (which often results in a temper tantrum regardless of the child's age). Rather, try briefing your child on the day's events each morning, and give two or three warnings in advance of each – e.g.:

"After breakfast, we're going to Grandma's."

"In 15 minutes, we're going to Grandma's."

"Five minutes. Then you'll put your puzzle away, and we'll get shoes on and go to Grandma's."

"One more minute. Then please put your puzzle away."

This may seem tedious to you, but it beats fighting a tantrum on your way out the door. Once you get into this habit, you'll find it's fairly easy to keep.

4. Distractibility: Easily Distractible or Focused?

- Can your child shut out noises and action beyond her point of focus?
- Or is she easily sidetracked by every bird that flies by, every phone that rings, and even by her own daydreams?

If your child is easily distractible, be sure to corral your child's full attention when speaking to her. While she'll ignore a shouted, "Time to go!" from the next room, she can't avoid a message delivered eyeball to eyeball. Once you're in her focus, keep your instructions simple, and utter them one at a time. "Get your shoes and coat on, grab your backpack, and get in the car" combines four requests – and you'll almost certainly lose her somewhere after the second. Instead, hand directions out one or two at a time, and check in along the way: "Got your shoes on yet?"

Differences in distractibility are real and explain why one child can do her homework amid family activity with television blaring and dog barking, while another requires a quiet, secluded desk to stay focused.

Being mindful of these differences – and explaining them to your child without judgment toward either end of the spectrum – allow you both to work with, and not against, her basic nature.

5. Biological Rhythms: Regular or Irregular?

- Does your child have a predictable pattern of sleeping and eating?
- Or does he get tired and hungry at different times each day?

Biological rhythms tend to appear very clearly in the first two years of life. Some children sleep and eat at consistent times each day, while others exhibit sporadic and complicated patterns.

A child with a regular biological rhythm thrives when meals, naptimes, and bedtimes are respected and consistent. Likewise, these children don't do well with hectic or unpredictable daily schedules. Of course, sometimes we don't have the luxury of planning our days around our children's biological preferences. If and when that's the case, do your best to accommodate your child by letting him nap in the car or packing a lunch to eat on the road, for example.

A child with an irregular rhythm can pose just as many challenges, as this child can turn up hungry or tired at unexpected and inopportune times. Again, try to keep snacks on hand, and allow a nap as soon as you can. Modifying your schedule is often easier than dealing with a tired, hungry, fussy child!

6. Mood: Optimist or pessimist?

- Does your child laugh and smile easily and frequently? Is he generally joyful and pleasant?
- Or is your child more pessimistic – crying, whining, or complaining more often than you'd like?

A little optimist can be a joy to be around; however, there are challenges, too. Sometimes you'll need or want your little Pollyanna to be more serious than she's willing to be, and you'll need to bring her down to earth. The challenge is in doing this carefully and lovingly, without crushing that joyful little spirit.

Far more challenging, though, is parenting the pessimist. This temperament trait can show up in very young children and have parents shaking their heads in dismay. A pessimistic child requires a loving parent to guide him through childhood with constant reminders to find the good in life. These kids tend to be emotionally intense, as well, so they broadcast their sadness and disappointment quite loudly. The mistake that parents often make – simply because they are human – is to respond with anger and frustration, which doesn't help. No parent is capable of constant cheerleading, however, so you simply have to do your best, as often as you can. Augment your efforts with uplifting books, videos, and audiotapes on subjects that cheer your child. Be wise, also, about the friends your child spends time with; two pessimists who spend too much time together will drag each other down. Encourage your child to spend time with more optimistic friends who tend to bolster his mood.

7. Situational Approachability: Approaches or Withdraws?

- Is your child always eager to try something new, always happy to make a new friend, always brimming with curiosity?
- Or is she cautious and slow to warm up to new people and activities?

If your child approaches new people and situations with eagerness, encourage this positive social skill by exposing him to new experiences and showing your support. The drawback to this temperament is sometimes a lack of commitment to focus on or finish any one thing. Your social butterfly may need to learn how to stick with something long enough to master it, or to spend enough quality time with one child to benefit from a "best friend" relationship.

We often label more cautious children as "shy." This isn't really accurate, however, and is no way to create a healthy self-image. Instead, you need to help others (and she herself) see her temperament as positive. When someone calls your child "shy," carefully change this to "reserved" or "thoughtful"; if someone comments that he's "quiet," point out that he has a long attention span

and is very focused. Learn to appreciate the strengths of your child's reserve, and your child eventually will, too.

Other ways to encourage your child:

- ease him slowly into meeting strangers
- avoid putting him in the spotlight
- refrain from talking for him when he's framing a response

8. Sensitivity: Sensitive or Not Sensitive?

- Do shirt tags, sock seams, bright lights, and loud sounds bother your child?
- Or does she mainly ignore these things?

Once you see that your child has a high sensitivity level, you'll be more apt to tolerate unusual or annoying complaints. A highly sensitive child typically has a low pain tolerance, so even the smallest booboo calls for tender loving care. As annoying as fixing that sock seam or cutting off that tag can be, these are simple, quick tasks that can placate a whiny, fussing child.

At the other end of the scale, you need to keep an eye on the less sensitive child so you don't miss something. A child like this may live with a wart on his finger or a lump on his foot for a year before ever telling you about it. A great way to stay abreast of any physical changes is to incorporate a back rub into your post-bath routine so that you can spot-check for health issues.

9. Persistence: Prevailing or Despairing?

- When the going gets tough, does your child get impatient and frustrated – and then give up?
- Or does he keep trying no matter how long it takes or how difficult the task?

A persistent child has a trait that will serve him well as he grows up...and drive a parent crazy along the way! Since your persistent child won't take "no" for an answer, simply avoid giving a direct command whenever possible. Instead, offer a choice: "Do you want to put on your pajamas or brush your teeth first?" This child also likes to have a say in what's happening, so asking for and considering your child's input when appropriate can help things run more smoothly.

A child who lacks persistence can be easier to raise in some ways: He typically does as he's told without fuss. He can frustrate a parent, however, with his seeming inability to finish any task, or his unwillingness to try very hard when an obstacle stands in the way. This child requires gentle encouragement and a guiding hand. Saying, "You can do it" isn't enough; he needs you to actually help get things started just to reassure him that he can accomplish the task.

Temper Your Temperament?

Here's a thought: Where do you stand, temperament-wise? It's just as important for you to be aware of your own makeup. Consider the traits listed here: You may suddenly realize that many of your battles with your child are due simply to the way your traits mesh or conflict with your child's. Exploring your own nature as it relates to your child's may help you modify your parenting actions to gain the most peace between you.

So then, what if your temperament differs from your child's? That can be difficult, no question. For example, I'm clearly "active," while my own mother is "quiet." If I had a nickel for every time she

said, "Slow down!" or "Sit still!" to me during my childhood, I could retire in style. She could do the same if she were similarly compensated for every time I implored her to hurry up. My mom lives with me now, and adulthood has changed neither of our temperaments. I'm still in constant motion, and she still moves slowly. What has changed? Our acceptance of each other's pace. And this acceptance has enabled us to enjoy each other for who we are, without insisting on change.

If you're an "active" parent with a "quiet" child, you're probably stressed by your child's dawdling and daydreaming. Conversely, if you're a "quiet" parent with an "active" child, you're probably frazzled by your child's constant activity. It's much better to identify this clash than to deny it, so you can handle it better. Of course, that doesn't mean you'll enjoy the difference, but being aware of it frees you to deal with it more realistically.

Parenting & Temperament

Parenting is more enjoyable if you keep the child's temperament in mind. Of course, no parent can respond in a textbook way to each and every situation, and let's face it, sometimes you just want your child – temperament or not – to do what you want him to do, without any excuse or delay.

Underlying any good advice about parenting is the admonition simply to do your best. When you succeed, enjoy it. And when you can't – let your love fill in the blanks, and everything will turn out fine in the end.

Article Resources: Caring for your school age Child Age 5 - 12
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