

## HAPPY children

Story thanks to  
Jutta Dempsey



# Tricky TRAITS

Understanding your child's temperament will lead to happy kids and happy parents, writes child psychologist Jutta Dempsey.

Parenting can be difficult because not every child is the same. There is no 'one size fits all' approach because each child has their own unique personality and temperament traits. But once a parent understands their child's different temperament traits they are better able to work in harmony with the child's nature. This makes for happier children and therefore happier parents!

### So what exactly is temperament?

Temperament is the behaviour patterns that we bring to various situations. For example:

- Is your preschooler shy or outgoing in unfamiliar settings?
- Is your baby irritable and hard to soothe or easily calmed?
- Does your daughter stick with homework and chores or is her attention span short?

Just as each child has unique physical features, they also have their own set of temperament traits or style of behaviour. It is largely inborn, although there are a variety of factors within the environment that affect it.

If parents understand and work with their child's temperament then there is harmony within the family. However, if the parent reads their child's temperament incorrectly, they may unintentionally work against their child's natural behavioural style, with frustration, and confusion resulting in both parents and children. Parents

and children may then experience anger, guilt, anxiety or depression.

Take the example of the parent who is highly competent at work, having the respect and responsibility of a large team, but who is overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy when their five year old manages to reduce them to "an out of control screamer at home".

Or the child who provokes conflict at home by digging their heels in, but is the perfect angel at school.

These are classic examples of what can occur when parenting without understanding the child's temperament.

W. Carey MD. has defined nine temperament traits, all of which overlap to form a unique way of responding to the environment. Rate yourself and your child from low to high on the traits below:

- Activity – how physically active are they?
- Regularity – how predictable are their responses?
- Initial reaction – how do they respond to new things?
- Adaptability – how well do they adjust to new things?
- Intensity – how much energy do they put in to responses?
- Mood – is their mood predominantly positive or negative or somewhere in between?

- Persistence and attention span – how well do they stick with an activity
- Distractibility – how easily distracted are they?
- Sensitivity – how aware are they of things outside, even if it's briefly?

Although you can't change a child's temperament, you can work with it and manage it to improve how your family functions.

Taking one of the above traits as an example: A child with an inhibited 'Initial Reaction' is timid about new experiences. Thus, parents can help by preparing for novelty situations, explaining plans and details and practicing or role-playing reactions to those situations, including social skilling. A shy child should not be ridiculed or shamed for his temperament – telling him "don't be shy", "say hello", "look at him when he is talking to you", will alienate your child and make him resentful.

Focus on appreciating and supporting the positive traits that promote your child's functioning and development. There is no point trying to hammer out undesirable traits through discipline and bribery. Instead parents can learn to accept those traits and develop alternative strategies to manage the child's temperament and increase harmony in the family.

And remember, sometimes the very traits that annoy one person will become an invaluable asset for the child later in life!!