

Sometimes the Apple DOES Fall Far from the Tree

By Jackie Block, Marriage and Family Therapist

I have two children. They don't look much alike, they don't act much alike, and often people question if they are full siblings. They are. The learning experience came with the birth of our second child. She is full of energy, needs little sleep, and dives into life with a passion second to none. I need sleep. I was used to the child who slept through the night and took regular naps during infancy and the toddler years. I had time for me and my daily tasks. I struggled with the second child. She was pleasant and engaging, but seemed to always need to be near me. It took awhile to realize that she was not going to adapt to my routine, but that I needed to figure out how to accept her needs and meet mine as well.

Although as parents we share our values, our lives and offer the best we can to our offspring, children will have personalities that are their own. This is where temperament comes in to play. Two psychiatrists by the names of Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas developed nine distinct temperaments. They are as follows:

ACTIVITY: This measures the amount of physical energy a child puts out in daily activities and behaviors. An active child prefers more active play, may move around a lot, even when sleeping, and may be active and fidgety when doing quiet activities. This child may go non-stop and then collapse into a deep sleep when exhausted or become cranky and difficult to settle down if over-tired. If you are a parent of an active child, you need to allow time for your child to get energy out. You also need to tune in and come up with ways that help your child settle more easily, which could be anything from a back rub, reading to your child or playing a special tape or finding a place to relax and wind down.

INTENSITY: Intensity looks at the levels of self-expression and the amount of energy, drama and volume put into expression. This child can be to the extremes of happiness, anger or sadness. You can be the best parent to her one minute and the worst the next. Your best bet is not to match the intense child's level of intensity but rather to be matter of fact. It is also wise during calm moments to teach appropriate responses and let her test it out.

SENSITIVITY: A child who is highly sensitive may have difficulty with transitions, may become over stimulated by lights or noise, or be sensitive to the way socks, tags on clothes or certain fabric feel on the skin. This child reacts strongly to the stressors in his environment. A child with low sensitivity manages sensory stresses with relative ease most often. For those of you with a highly sensitive child, I am sure you have already cut the tags out of the clothes, bought the right kind of socks and given your child prep time before transition times. You don't need to over accommodate, but you can offer sympathy when your child is having difficulty with disappointment or adjustment.

REGULARITY: This measures predictability of things such as hunger, bowel movements and fatigue. An irregular child will not always be hungry at scheduled times. You may need to have prepared snacks for him so you are not jumping to every whim. He may be more difficult to toilet train and may have difficulty following scheduled

activities. A benefit of a child who is less scheduled is that he may handle spontaneity better.

PERSISTENCE OR FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE: A child who is low in frustration tolerance tends to give up easily and have difficulty with challenging situations. As an infant she may want to be held more and as a toddler has difficulty playing by herself. To help such a child, it may be beneficial to break tasks down, not respond right away with help, allow time for transitions, and give warnings about time and when or what is going to happen next.

DISTRACTIBILITY: Such a child is keenly aware of his environment. The child tunes into everything around him. A benefit of distractibility in an infant is that this child is easier to soothe whereas a less distractible infant wants what he wants. A child with low distractibility tends to do well in school and focus well even when there is much going on around him. To keep a more distractible child focused, remind him to focus and bring him back to task.

APPROACH/WITHDRAWAL: This measures an infant's initial reaction to new things such as new foods, people, experiences or situations. An approaching infant has a positive initial reaction. A withdrawing infant is more negative in her response and may be slow to warm up. An approaching child may need to be taught to slow down and a withdrawing child needs to be given time to warm up to a situation. As parents, you must remember that the initial reaction is not necessarily the long-term reaction. Don't get caught up in the "I don't want to" with new situations. Encourage your child and expect your child to try new things.

ADAPTABILITY: This measures adjustment to change after a child's initial reaction. A highly adaptable infant seems to be able to go anywhere, sleep anywhere, and handle changes in routine well. An adaptable child may need help in learning how to stand up for himself and define what his needs are. A child with low adaptability needs time to adjust to a situation and may need to be prepared for new things. Even a highly adaptable child may have difficulty with major changes in life.

MOOD: Mood measures a child's disposition. Some babies are happy and smile a lot, others are fussy and cry. Like many adults, some see the cup half-full while others see it half-empty. The benefit of a child who is more negative is that the child can be more analytical; a skill you can foster in your child. The ones who are more positive may need to learn how to be more critical when appropriate.

Now that you know that your child is not just a product of the environment you created, take a deep breath, wonder at the marvels of genetics and enjoy the child in front of you who is truly his own person.

Information for this article was adapted from an article by Alice Shannon entitled, *Beloved Stranger*, printed in the May/June 2005 issue of *Psychotherapy Networker*.

Suggested Readings:

***The Highly Sensitive Child*, by Elain Aron. New York: Broadway Books, 2002.**
***Understanding Your Child's Temperament*, by William B. Carey. New York: MacMillan, 1997.**
***Know Your Child*, by Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas. New York: Basic Books, 1997.**
***The Explosive Child*, by Ross Greene. New York: Quill, 1991.**
***Raising Your Spirited Child*, by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.**
***The Difficult Child*, Stanley Turecki. New York: Bantam, 2000.**

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