



Parent Pages



Resources for Christian Parents in the 21st Century

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It's in the DNA

Child development theory has swung back and forth between nature and nurture. The nurture side wants to give blame or credit for child development to parents and family circumstances. The nature side would have us believe that DNA decides a child's personality.

As most parents will tell you, the truth lies somewhere in-between. If you didn't have this understanding from child #1, you most likely did after the same parenting methods showed different results for child #2. Research over the last 50 years has shown that specific traits come hard-wired into individual children. Through good parenting, these traits are modified into a personality that allows the child to be happy and successful.

Temperament is defined as personality traits that are presumed to be with a child from birth. Because of this, they tend to be strong traits. A highly reactive infant is likely to grow up to be cautious about new things and new people. Because temperament is not a learned behavior, it is not something that can be completely changed. Other than the fact that a parent might recognize behaviors that he or she was known for as a youngster, temperament is not something we can blame on parents. That's a relief!

Experts are still working on refining categories for temperament. The ones most often used include:

- Activity level — A child's preference for observing or doing
- Rhythmicity — How dependent a child is on physical routine such as meals and sleep
- Approach — How a child reacts to new people or things
- Adaptability — How easily a child adapts to a new routine or situation
- Threshold of response — How a child responds to loud noises or bright lights



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- Intensity — Strength of a child's response to things in the environment
- Distractibility — How easily a child can be distracted from an activity
- Persistence — How well a child sticks with a task
- Mood — Whether a child's mood is generally pleasant or unpleasant

For the most part, these traits create the beginning of a unique personality for your child. In some cases, when the temperament is extreme, it can be a source of frustration for child and parent alike.

On occasion, a child's temperament can interfere with learning in school, especially if a child is easily distracted or does not effortlessly adapt to change. If you are aware of such temperament issues for your child, discuss this with teachers. Most teachers welcome advice on strategies that have worked. But keep in mind that the teacher works with many children, not just one. Your child's teacher may need to use different techniques to help your child adjust. Because teachers see such a variety of children and temperaments, they often are a good source of advice on how to help a child make the most out of temperament traits. A good teacher is a good partner



in helping your child learn to adapt to the temperaments of other children.

Remember that God has built strengths into each of these traits. A child who is intense, persistent and doesn't adapt well can be a source of frustration when the family goes on vacation. The same child will use these traits to stick with a big learning project until its conclusion. My firstborn was not one to dive into new situations. Her father and I spent a lot of time encouraging her to try new things. My perspective on this wariness changed when her brother was born, and I found myself wishing he were a bit more cautious. Learn to value your child's temperament.

Temperament traits are with a child from birth; however, that does not mean they are a life sentence. The process of adapting these traits through the experiences and influences of others is how a child's personality develops. Through loving parenting, a child can learn to adapt temperament traits to take advantage of strengths, without allowing weaknesses to interfere with learning and relationships. For instance, a child who reacts to events with great intensity can be taught coping strategies that help her to calm down. Likewise, a child with a high motor activity level can learn how to burn off energy at appropriate times.

Temperament also will guide a child to areas of interest. An intense and persistent child may find success with music lessons; a highly active child with low distractibility may shine on a sports team. It is a blessing for parents to help their children find where they fit.

If you are working with your child to help adapt his or her temperament, keep in mind a few things. First, she was born with this trait and is not using it to annoy or defy you. Second, it is slow going for a child to change a temperament,



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but it goes better when you adjust to his needs and help him along. This is called goodness-of-fit parenting. Third, remember that God created your child and has a plan for her future. And finally, remember that the Spirit works in you to complete this task.

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:28–29a).

For Further Study

For an understanding of how temperament can affect learning, see *Temperament in the Classroom: Understanding Individual Differences* by Barbara K. Keogh.

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