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serving adopted children of color

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Seeing A Child Through The Lens Of Temperament

By Rona Renner, RN

"Do you think my child's fearful approach to everything new is because of his early experiences, or is it just his nature?"

"My daughter's high energy is really hard for me, I wonder if she'll always be so hyper."

These are typical questions I heard from parents when I did temperament counseling in the Pediatric Department at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Richmond, California. I worked with parents of young children, including many who had adopted children locally and from around the world. I love to assist new adoptive parents as they work with determination to get to know their baby or child and understand what is needed to provide love and security. Understanding a child's temperament, and your own, is one way to make sense of behavioral issues, social interactions, preferences, and power struggles.

"Temperament" is a person's first and most natural way of responding. It's the way we move in the world. It's the "how" of behavior—for example, how adaptable, persistent, energetic, sensitive, and intense a person is in most situations. Just as some children have curly hair and others have straight hair, some children are high-energy right from birth and want to climb and run non-stop, while other babies are happy to play with toys or watch you while you make dinner. Children come into the world with a style all their own.

The importance of temperament in child development was recognized by Drs. Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas beginning in the 1950s. Back then parents (especially mothers) were blamed for all behavior problems. Chess and Thomas sensed that there was something wrong in this explanation, since many cases in their practices did not fit this "blame the mother" concept. They were convinced that children had innate differences that played a key role in determining a

child's behavior. They knew many competent and loving parents who had challenging children and they wanted to understand what that was all about.

In 1956, Chess and Thomas began the New York Longitudinal Study to investigate individual differences in children. They studied approximately 130 children for more than thirty years. They found that babies varied in their behavior and reactions to the world and people around them. Chess and Thomas defined these differences as nine temperament traits: sensitivity threshold, activity level, intensity of reaction, rhythmicity, adaptability, mood, approach/withdrawal, persistence, and distractibility.

Many people over the years have adapted this original work and even changed the names of some of the categories or added new ones. When I first learned about temperament in 1991 from Chess and Thomas and Dr. James Cameron, I could see my four children and myself in a new light. It was the missing piece of the puzzle, giving me a new understanding of problems I had when my expectations and demands did not fit well with my children's style and needs. I began to notice when our differences in temperament did not mesh well.

My first two children, who were only twenty-one months apart, were like night and day. One child would eat anything and the other was a picky eater. One could fall asleep at rock concerts but the other didn't like too much noise, and would cry until she could be in a less stimulating environment. I, like many parents, felt as though I was doing something wrong when my second child was unhappy, and yet I didn't really think about how my expectations of her behavior didn't fit with who she was and what she needed. She was so unlike me or my husband and no one had suggested that the strategies that I used to comfort or discipline my first child needed to be adjusted to meet her unique style.

How much frustration and how many tears (hers and mine) could have been eliminated with more insight into and understanding of our different temperaments!

Temperament also plays a role in relation to trauma. When children experience trauma, such as separation, abuse, divorce, or death of someone they love, they all respond differently. I can see in retrospect that when our family went through a divorce, my children responded differently in part based on their temperaments (as well as their ages). When dealing with the behavior of children who have experienced trauma, sorting out “is it temperament or is it trauma?” can be very difficult, but paying attention to a child’s consistent behavior patterns and personality traits can help parents respond in a compassionate way.

There are many factors that influence your child’s behavior—including parenting style, environment, genetic makeup, past events, siblings, and friends. A child’s temperament is a key part of the equation. Sometimes parents, whether by birth or adoption, see similarities between their temperament and their child’s, but just as often you’ll hear parents say things like, “I’m living with a child who is so different than I was, I just don’t understand why she’s so dramatic about everything” or, “I really can’t understand why my son is so unhappy when he has to get dressed. Labels in shirts or ridges in socks don’t bother me. Why does he make such a big deal about them?”

In some ways adoptive parents and biological parents are in the same boat when it comes to developing empathy for a child’s inborn traits. On the other hand some adoptive parents don’t know much about their child’s early months or years, and need to sort out “nature” from “nurture.” None of us get to choose our child’s temperament nor does our child, but as a parent you can make a big difference. You can help your child understand his temperament, emphasize his strengths, and provide him with tools to express himself. There are no good or bad temperaments, but some children have temperaments that may be more challenging than others for you. So much depends on your own temperament, and how well you and your child fit with each other. For example:

- Your high-energy daughter may want you to play ball with her when she wakes up, but you may have lower energy and want to sit and read the paper. Her high energy might get on your nerves, even though it’s normal for her. Set a routine for how long you will read and help her decide what she’ll do until it’s time to play with you.
- Your son may be slow to warm up to new places and people, so when you go to a friend’s house he may want to sit on your lap. Since you’re outgoing, it may be hard for you to tolerate his caution. Give

him time to get comfortable, and then he’ll be more likely play with the other children after he’s checked out the situation.

- You might be intense in your reactions, and yell, just like your parents did, but your child might be low in intensity and sensitive to loud noise. Do your best to lower your voice and calm down before you react. On the other hand, you may have a child who is loud and demanding. If so, take three deep breaths before responding so that you don’t throw fuel on the fire. A yelling match always ends with everyone feeling bad.
- Some parents are fast adapting, and they can become impatient with a child who’s slow to get out of the house in the morning. Get up fifteen minutes earlier, slow down a bit, and give your child clear instructions about what you expect. Use a timer so everyone will know when it’s time to move on.

Step back and think about your child’s temperament. Read books like *Raising Your Spirited Child* or *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles*, by Mary Kurcinka, or *Temperament Tools*, by Helen Neville, and you’ll be able to put strategies into place that will make a huge difference for you and your kids. I’ve talked to countless parents over the years who felt like their home life became so much easier once they sorted out what each child needed and what to do when temperament styles clash.

Strategies for addressing temperament can be as simple as providing fun activities and chores to keep high-energy kids busy, giving plenty of transition warnings to kids who adapt slowly, and making sure spirited kids get all the food and sleep they need. Parenting strategies also include making time for yourself, paying attention to your own needs, and getting help from the “village” around you.

Keep thinking about your children’s strengths, and help them find things they are passionate about doing. Many times you won’t know if a behavior is because of in-born traits or environmental factors or past experiences. See it as a puzzle with many pieces, and when you put them together you get a picture of a child who is complex and beautiful.

To learn more about your child’s temperament and receive a free assessment for children ages four months to six years go to www.preventiveoz.org.

*Rona Renner, RN (“Nurse Rona”) hosts the parenting radio show *Childhood Matters* (visit www.childhoodmatters.org for more information). She has been a nurse for 44 years, a parent educator for 20 years, is the mother of four grown children, grandparent of two young boys, and lives with her husband Mick.*