How Temperament Affects Parents, Children and Family Life

The Andersons have two daughters: Sarah, age 1, and Angela, age 4 months. Both girls are bright, active and developing normally. Yet their parents wonder how two girls in the same family could be so different. Sarah moves at a slow pace, is easy going, adaptable and “laid back.” Angela is energetic, intense, quick-responding and races through life at top speed. Sarah fits her parents’ lifestyle well, but they are puzzled and sometimes upset by Angela’s high activity and intensity. Sometimes it feels as if Angela’s behavior makes routines and home life difficult. The differences in behavior between the two girls reflect individual characteristics of temperament and these differences are powerful contributors to the ups and downs of everyday life in the Anderson household.

What is Temperament?
Temperament describes individual differences, which are:

1. Biologically based
2. Evident early in life
3. Characteristic of an individual in many situations and over time

Differences in temperament are seen in infants. Some babies are fussy, sensitive to noises, easily startled and upset, and have irregular eating and sleeping patterns. Other babies are calm, mellow and quickly adapt to regular eating and sleeping routines. Many infants are energetic, intense and quick responding, whether they are eating, playing, etc. Others have a deliberate tempo, are reflective and take time to adjust to new situations, new foods and new people. Parents who have several children recognize differences in persistence, distractibility and energy levels, and are aware that one child may be typically outgoing and enthusiastic while her sister is shy and “low-key.” It’s important to remember that one style of temperament is not better than another. Temperament is simply a way of describing how a baby reacts and responds to her environment.

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What Research Tells us About Temperament

Psychiatrists Thomas and Chess (1977) define temperament “as a general term referring to the ‘how’ of behavior.” It differs from ability, which is concerned with the “what” and “how well” of behaving, and from motivation, which accounts for “why” a person does what he is doing. Thomas and Chess identified nine dimensions of temperament based on their own clinical expertise and on their research with children and families. These dimensions provide a framework for describing individual differences in temperament.

Nine Temperament Styles

1. Activity Level
2. Biological Rhythms
3. Approach/Withdrawal
4. Adaptability
5. Mood
6. Intensity
7. Sensitivity
8. Distractibility
9. Persistence

Thomas and Chess also describe three styles of temperament that influence parent-child relationships and family life. These nine characteristics are reflected in the three major temperament styles.

1. “Flexible” children are typically adaptable, mild or moderate in activity and intensity, positive in mood and interested in new experiences.
2. “Feisty” children tend to be intense, low in adaptability and negative in mood.
3. “Fearful” children are upset by change, are characteristically reluctant and withdrawing in new situations, and shy with new people, although given time they adapt slowly and well.
How Temperament Influences Family Life

Individual differences in temperament or behavioral styles are important in family life in several ways because they affect the nature of the interactions among family members. Some infants adapt quickly and easily to family daily routines and get along well with others. Others, especially highly active, intense and “prickly” infants have a more difficult time adjusting to everyday demands, and their interactions with parents and siblings may lead to friction and stress. Consider how a fussy or extremely active infant can bother an older sibling who is trying to complete a school project, or how a distractible child who is low in persistence can frustrate parents’ efforts to get her to breastfeed or bottle-feed.

It is important to note that parents, like children, also differ in temperament. Some are quick-reacting and intense, while others are quiet and slow to respond; some are flexible and adaptable, and others are not. The “mix” between parents and infants’ temperaments has a strong effect on family life, sometimes leading to positive interactions, sometimes to frustrations and sometimes even to conflicts.

It is interesting to note that parents also differ in the expectations they have about their infants’ behavior, and how they view and tolerate differences in temperaments.

For example, certain constellations of temperament such as high activity, intensity and persistence may be tolerated and valued in boys, but not in girls. Conversely, shyness and sensitivity may be viewed as acceptable in girls, but not in boys.

This leads to the notion of “goodness of fit,” which can be a useful framework for helping parents figure out how temperament affects relationships in the family. “Goodness of fit” refers to the match or mismatch between an infant and other family members.

For example, a high-activity, intense child like Angela may upset and irritate a quiet, slow-paced, reflective parent. An active, quick-responding parent may be impatient with a fearful child, whom the parent may see as lazy or indifferent. Sparks may fly when both parent and child are intense and quick-responding. Life in a family is not the same for all children, and temperament is one of the ingredients in the “fit” between child and family.
How can Understanding Temperament Improve Family Life?
Understanding your infant’s temperament provides a fresh way of thinking about infant and family relationships.

First, it reframes how you interpret your infant’s behavior and affects the way you think about the reasons for her behavior.

For example, you might view an active, energetic and approaching infant who is into everything as “exuberant,” rather than as “hyper” and intrusive. Or you might see a shy and fearful infant as “sensitive” and thoughtful, rather than as unfriendly and sluggish. Your response as a parent is affected by how you interpret your infant’s behavior. For example, if you see disruptive behavior as purposeful, you are apt to be irritated, even angry, and to respond negatively or punitively. When you see your infant’s behavior as temperament-related rather than as due to willful misbehavior, you can reduce your negative reactions.

Second, it is important to emphasize that thinking in temperament terms does not excuse undesired behaviors (such as throwing a cup), but does provide direction for responding to it.

As parents often learn, many small accommodations in family life can reduce tensions. A slow-paced child may need extra time in the mornings to “dawdle” over breakfast. Providing an extra half an hour in the morning, rather than rushing your infant, can be a small price to pay for a peaceful breakfast. A highly persistent infant who is disgusted by peas may need to be exposed to them a few more times before she is ready to try them.

Third, thinking about your infant’s behavior through the lens of temperament helps you anticipate when and where there are apt to be problems.

A shy and fearful child does not like surprises or sudden changes in routines. She is comfortable when the daily routines of family life are orderly and consistent, and she needs time to adapt when those routines are upset. A change in a parent’s work schedule, a new babysitter, even a change in the time to eat can be stressful. Similarly, if you can anticipate when and where a highly active, intense and distractible infant will have problems, you can reduce the likelihood of negative outbursts. A long car trip without frequent stops and interesting activities has a high probability of leading to problem behavior. Planning ahead is especially important when traveling with a child with this kind of temperament.
Family life is made up of countless, continuing interactions, which affect the quality of our daily lives, and individual differences in temperament among family members are important factors in determining whether those interactions are positive and pleasant or “rocky” and stressful.

**It is also important that you know yourself and recognize your own unique temperament, and that you are aware how your behavioral style affects daily life in your family.**

Awareness of individual differences in temperament provides a positive way to prevent and manage problems that can result from a mismatch of behavioral styles within your family.

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References: