

# WHY DOES MY CHILD DO THE THINGS HE DOES?

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT

### WHAT IS TEMPERAMENT?

Every parent who has more than one child recognizes that each has a very different personality right from birth. Parents whose first baby slept through the night during the first three months of life and cried only when hungry are not prepared for a second child who sleeps irregularly and belchs out every need.

One child may enter nursery school eagerly with never a backward look, yet her brother may need mom or dad around for the first few days while he gets used to the new environment. These differences in personality are referred to by psychologists as temperament. Temperament means those qualities possessed by each of us that were present when we were born and which remain relatively unchanged throughout life.

Dr. Stella Chess, M.D. has identified nine general categories that define your child's inborn behavioral style. None of these qualities can necessarily be called good or bad; they are just the way each individual is put together. An understanding of these categories will help you, as a parent, identify the more difficult aspects of your child's personality and to cope constructively with them. Each behavior listed below describes both ends of the spectrum; most children will fall somewhere in the middle.

#### **Activity level:**

It seems that some kids just can't sit still for a minute. At the other end of the spectrum are those who can play quietly for hours with their toys.

#### **Regularity:**

Some children have very regular sleeping, eating and digestive rhythms. Others have little natural rhythm, frequently waking in the middle of the night and feeling hungry at unpredictable hours.

#### **Wariness or Approach/Withdrawal:**

Some kids are "plungers" who react enthusiastically to most new foods, toys and peo-



Photo by Howard G. Buffett

ple. "Sideliners" initially back off from anything unfamiliar.

#### **Adaptability:**

Nearly all kids will have some trouble adjusting to an unfamiliar environment, such as a new school. But while some will settle in fairly quickly, highly unadaptable kids are apt to feel and act uncomfortable for much longer.

#### **Sensitivity:**

Some children are acutely sensitive to light, sound, texture and temperature, while others are not bothered by a barrage of sensory stimuli.

#### **Intensity:**

Some kids' emotions are easy to read – they're happy they're all smiles. Kids who react less intensely don't always express themselves clearly, so it's harder to decipher their real feelings.

#### **Mood:**

Some children have predominantly positive reactions to what is happening while others have predominantly negative reactions.

#### **Distractibility:**

Some children have a hard time concentrating. Others can be easily distracted from an activity they are involved in. Still others continue their chosen activity despite distractions.

#### **Persistence:**

Some children will leave what they are doing easily when a new activity is offered. Others stick to what they have chosen "through thick and thin." Let's take a look at how these nine characteristics are expressed very differently in a set of twins-Sam and Jake:

### At eight months:

Both babies are playing on the floor. Sam crawls over to an electrical outlet (which is covered with childproof caps) and begins to explore it with his hands. Jake follows him. Their mother leaves the clothes she is folding and calls them. She rattles a milk container full of clothespins and pours them out onto the floor. Both babies leave the outlet for the clothespins. After a minute, while Jake is still totally absorbed with the clothespins, Sam heads back for the outlet.

### At two-and-a-half years:

Sam and Jake go on a car trip with the rest of their family. Jake settles into his car seat and is content to ride for hours. However, Sam fights against being restrained after only about an hour of driving. His parents discover that if they stop at a rest area and let him run for five minutes, he is willing to go back into the car seat without complaint. When visiting, Sam enjoys meeting new relatives and has no trouble going to sleep in strange beds. Jake, on the other hand, becomes grouchy after one day of so many changes. His parents get worn out with his refusal to eat in restaurants and his resistance to sleep. When introduced to adoring aunts and uncles for the first time, he hides behind his mother and clings to her leg.

### At four years:

Sam and Jake's teachers say that both children have adjusted well to their preschool classrooms, although they note that while Sam is loud and exuberant with intense mood changes, Jake is more quiet, self-contained and even-tempered.

The teachers are concerned, however, that Sam is having difficulty in the gym. Every day he runs around wildly, bumping into other children and literally bouncing off the walls. The teachers have discovered that he calms down quickly when they take him out of the noisy gym into a quiet environment.

These twin babies were raised in the same family environment, but respond very differently to their world.

While both babies at eight months were distracted from the electrical outlet, Sam's interest persisted and he returned. At 2 ½ , active Sam cannot tolerate the car seat and needs frequent opportunities to run off his energy; he adapted easily to all the changes he experienced during the family trip. Jake, however, is thrown by change and withdraws

from new situations and people.

At school, Sam's intensity shows up in his exuberance and in the strength of his moods. Jake's moods are less changeable. The teachers discovered that Sam's difficulties in the gym are the result of his inability to deal with the noise level because he has a low sensory threshold.

