

# VIP Value In Parenting

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## TEMPERAMENT:

# Why Each Child Is Different!

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Tommy, age 6, loves birthday parties. He loves the games, the noise, the excitement! When Sarah, also six years old, is invited to a party, she seems very uneasy and wants her mother to stay the entire time.

Danny's mother hates getting him ready for school; she has to tie his shoes at least five times before they are comfortable on his feet. His little brother is happy wearing his shoes on the wrong feet!

What makes children in the same situations react so differently? TEMPERAMENT!

### The "Ideal Child"

Before you became a parent, what did you think your child would be like? Did you imagine a calm, quiet child or an energetic, physically active child? Nancy Samalin, an author and parent educator, suggests that every parent has an "ideal" child that they openly or secretly expect. When the REAL CHILD arrives, the parents may be disappointed and confused. Some parents simply assume that their child will be like them in personality and interests. But, in reality, each child is totally UNIQUE. Parents who understand and appreciate this uniqueness are more likely to feel satisfied with their children and their own parenting experience.



According to Jennifer Birckmayer, Senior Extension Associate, Cornell University, "Temperament can be defined as a child's **style of behavior**.

- ◆ It is not why children do what they do (motivation).
- ◆ It is not what children do (behavior).
- ◆ It is **how** children do what they do."

### Understanding Temperament

Researchers Chess, Thomas and Birch have identified nine behavioral traits that make up temperament. These traits are part of a person's genetic make-up, meaning they are born with them. Just as a child is born with a certain hair color and shape of eyes, they are born with certain temperamental traits. A child's personality is actually the result of how these traits are influenced by significant people and important experiences in their life.

- ◆ According to Dr. Stanley Turecki, author of *The Difficult Child* (Bantam Books, 1985), there are three basic types of temperament - "easy-going", "slow-to-warm," and "difficult." It is important to note that there is no one type that is better than another. All temperament types have positives and negatives, and all styles are NORMAL and OK.

*Thomas Edison was said to be an extremely persistent child and drove his parents and teachers*

*"crazy," however, it was that trait of persistence that helped him to discover the light bulb!*

Differences in temperament can also help to explain differences among children in the same family. As anyone with more than one child knows, what "works" with one child might fail with another. In fact, sometimes children are labeled as "difficult" simply

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because they don't fit their parent's view of how children should be, or have temperaments that are different from most of the other family members.

## "Goodness of Fit"

Recognizing your own temperament traits can be a first step in understanding the idea of "goodness of fit." Take a moment to ask yourself the following questions:

- ◆ Do I adapt easily to new things?
- ◆ Do I like a lot of noise and activity?
- ◆ Do I need time to get used to new things?
- ◆ Do I tend to withdraw if I feel uncomfortable in a situation?
- ◆ Am I easily distracted or am I very focused and persistent?
- ◆ Does the tag in the back of a new item of clothing really bother me?
- ◆ Do I see the world as a "glass of water that is half full or half empty"?
- ◆ Do I usually sleep and eat at the same times each day?

*Now, ask yourself the same questions about your children.*

Some parents are most comfortable with a child who is "like" them; other parents report a real clash if their child has a similar personality - "She's as stubborn as I am!". Psychologists use the term "Goodness of Fit" as the desired goal between a child and a parent. Once adults understand their own natural preferences they can more easily appreciate their child's natural behavioral style. When there is not a comfortable fit, extra effort can be taken to increase compatibility.

## Temperament Tips

If your child had wild hair, you would buy conditioner to untangle the knots. Your child's temperament may also require special efforts to help him/her learn and be successful. Some behavior styles may require more thought or planning.

- ◆ The child who has a hard time **adapting** to new places or people may need more TIME and preparation before making a transition. This is the child who needs lead time before leaving the playground, going to visit a relative, or going to the store. They need to know what will happen, when it will happen and what is expected of them. This will help them feel more comfortable and be more cooperative.



Helping each child grow to their fullest potential is like polishing a beautiful piece of furniture. We have to **work with the grain of the wood** to bring out its natural beauty. Rubbing against the grain because it is easier for the polisher will only scratch the wood and limit the furniture's beauty.

