

My friend, Mary, recently shared a discovery that she declares “turned the tide” on her parenting: “I realized that my daughter was not me!” she recalls. “At 4 years of age, I was expecting her to be like me, outgoing and demonstrative. I pushed her to talk to, and greet people and, basically, socialize the way I did! The more I pushed, the more she withdrew into a shell.”

After taking a parenting class that studied temperament, Mary realized that her daughter was not “wired” the same as she was. She was what temperament experts identify as “slow to approach”--- needing time and space to warm up to new social situations and people. (This temperament information also explained why Mary’s daughter had trouble separating from her, when siblings had not: “Slow to approach” kids also can also be “slow to separate”). She stopped pushing her to interact, and began to ask her what she needed to feel comfortable in unfamiliar circumstances. Mary reports: “Now, my daughter has become more confident and outgoing because I have been able to support her way of doing things and stop making her into someone else!” Mary has a very lucky daughter!

According to the book Temperament Talk by (Goodman, Warsaw and Zookin) “Temperament is a set of traits each of us is born with—our own unique style that is the starting point of personality. It is what makes some things easy, other things hard, and determines how a person goes about almost everything she/he does. Temperament isn’t good or bad. Like eye or natural hair color, **it just is**. Understanding a child’s temperament can make parenting a lot more enjoyable, because the challenges parents face daily are often determined by a child’s temperament. It is what makes some children more challenging to raise than others.

Temperament research done by the authors has categorized 10 behavior traits. There are positive and negative things about every one of the traits. The challenge for parents is to find ways to channel a child’s inner strengths in positive ways, so the child can become the person they are meant to be. Doing this often requires a parent to examine his/her own temperament traits. As my friend Mary realized, it is part of human nature to assume others respond to the world as we do—but it is erroneous.

Understanding her daughter’s temperament traits helped Mary to accept them as part of who her little girl is and to know that her daughter’s behavior was not a rejection of her teaching or values---or a sign of trouble. It enabled Mary to focus more on how she could modify the physical environment to fit her child’s sociability, teach her skills to overcome her shyness and stop demanding that she act contrary to her own nature.

How does a parent know if something is based on temperament? The authors suggest asking these three questions:

1. Did the behavior start when your child was under 4 years of age?
2. Is the behavior hard to change?
3. Did you teach your child to behave this way?

If you answered “yes” to the first two and “no” to the last, odds are good that the issue is one of temperament and learning more about it would benefit both you and your child.

