

How temperament affects feelings

Meet Jasmine. She loves to read books and she also enjoys drawing and playing with her cat. She is most comfortable at home. Whenever Jasmine has to meet someone new, or do something she has never tried before, she gets very nervous and needs lots of reassurance. She has been like this since she was a baby.

Georgia, Jasmine's younger sister, is very different. She loves meeting people and being the centre of attention.

Georgia has always been independent. Before she was two, she was already telling her mother she didn't need her help, saying, "Me do it. You go away!" Though she is younger, Georgia often bosses Jasmine around. When Georgia decides she wants to do something it can be very hard to stop her. She tends to jump into things without stopping to think.

Different temperament patterns

It is sometimes surprising to find how different children in the same family can be. Their personalities, likes and dislikes, and the ways they react to situations, may vary a lot. These kinds of differences are known as temperaments.

Children's temperament patterns are usually noticed very early by parents and carers, often from birth. For example, some babies sleep well and seem to have an easy-going nature, whereas others can be difficult to settle. Some young children like to explore new places and meet new people, while others appear shy and can take a long time to get used to new situations.

These kinds of differences in temperament can mean that parenting strategies that worked well with one child may not work so well with another.

Understanding temperament differences can help parents and carers match parenting to children's needs.



How temperament makes a difference

Researchers have found that the main things contributing to different temperaments include:

- how strongly children react to people and events (eg getting angry or upset quickly and easily)
- how easily children approach new people or new situations
- how well children can control their attention, emotions and behaviour.

Children who are more naturally calm, open to new experiences and easy to get along with are easier to parent. Children who are highly reactive or shy often have difficulty with managing fears and worries. This may place more demands on parents and carers for support. Children who are highly reactive and have trouble managing frustration may show this through impulsive or challenging behaviour. These children are often more difficult for parents and carers to manage.



How parents and carers can help

Adapting your parenting style to match your child's temperament helps to support their social and emotional development and builds your relationship. Here are some suggestions and examples:

- Observe how your child responds in a range of situations to get a clear picture of how well he or she manages emotions and what triggers difficult reactions.
- Find out what it's like for your child. Talk about your observations and get your child's input, for example: "You seemed to get really nervous when your friend asked you to come over to play. What was worrying you?"
- Communicate caring and warmth (eg by showing you understand your child's point of view). This supports children who feel anxious and reduces negative reactions in children whose behaviour is challenging.
- **For children who are shy:** Avoid being overprotective. Provide support through helping them find strategies for managing fears and worries.
- **For children whose behaviour is challenging:** Use clear and consistent limit setting rather than harsh punishment. Spell out any consequences in advance and make sure that your discipline strategy is fair and is geared to encouraging appropriate behaviour.
- Be aware of the similarities and differences between your own temperament and your child's. Adapting your parenting style to suit your child's temperament can help to improve relationships and behaviour.

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This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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