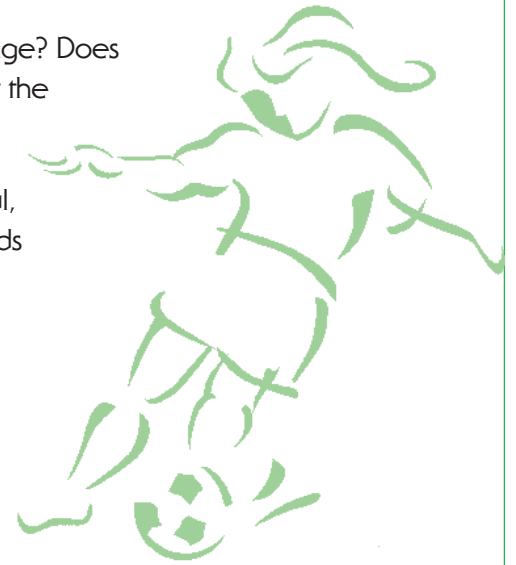
- ◆ The very **persistent** child needs support and encouragement, especially if they are having a hard time reaching their goal. Introduce new tasks and activities on a day when you will be at home and have plenty of time to allow them to follow through. This child needs to be reassured that trying their best is more important than constant perfection. You may have heard the saying - "Life is a journey, not a destination."
- ◆ The child whose **general mood** is negative may need less "jolly" along and more time being listened to. Help them share what could be done to make a situation more pleasant. And remember... You don't have to make children feel happy all the time. Respect this child's need for time alone; he may learn to express himself through music or poetry! Don't isolate or ignore them, but don't be angry with them or yourself if they are not always acting happy.
- ◆ When your child **withdraws** from interacting socially, help them figure out what they could do to make it more comfortable. Some children need to practice simple social skills like greeting someone, saying hello,

looking into a person's eyes, or starting a conversation. Allow the young child to be reassured by your presence, while you gently encourage them to participate. Some children need to watch before they can enter into the experience.

- ◆ When your child's **physical sensitivities** are "driving you nuts" and he refuses to wear certain clothes, get dressed or bathed, stop and LISTEN to them. Often giving children some control in the situation will help the problem tremendously. Of course, the child still HAS to bathe, get dressed, etc., but adults can learn to respect the child's physical preferences - "I like baths, but not showers"; "I like socks with no seams."

# The Nine Traits of Temperament

- 1. Activity Level** – How active is the child generally, from an early age? Does my child wiggle and move a lot while being read a story or when sitting at the table to eat?
- 2. General Mood** – How much of the time does my child show joyful, pleasant behavior compared with unpleasant crying and fussing? Are moods more often sunny or grouchy?
- 3. Regularity** – How predictable is my child in eating, sleeping, and bathroom habits?
- 4. Adaptability** – How quickly can my child adapt to a change in routine or schedule, a new place or food? Can my child move from one activity or place to another easily?
- 5. Approach/Withdrawal** – What are my child's initial response to newness: new people, places, foods, clothing? Does my child quickly embrace the situation or does he/she withdraw?
- 6. Intensity** – How strong are my child's reactions? How loud is my child generally, whether happy or unhappy?
- 7. Physical Sensitivity** – How does my child react to sensory stimuli such as noise, bright lights, colors, smells, pain, tastes, warm or cold temperatures, texture and feel of clothing? Is he/she easily bothered or quickly over-stimulated?
- 8. Distractibility** – Is my child easily distracted? Can he/she focus and pay attention?
- 9. Persistence** – Does my child stay with something he/she likes to do? How stubborn is my child when he/she wants something?



## Recommended Reading About Temperament:

Keirse, David and Marilyn Bates. *Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types* (1984) Prometheus Nemesis Book Company, CA.

This book presents the classic Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator, a test which helps to identify character and temperament styles and gives a detailed exploration of temperament traits and styles in adults, children, and relationships.

Kurcinka, Mary Sheedy. *Raising Your Spirited Child* (1992) Harper Collins, NY.

Expanding upon Turecki's original work, Kurcinka presents a more positive view of the child that he describes as "difficult" and explores many strategies for dealing with a "spirited" temperament.

Turecki MD., Daniel. *The Difficult Child* (1985) Bantam Books, NY.

The original work which exposed a challenging temperamental style in children and explains the need for patient understanding of the child who finds life difficult.

# On Parenting



Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you.  
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.  
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
You may strive to be like them,  
but seek not to make them like you,

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,  
and He bends you with His might that His arrows might go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

*Kahlil Gibran*

## VIP Value In Parenting

For more information on parenting education and/or the Orange County Parenting Coalition Action Team, contact Cornell Cooperative Extension at 845 - 344 - 1234.  
[www.cce.comell.edu/orange](http://www.cce.comell.edu/orange)



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CLIP & SAVE!



## Healthy Orange / Partners for Children Action Teams

To learn more about any of these issues, please contact the following Action Team representative:

**Prenatal Care Team,** Ann Craig, 568-5280

**Eating Disorders Coalition,** Debbie de Jong, 294-7411

**Child Care Team,** Liz Kuriplach, 294-4012

**Parenting Coalition Action Team,** Denyse Variano, 344-1234

**Immunization Team,** Shirley VanZetta, 291-2375

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**Health Issues Team** (currently at the developmental stage)