## TEMPERAMENT CLUSTERS

You can see from this example how the different temperamental characteristics are displayed in the unique behavior style of each child. Because there are nine different characteristics and a wide range of behaviors within each characteristic category, the possibilities for differences in temperament between children, even in the same family, are vast.

In his book, Infants and Mothers, T. Berry Brazelton clusters these characteristics into three groups and identifies them as average, active and quiet.

**Average:** Your child basically enjoys new situations and adapts easily to change. He has regular eating and sleeping habits, is moderately active and moderate in the intensity of his moods. It was probably easy to get him onto a regular schedule when he was a baby. He accepts most frustrations with a minimum of fuss and generally learns new rules quickly.

As he matures, however, you may need to help him learn to stand up for himself, rather than adapting readily to any situation which presents itself.

**Active:** Your child is very active and distractible. She has intense moods and is usually irregular in body functions. You probably feel as if you've had your hands full since she was born. It helps to let such a child know, both in words and by adjusting your expectations of her, that you understand her temperament. This does not mean that you tolerate unacceptable behavior (no matter how active she is, she may not run across the street; no matter how intense her anger with a younger sibling, she may not hit or kick). Acceptance of such a child means making sure there is enough physical activity in a day; periods of relative quiet should be followed by time at the park or playground; car trips can be broken up by stops to run around a rest area.

It is helpful to separate the issue of nutritional intake from mealtime, and the issue of adequate sleep from bedtime. You may require that your child "attend" mealtimes with the rest of the family, but allow her not to eat much if she is not hungry. Nutritional "snacks" can be available in the refrigerator for her to help herself at times when she is hungry. Similarly you may require that she be in bed at a reasonable hour, that she stay there and that she is quiet. But if she cannot go to sleep, she may be allowed to do a quiet activity.

**Quiet:** The basically quiet child presents another "cluster" of temperamental qualities. If your child is not very active, has mild moods, is slow to warm up to new situations and not very adaptable to change – she may need considerable support from you in group situations so that she doesn't get "lost in the shuffle." It is important not to label such a child as "shy," but to allow her to take her time in adapting. It will also help to arrange for time to help her get used to new situations.

## PARENTS' ROLE IN THEIR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT

An important part of growing up is learning to understand and accept one's own temperament. As a parent, it is not always easy to accept your child for who he is. Most parents harbor particular hopes and expectations for their child, and it can be rough when the finished product is decidedly different – or difficult. This is a challenge every parent faces. It is important to look at your child's temperamental strengths and try to accommodate temperamental difficulties.

What initially looks like a disadvantage in a temperamental characteristic may be turned into an advantage.

For example, the very active three-year-old may wear out his teachers and parents, but his energy level will enable him to accomplish great things as he matures. The quiet child may get into less trouble, but also runs the risk of being overlooked.

Distractibility can be a stumbling block in learning, but it is an asset in being able to "switch gears" easily and quickly. The person who is active and distractible, yet persistent, can learn to give himself frequent activity breaks which will allow him to return to a task refreshed and see it through to completion.

Not only is it important to understand your child's temperament, but also to understand your temperament. Because of their temperament, parents may expect conformity to a lifestyle or "schedule" of achievements that are ill suited to their child's temperament.

For example, a child with a particular temperament placed in two different families will be perceived differently.

**CHILD:** Shelly is full of energy and always on the go. She expresses herself with exuberance and intensity. She is easily distracted and irregular in body functions.

**FAMILY #1:** This family is a quiet couple in their late 30s living in an apartment in New York City who waited to further their careers before having children. Both are professionals with very scheduled lives. Shelly is their first child. How would they perceive her as fitting into their family?

**FAMILY #2:** This is a farm family with three active boys. Both parents help with the family farm and schedules are often varied from day to day. Shelly is the fourth child and first daughter. How would they perceive her as fitting into their family?

Having a "challenging match" in your family is not an easy situation, but one that can be positive and rewarding with understanding and information. Such a "mismatch" of expectation and temperament results in a "no win" struggle between parent and child that can escalate with each developmental step. Unfortunately, some parents find it difficult to adjust their expectations, and feel frustrated when they realize that they cannot change their child into what they would like him to be. A child who thinks his parents don't really like him will grow up not liking himself. Often the message from the parent is "You don't fit into this family. What's wrong with you?"

A "challenging match" becomes a "harmonious match" between parent and child when it involves mutual respect. When a parent understands and manages temperamental issues with sensitivity and respect, the child learns to accept and appreciate himself. He also learns to make whatever adjustments are necessary to accommodate his temperamental peculiarities. Such self-awareness is the foundation of maturity.