

FROM A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Temperament: Who We Are

– Situation –

Kevin, our first born, was a dream child. He woke up happy, ate everything, and started sleeping through the night by the time he was eight months old. His younger sister, Avery, is another story. I truly believe she is able to separate out the mashed banana from her bowl of cream of rice cereal. She is suspicious of any change. At age two she still doesn't sleep through the night and always seems to be grumpy.

What have we done wrong? What did we do right with Kevin? How can we get Avery to be more willing to try new things and establish a reasonable schedule? What can we do to cheer her up?

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– Solution –

Born to be Me

Your children are different, and it's no one's fault. Kevin is Kevin and Avery is Avery. Another word for different is temperament.

Some of us are mild-mannered Clark Kents minding our own business on the streets of Metropolis while others leap over tall buildings with their Superman capes flapping in the breeze. Temperament could easily be responsible for Clark's calm or Superman's sizzle were they two separate people. If temperament lies behind a child's behavior, she is not being *bad* or *good* but simply who she is.

What kind of child do you have? Is he 'Clark Kent' or the 'Kid of Steel'? Does he scream when his finger gets scraped (high sensory threshold) or stare unblinking when his whole hand gets stepped on (low sensory threshold)?

Researchers categorize temperament in different ways, but they all include variations of the same traits (see sidebar). Whatever the trait — we all feel the impact of temperament.

The Impact of Temperament: Understanding and Acceptance

Rhythmicity describes a person's regularity and is visible in *routine* behaviors. Kevin and his steady sleeping schedule sounds like a *medium to high rhythmicity* child, while Avery's lack of a sleeping schedule could reflect a *low rhythmicity* temperament. Routines vary and so do children's need for them.

Approach – Withdrawal

How we approach new situations is another function of temperament. Avery and her suspicion of different foods or change sounds like a child whose *withdrawal* response is strong.

Does your child charge into her new gymnastics class raring to go (approach), or clasp your legs in a death grip for the entire session (withdrawal)? Temperament influences both responses.

What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

Adaptability

While *approach* and *withdrawal* describe initial reactions to change, the temperament trait of *adaptability* refers to one's long-range response.

The child with *low adaptability* may take months getting used to a new school, new house, or change of teachers while the child with *high adaptability* will be filling the backyard with new playmates, settled into her new room and making cards for a different teacher within a week or two.

The Pluses and the Minuses: Distractibility

Distraction, the discipline tool of choice for the under three set, falls short with the *hard to distract* child. *Low distractibility* would be a plus and praised as persistence when such a child determines to train for the Olympics, solve an algebraic equation, or master the art of riding a bicycle.

But it isn't very helpful when we want to distract her probing fingers from the computer keyboard, coax the neighbor's toy train out of her iron grip, or entice her to get off the swings and come inside for a story.

Up and Down: Mood

Think about starting the morning with Kevin's sunny smile (*high mood*) to greet you. Or consider Avery's scowl (*low mood*) as she trudges down the hall to breakfast. One might be easier to be around but both children are equally fine people. *Quality of mood* is innate.

Temperament to the nth Power

Temperament traits intensify under stress.

Imagine the special agony of a child with *low adaptability* when placed in foster care. Consider a single mother's anxiety when introducing her *negative mood* son to someone for the first time. What extra help might the child with a *withdrawal* response need when dad moves out and she faces spending part of each week at his new apartment?

Achieving the Fit

Figuring out a child's temperament and becoming aware of our own is important for identifying what each of us needs. Balancing these differing needs is the task of finding a *fit*. A good *fit* involves compromise, respect, and both understanding and valuing those needs.

The foster parents of the *low adaptability* child placed in their care will be wise to exercise extra patience. They need to expect such a child to take longer to adjust to household routines, become accustomed to performing assigned chores, and begin interacting with others in the home.

The *low mood* child meeting a new person for the first time needs preparation for the encounter. Adults can be forewarned not to interpret his grumpy greeting as signifying personal dislike or as predictive of the relationship's future.

The child with a *withdrawal* response may need to limit time at dad's new apartment to short daytime visits, adding regularly scheduled overnights later on, thus easing this change.

When Temperaments Clash

Temperament is not *good* or *bad* but some may be harder to cope with

than others. The temperament of all household members affects the outcome.

A parent and child who share *low rhythmicity* may be fine with meals grabbed at irregular intervals, but if one of them has the opposite temperament, when to eat could become an issue.

Suppose a *high rhythmicity* mom sets out dinner at 6 pm every night but her daughter Stacy's *low rhythmicity* interferes. Stacy's appetite does not adhere to her mom's schedule. The issue becomes not that their temperaments differ but how to meet both of their needs.

Mom might offer a bowl of cut up vegetables to a hungry Stacy late in the afternoon but still expect Stacy to sit with the family at the dinner table, even though she is no longer hungry. Such accommodations allow Stacy and her mom to create a *fit* between their differing needs, which will serve them both.

Too Alike

Sometimes sharing a temperament trait with a child creates problems, too. *Intensity of reaction* is another temperament trait. When a *high intensity* parent gets matched with a *high intensity* child, emotions in their household will be BIG. Finding ways to defuse intensity, such as the use of a mutual cooling-off time to handle angry feelings, will help to keep the peace.

What Works

A child with an initial *withdrawal* response will do better with several visits to his new preschool while mom or dad stays nearby.

The *low adaptability* youngster's child care schedule might increase from a

Temperament Traits

Temperament traits affect a person's approach to life. We are all born with a unique set of temperaments. For a complete description of all nine temperaments, refer to "Temperament: What makes your child unique?" in *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* (Prima Press, 1998.)

- Rhythmicity
- Initial response (approach or withdrawal)
- Adaptability
- Distractibility
- Quality of mood
- Intensity of reactions
- Sensory threshold
- Activity level
- Persistence and attention span.

morning visit, to attending half and then full days over the course of two or three weeks, instead of only over two or three days.

Parents of a *negative mood* child such as Avery need to remember that their child's mood is not a response to the people around her but to her own temperament. Acceptance and gentle encouragement will filter precious rays of life's sunshine through her overcast mental forecast.

A *highly distractible* parent matched with a *highly distractible* child could wander off on some great adventures together, but they may need the help of a less distractible person to see that homework gets done, school forms turned in, or the soccer uniform gets washed in time for Saturday's game. Whatever the temperament — understanding, acceptance, and the achievement of a good *fit*, are keys to household harmony.