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Temperament and Children's Behavior and Adjustment

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Children bring a wide range of personal characteristics to their daily lives. They differ in cognitive aptitudes, in language facility, in motivation, even in physical size and appearance. They also differ in temperament, a less well studied dimension of individual differences, but one which affects their experiences at home and at school. We all know people who have a slow tempo, who move at an unhurried pace, who are slow to respond and slow to action. We also know highly active, intense, quick acting people who go through life at high speed. We recognize that some children are uncomfortable with change and are shy with new people, while others thrive on novelty, seek out new experiences and interact with those around them. These characteristics are expressions of temperament. Children obviously are affected by the environments in which they live, but environmental conditions do not operate on a tabula rosa or a blank slate, and temperament is one of the individual differences which make children unique and which contribute to their development, behavior, and adjustment.

What is Temperament?

There are a number of specific definitions of temperament, but overall agreement that temperament is biologically based, is evident early in life, and some stability over time and situations. Think of the differences in how two 6-month old infants react to a sudden loud noise. One is startled, distressed, agitated, and cries vigorously. The other turns his head slowly and looks with interest to find the source of the noise. Think of the quick responding, highly reactive and intense adolescent with a "short fuse" or the adolescent who is quiet, reflective, and deliberate.

One of the most widely accepted and clinically useful definitions of temperament is that of psychiatrists Thomas and Chess (1977) who described temperament as behavioral style. In their view temperament is the how of behavior. It differs from ability which is the "what and how well" of behavior, and from motivation, which refers to "why" an individual chooses to do what he does. Thomas and Chess identified nine dimensions of temperament: Activity Level, Rhythmicity, Approach/Withdrawal, Adaptability, Threshold of Responsiveness, Intensity of Reaction, Quality of Mood, Distractibility, Attention Span/Persistence.

Based on these nine dimensions, Thomas and Chess described three major types of temperamentally different children. "Easy" children are characteristically adaptable, positive in mood, and moderate in the intensity of their reactions. They are interested and approaching to novelty, and are sociable and friendly. "Difficult" children, in contrast, tend to be negative in mood, intense, low in adaptability, and withdrawing in new situations. They are sometimes described as "prickly." A third group, those considered "Slow-to Warm-Up," differs from both easy and difficult peers. While initially shy and withdrawing in new situations they are moderate in the intensity of their reactions, but given time they adapt well, and when comfortable they are positive in mood, responsive, and sociable. It should come as no surprise that parents and teachers find life more

pleasant with easy children than with those considered difficult, and that slow to warm up children may require especially sensitive responses from adults.

Why is Temperament Important?

Temperament is important for several reasons. It describes behavioral styles which contribute to personal/social interactions, it evokes responses from others in the child's life, and it affects the range and nature of children's experiences. An approaching, friendly, and active child is likely to seek out new situations, whereas a withdrawing, timid child will avoid them. As a consequence, some children have a broader range of experiences than do others. Indeed, it is even possible that high energy, active children may put themselves in risky situations which are never experienced by their more withdrawing and less energetic peers.

Developmental psychologists stress that adult-child interactions are reciprocal, that is, that adults influence children's behavior, but that children also influence adults' behavior. Parents of highly active, intense, "fearless" toddlers may have to make special arrangements in their home to ensure a child's safety, and teachers may have to give special attention to slow-to-warm-up students who tend to be overlooked in busy classrooms. Children also evoke different affective responses from others around them, in part based on their temperaments. Children with difficult temperaments are more apt to elicit negative, even punitive, reactions from parents and teachers than are those with easy temperaments. This leads to the notion of "goodness of fit" which is central in understanding how temperament contributes to children's development and experiences.

Goodness of Fit

Goodness of fit refers to the match between a child's characteristics and the characteristics of the environment, including the values, expectations, demands, and temperaments of adults. A child's behavioral style may fit well with parents' expectations and the daily routines in a family, or may have an intrusive or disruptive effect. Similarly, a child's temperament may or may not fit well with classroom demands. Classrooms, like families, are complex social settings with both explicit and implicit rules and expectations for children's behavior. Classrooms differ, some being highly structured, even rigid, others being free flowing, sometimes chaotic. How children respond to these differences in part relates to the individual differences in temperament they bring to the classroom. For example, slow-to-warm-up children may not do well in fast-paced instructional programs, and may be overwhelmed in free flowing "open" classrooms where there is a high level of activity, where routines change daily, even hourly. Intense, active, and impulsive children may have problems in classrooms with rigidly defined rules and work periods which demand persistence and quiet concentration over long periods of time. It is important to note that teachers, too, differ in temperament, some being highly active, intense, and impulsive, others being slow in tempo, slow-to-warm-up, and shy. Fast paced teachers may see shy and withdrawing children as unresponsive and unmotivated, while more reticent, slow-to-warm-up teachers may see the behavior of high energy and intense children as troublesome.

How Can Awareness of Temperament Be Useful?

Recognizing individual differences in temperament can help parents and teachers in several ways. First, it broadens adults' views about children's behavior, especially adults' views about problems behaviors. Adults frequently attribute motivational reasons for troublesome behaviors, as for example, "He could do it if he would only try harder" or "She just refuses to try anything new." Being aware of individual differences in temperament helps parents and teachers reframe their ideas about the reasons for particular behaviors and leads to considering problems in a different context. The result is reduced negative affect and frustration and improved interactions. Second, and closely linked, awareness of differences in temperament can help parents and teachers anticipate potential problem situations. Waiting in line for long periods of time is an invitation for trouble in a group of active 9-year-old boys. Slow-To-Warm-Up children may have difficulty getting started when faced with new tasks and new demands, and need to be alerted to upcoming changes in home or classroom routines. Finally, sensitivity to temperamental differences points directions for intervention. "Forewarned is forearmed," and many problems can be prevented or minimized by considering the behavioral styles of the children relative to the expectations and demands of the situation. Minor modifications in daily routines can often improve the goodness of fit between child and setting and thus reduce tensions and negative feelings.

In summary, temperament researchers have documented that there are real individual differences in children's temperaments or behavioral styles which affect their everyday lives and experiences and their relationships with others. The role of temperament is best understood within an interactional framework in which the characteristics of both children and adults are important. Temperament is part of the goodness of fit between child and environment.

References

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