The Importance of Temperament

Anyone who has spent time with infants and children knows that from a very young age their identities can be clearly defined. Even among siblings, children can and do have very different likes and dislikes, levels of activity, reactions to stimuli, and any number of other traits that make them distinct individuals. Any parent or caregiver will tell you that methods of discipline and teaching do not work in a one-size-fits-all manner because every child responds differently due to the fact that temperament varies among children.

What is meant by “Temperament”?

The factors that make a child a distinct individual are collectively defined as temperament: essentially, what makes a child “tick.” Temperament differs from personality, although the two are related. Temperament may shape personality, but temperament is rooted in a child’s biology. While the prevailing opinion is that nurture and the circumstances under which children are reared – and not nature – are responsible for making them who they are, it is important to remember that there are certain traits that are simply part of the genetic makeup of the child, which is to say that nature is indeed a factor. Temperament is present at birth, but it is difficult to determine until around age four months when babies begin to be more physically active.

How is Temperament Defined and Identified?

Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas, both Professors at the New York University School of Medicine, published *Your Child Is A Person: A Psychological Approach To Childhood Without Guilt* in 1965. While the work may be dated, the information contained therein is not. In their work, these professionals performed long-term studies on children from across cultural and economic strata and classified temperament according to nine criteria: sensory threshold; activity level; intensity; rhythmicity; adaptability; mood; approach/withdrawal; persistence; and distractibility. The children’s “score” on these traits classify them as “easy,” “slow to warm up,” and “difficult.” The children in the study were observed at ages 2 months, 6 months, 1 year, 2 years, 5 years, and 10 years. Parental observations and input were also considered for the study.
The nine dimensions of temperament that Chess and Thomas defined are as follows:

- Sensory Threshold: the level of stimulation needed to evoke a response in the child.
- Activity Level: general motor activity level during wakefulness and sleep.
- Intensity: how expressive a child is, whether acting out of happiness, anger, sadness, or other emotions.
- Rhythmicity: how predictable bodily functions are (appetite, elimination, sleeping cycles, etc.).
- Adaptability: how easily a child adjusts to change/transition.
- Mood: describes the child's basic disposition (happy, serious, etc).
- Approach/Withdrawal: how a child reacts to new places or situations.
- Persistence: how well the child handles obstacles.
- Distractibility: how easily a child can be distracted or can concentrate.

The three patterns of temperament characteristics that Thomas and Chess described are:

- Easy: typically adaptable children with a positive mood who are moderate in activity and intensity and are interested in new things;
- Difficult: children with a negative mood who are tense and low in adaptability; and
- Slow to warm up: children who do not adapt well to change, withdraw in new settings, and are shy, although they adapt well if given time.

Does Sex or Birth Order Shape Temperament?

*The Preventive Ounce* conducted a study of parental perceptions of temperament of four-month-old babies. While birth order may shape parents' reactions to temperament, and certainly it can shape the parent-child relationship, "no link between birth order and parents' perception of their infant's temperament [was reported] at four months. . . . Birth order did play a role in determining the strength of the relationship between the child's temperament and the occurrence of later behavioral issues. For example, if an infant was easily frustrated and intense in reactions at four months, separation issues later on were more likely if the infant was also first born."

What is the Benefit of Knowing a Child's Temperament?

What is the significance of determining, for instance, what the distractibility of an "easy" child is, or how active a "difficult" child might be? The significance is great. Once we understand the temperament of a particular child, then figuring out how best to create an environment for optimal growth and development is much easier and more productive. If the child's nature or temperament is in harmony with his environment, then the child's psychological growth and healthy development are poised to flourish.

It is neither productive nor fair to simply state, "Well, the child is who he is and we cannot change his behavior," since it is important to know and understand a child's temperament. For it is this temperament that will direct the best ways to educate, discipline, nurture, and understand a child for who he is: namely, an individual.
If parents, for example, know that their child is slow to warm up, then allowing that child time to adapt to a new environment will help the child to adjust. Parents may have to encourage such a child to try new experiences, but encouraging rather than pressuring the child will ultimately help him or her to grow and develop at his or her own pace.

If parents and caregivers are not attuned to a child’s temperament, the child may experience undue stress. A child who has a high activity level cannot be expected to sit in a car for several hours at a time, for example. Thomas and Chess offer the following example of how knowing a child’s temperament can help keep the child safe: “An adaptable child who is caught sticking things into electric sockets may need only one lecture on the danger to give up this practice; an easily distractible child may merely need to have his attention diverted to some other activity; a persistent child may have to be removed bodily from the hazard.”

Teachers and other caregivers can also benefit from knowing a child’s temperament. A child who is highly active cannot be expected to flourish if he is expected to sit still without outlets for his energy. A child who is slow to warm up may require coaxing in order for him to engage with his peers or he may withdraw entirely.

**Can Knowing a Child’s Temperament be a Bad Thing?**

It might be tempting to label a child as “easy,” “difficult,” or “slow to warm up,” but it is best to avoid these labels. Others may begin to see the child through this lens, and that can affect a child’s self-esteem and create other problems as the child develops. There may be an element of the self-fulfilling prophecy for a child who is labeled “difficult.” Rather than assigning labels, approach the knowledge of the child’s temperament as just one more thing you know about what makes a child an individual and then strive to create a match between the environment and the child’s temperament.

Parents may feel that they are not treating siblings equally if they react to the temperament of each child individually. However, equality is still possible: even though each child may not get the same treatment, he will nevertheless get what he needs.

Parents may also worry that understanding a child’s temperament will lead to catering to the child. However, understanding what makes a child “tick” more often means that the parent understands why he or she must be more firm in some areas of discipline and limit-setting.

Equally important is to avoid thinking that a child’s behavior is inherently bad. Often it is only when the environment clashes with the child’s temperament that the “bad” behavior occurs. Like adults, when children are required to behave in ways that clash with their innate nature, they may exhibit undesirable behavior.

**Understanding Temperament Supports Development**

Much of this theory and practice seems rooted in common sense: if we are all different as adults, then of course we must all be somewhat different as children. As adults we are not all motivated by the
same things, nor do we respond positively to the same things, yet we do not spend a great deal of time analyzing why this is so. Taking a look at a child’s temperament gives us the chance to see the child for the individual that he is and to respect his particular innate personality traits. Once we begin to define and understand these concepts, we can establish an environment that works in conjunction with the child’s nature and allow the child to grow and develop in a meaningful way.

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