

Ask the Expert: *Looking at Your Child's Behavior Through the Lens of Temperament*

by Rona Renner, RN nurserona@gmail.com

Q. Do you think my 18-month-old son's fearful approach to everything new is because of his age, the fact that he was adopted, or is it just his nature?

Q. My three-year-old's high energy is hard for me. Will she always be so hyper? My other daughter can sit and play by herself, but her sister wants my attention all of the time.

A. These are typical questions I hear from parents. Understanding a child's temperament and normal growth and development are ways to make sense of behavioral issues, social interactions, preferences and power struggles.

"Temperament" is a person's first and most natural way of responding to a situation. It's the way we move in the world. It's the "how" of behavior—how adaptable, persistent, energetic or intense a person is. 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 nonstop, while others are happy to play with toys or watch you while you cook. Children come into the world with a style all their own, and as with developmental milestones, there's a wide range of normal. (If you're concerned about milestones in development, research the wide range of normal development, and talk to your child's doctor.)

Before the research of Drs. Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas—pioneers in temperament research in the 1950s—parents, especially mothers, were blamed for many behavior problems. Chess and Thomas were convinced that children had innate differences that played a key role in determining a child's behavior.

They defined these differences as nine temperament traits: sensitivity threshold, activity level, intensity of reaction, rhythmicity (or regularity), adaptability, mood, approach/withdrawal (or introversion/extroversion), persistence and distractibility.

The mother who is worried about her fearful 18-month-old child has good insight into the possible causes. He's probably slow to adapt to new things and people, and may also

be sensitive. His age and developmental stage fits with his fearfulness since we know that at 18 months many children are afraid of things that they were neutral about in the past. They are learning so much each day and becoming more independent, so they have to integrate their new experiences with their views of the world. Sometimes children need a parent or caregiver to be close at hand so they can come back to a safe lap and refuel. The fact that this child was adopted might play a part in his cautious approach to things, or it could be the other factors. Sometimes we just don't know but need to follow our intuition and respond with all of our understanding. It is important to be sensitive to the challenges children face when they have been adopted, while keeping in mind that a child's normal temperament can have significant impact on his behavior.

There are many factors that influence your child's behavior—including parenting style, environment, genetic makeup, past events and siblings. Temperament is a key part of the equation. In the earlier example of the child who is high energy and demands attention, chances are she is also intense. Also, because her mother is used to her lower-energy sibling, she still hasn't adjusted to having a "spirited child." At all stages of development, active and intense children need creative outlets for their energy and often want someone around for company.

They love attention and interaction, and can be draining for a parent who is lower in energy, stressed, or desires a calm and quiet environment.

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:

Situation: Your high-energy daughter wants you to play ball with her when she wakes up, but you have lower energy and want to read the paper. Her high energy gets on your nerves, even though it is normal for her.

Solution: Set a routine for how long you



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will read and help her decide what she will do until it is time to play with you.

Situation: Your son is slow to warm up to new places and people, and when you go to a friend's house he wants to sit on your lap. You are outgoing, and it is hard for you to tolerate his caution.

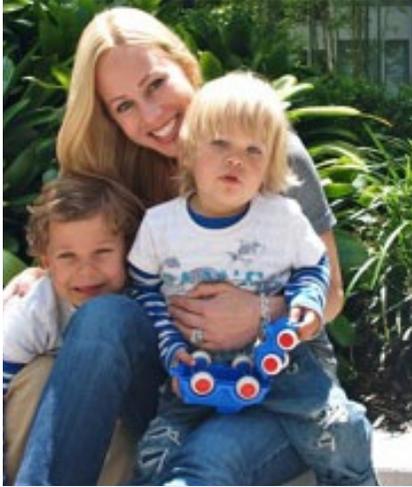
Solution: Give him time to get comfortable, and then he will be more likely to play with the other children once he has checked out the situation.

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To submit a question for our Ask the Expert column, please email newsletter@ggmg.org.

Volunteer of the month

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We recognize **Jenny Loffer**, Recruiting Committee Chair, for her efforts to improve GGMG's Volunteer Recruitment and Retention program.

Along with her team, Jenny has worked diligently on filling all of GGMG's open volunteer positions while developing new programs, like welcome events for new volunteers and educational development opportunities, to help retain our fabulous talent.

Jenny has two boys—Wyatt, age four, and Noah, age two—and has been a volunteer since April 2010, when she started on the Business Development Committee. Jenny finds volunteering rewarding because "it's an opportunity to give back to an organization that has given me so much and provides mental stimulation outside of singing 'Itsy Bitsy Spider' for the thousandth time."

Situation: You are fast adapting, high intensity and yell easily. Your child is low intensity, sensitive and slow to adapt. Getting your child dressed in the morning has become a stressful battle.

Solution: Do your best to lower your voice and calm down before you react. Take three deep breaths before responding, and use a timer so everyone will know when it's time to move on.

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 healthy food and sleep they need. Parenting strategies also include making time for yourself, paying attention to your needs and getting help from the "village" around you.

Keep thinking about your children's strengths and help them find things they're passionate about. Often you won't know if a behavior is because of in-born traits, environmental factors, developmental stages 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.

Rona Renner, RN ("Nurse Rona") hosts the parenting radio show Childhood Matters (www.childhoodmatters.org). She has been a nurse for 45 years and a parent educator for 22 years. Rona is the mother of four grown children, grandparent of two, and lives with her husband in Berkeley. She's available for temperament consultations and parent coaching in person or by phone.

University of California San Francisco Research Study

A Chance to Share Your Story About Postpartum Depression

Dr. Janice Humphreys RN, CS, NP, PhD and Alyssa J. Abraham RN, MS, PhD (c) are doing a research study to try to understand the experiences of couples as they have become parents, when the mother is diagnosed with postpartum depression. Volunteers will be asked to take part in no more than 3 interviews, one alone and one or two as a couple, and will receive a payment of \$25 per person for each interview.

Dr. Humphreys and Ms. Abraham are looking for couples for their study.

Volunteers must:

- Be at least 18 years old
- Be English speaking
- Be couples who are living together and have a child between 3 months and 3 years old
- Be in a relationship where one partner has been diagnosed with postpartum depression
- Not be currently depressed

If you are interested in helping Ms. Abraham with her research you may contact her directly to discuss any questions you may have about the study. Ms. Abraham may be reached by phone at **(415) 475-9380** or by e-mail at **Alyssa.abraham@ucsf.edu**.