

Background

Thriving with Your Spirited Child

Introduction

Learning about a child's temperament can help parents understand the child and often give insights to the adult's temperament. However, a child's temperament is only one aspect of the child. The situation and environment are two other aspects that may heighten, diminish or otherwise influence the child's behaviors. Because parents have little control over the child's temperament, they need to be encouraged to modify the child's environment to improve behavior and assist the child's functioning in the world.

Temperament Theory

Stella Chess, Alexander Thomas and Herbert G. Birch identified nine temperament characteristics that could be reliably scored (sensory threshold, intensity, activity level, adaptability, approach/withdrawal, regularity of biological functions, persistence, mood, and distractibility). They found these nine traits could be identified as early as three months and in a diversity of population samples. Temperament is considered the child's style of behavior or how a child does things, as opposed to what a child can do (abilities) or why a child does something (motivation).

Most researchers, clinicians or educators who discuss temperament have clustered the traits in order to form general temperament types. Chess, Thomas and Birch revealed three types of temperament styles. One type is characterized by a positive mood, regularity in bodily functions, a low or moderate intensity of reaction, easy adaptability to change, and a positive approach to new situations. These children were considered to have an "easy" temperament. Approximately 40% of the children in their study fit this category.

In contrast, the next type of individual was characterized by irregular bodily functions, intense reactions, slow adaptability to change, a negative mood, and withdrawal in the face of new stimuli. These children were considered to have a "difficult" temperament. About 10% of the children in their sample fit the difficult category.

The third type was characterized by a tendency to withdraw in new situations, slow adaptability to changes, fairly regular bodily functions and mild intensity. These individuals were considered to have a "slow to warm up" temperament style. These children made up about 15% of the sample studied. About 35% of the children they studied did not fit any of these three temperament categories.

In general, the Chess, Thomas, and Birch research indicates that parents and teachers need to recognize what specific children can and cannot be expected to do, given their particular temperament style. For example, a young child with a high activity level will be unable to sit still through a long story time, and is likely to start fidgeting or being disruptive. A detailed knowledge of a child's temperament can be of great help to parents in handling a child and avoiding the development of behavior problems. A persistent child may have to be bodily removed from a hazard. A highly active child surely will need time to run around and express that energy.

Children do show distinct individuality in temperament in the first weeks of life, independent of their parents' handling of them. **T. Barry Brazelton** discovered this in his clinical work. He discusses three baby types in his book *Infants and Mothers*, and says, "The active and quiet babies demonstrate how amazingly broad the spectrum of normal development can be." Brazelton's three baby types are: 1) the average baby; 2) the quiet baby; and 3) the active baby.

Some differences are apparent from the moment of birth. Brazelton also believes that the infant affects his environment as much as it influences him. Just as each newborn differs in appearance, in feeling, in movement pattern, in reaction to stimuli and in capacity to develop their own pattern, each parent's response will differ in those same aspects. Each baby becomes a special experience to the parent.

Linda Budd discusses "Active Alert" individuals. These children demonstrate characteristics that are: highly active, alert (which would be a low sensory threshold), bright (intelligent), controlling, fearful, highly intense, attention hungry, and fluctuating self-esteem. These individuals have trouble getting along in social situations, are performers, can do the job (i.e. behave wonderfully in school, then fall apart at home), and have empathic ability, usually tied to the main caregiver.

Mary Sheedy Kurcinka discusses individuals with similar traits, but organizes them differently. The individuals Kurcinka describes as "Spirited" are characterized by these traits: high intensity, moderate to high persistence, high sensitivity, low adaptability, and perceptiveness (which corresponds to Budd's "Alert"). These individuals are uncomfortable with change. Kurcinka gives us "bonus" traits that enhance or exacerbate the five already mentioned. These traits include irregularity, high energy, an analytical mood, and a tendency to withdraw when new stimuli is presented.

Temperaments and Families

When we put individual temperament traits together in a family and look at all the ways individuals differ from each other, is it any wonder there is trouble respecting one another's gifts? Chess and Thomas believe that parents are affected and changed by their children as much as children are affected and changed by parents. Both parties impact the other's individual tendencies. Of course, as children grow older other factors besides their parents will shape their lives. The school and social environments, as well as unexpected experiences that occur in children's life, will affect their development.

A general principle, called "goodness of fit", appears to influence whether a child's development will proceed smoothly. While children with more challenging temperament styles may be at increased risk for developing behavior problems, what seems to be most important for children's healthy development is the goodness of fit between their temperament and parents' expectations and demands. Chess and Thomas explain: "Goodness of fit exists when the demands and expectations of the parents and other people important to the child's life are compatible with the child's temperament, abilities, and other characteristics." A poor fit creates stress in the parent-child relationship and puts children at increased risk. When parents are able to provide a good fit, children are less likely to develop behavior problems. Goodness and poorness of fit may relate to characteristics other than temperament, and what constitutes a good fit may change with children's development.

The concept of "goodness of fit" may apply to any of the interactions between family members. Communication styles and hierarchy of power within the family, as well as goodness of fit, are important features of family systems. We cannot gain an understanding of any individual unless we also look at the family surrounding that individual.

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Web Resources:

<http://www.advisorteam.com/>

<http://www.temperament.com/>

<http://preventiveoz.org>

<http://www.elainegibson.net/parenting/index.html>

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