

Temperament - Survival of the Best Fit

Once, years ago, my extended family came to my place for Thanksgiving dinner. What happened makes me certain that it may be a very long time before they return. Before dessert, I led them through a game I regularly play with students to introduce the behavioral characteristics and potential social consequences of each person's basic temperament - the earliest and most consistent expression of our personality. On a sheet of paper, each guest wrote down the nine categories that portray anyone's personal style, no matter whether you are describing an infant or a retiree:

1. *Activity level*: How little or much does he or she physically move when talking, eating, listening, even sleeping?
2. *Predominant mood*: Is he mostly optimistic or pessimistic by nature?
3. *Intensity of reactions*: No matter if positive or negative, does she dramatize her feelings or keep them to herself?
4. *Rhythmicity or regularity*: How predictable are his thoughts, actions, eating habits, schedules?
5. *Threshold of reactions*: Does she have a high tolerance for frustration? How much do you have to work to get a reaction out of her?
6. *Approach-withdrawal responses*: What's his initial reaction to change or to a new environment? Does he jump right in or sit back a while until he feels comfortable?
7. *Adaptability*: Over time, does she grow to feel comfortable in a new setting or situation?
8. *Attention span or persistence*: How long will he concentrate on completing tasks?
9. *Distractibility*: How easily can she be distracted from the task or person at hand, even if her attention returns to complete the unfinished task or conversation?

I then asked them each to describe three people - their ideal child, themselves and the relative sitting next to them at dinner – rating them as high, moderate or low (or where more appropriate: positive, neutral or negative) on each of the nine categories. A few truths were revealed through this exercise. Of the dozen folks around the table, three or four very different temperamental types were identified as constituting the ideal child. Goes to show that we like and would likely get along best with different types of people (different strokes for different folks). Too bad we don't actually get to choose our children. Instead, we have to learn to understand, support and grow to love them even if they possess qualities we dislike in ourselves. Which is what my guests considered when they realized that how they rated themselves was sometimes strikingly similar or different from what they wish for in their child. If you like your temperament, chances are you will be happy if your child acts similarly and challenged if she has a different temperament – one, say, like that kid who tormented you in fifth grade. Anger boiled (and turkey legs became weapons) in response to the third round of the game: describing their neighbor at the table. “How could you think that about me? That's not at all who I am!” We don't always reveal our true self to others (or to ourselves). And in the case of encounters with strangers, first impressions can foreclose school admissions, job opportunities and social relationships.

Some of the nine temperamental characteristics often cluster together in patterns. So-called “Easy” (many prefer the term “Flexible”) children are typically moderately active with mostly positive mood, quick to accept and adapt to changes in their environment, act in predictable ways and times, have long attention spans and little distractibility. These children and adults get into serious trouble less often than others. They are comfortable in a wide range of settings and relationships. Conversely, though, they are more likely to become scapegoats since they so readily accommodate to demands and expectations. “Difficult” (or “Feisty”) children are intense skeptics who are unpredictable, adapt very slowly if ever to new conditions and don’t willingly conform to rules and regulations. Yes, they are overrepresented in the Principal’s office or the afterschool detention. At the same time, they are more likely to become Principals, leaders of any kind and innovators. “Slow-to-Warm-Up” kids are a lot like easy/flexible ones except they are initially averse to change, though when given a chance to become comfortable, they eventually adapt positively. Such individuals are too easily written off as dull, dumb or disinterested by impatient peers and teachers. These naturally shy folks offer the reward of loyalty and effort in gratitude to those who understand and patiently encourage them. All teacher’s pets were slow-to-warm-up.

So here’s the important point: these inborn, surprisingly stable, inherited behavioral traits that make us unique individuals from the moment we are born (actually parents begin to ascribe unique qualities to the activity patterns, rhythms and reactions of fetuses) are neither good nor bad by themselves. They help us adapt and thrive more naturally in certain circumstances and relationships or cause discomfort and challenge in others. It is the goodness of fit between our nature and the nature of the expectations our environments place upon us that determines the kind of effort we must apply in order to succeed and feel happy. I learned early on that loud, frenetic people and places make me crazy. When forced, I get hold of myself, work through it and get away as quickly as I can. And I appreciate how in certain situations, like hurricanes, fires or war, my life might be saved if noise and hysteria warn me of danger. I know folks who seek and thrive in the midst of the relative chaos of battlefields, department stores, emergency rooms and stock exchanges. Remember, many people prefer pit bulls to basset hounds. And we choose our field of work as much to suit our temperament as our interest.

Temperaments differ even among members of the same family. Consequently, parents cannot take any child for granted and every parent-child relationship in a family develops its own melody and harmony. Firstborn was a calm, quiet kid who easily and quickly adapted to change? When number two appears, feisty, fast, rarin’ to explore everywhere, too persistent to go to sleep and unsure this new school (or recipe) is a good idea, parents, teachers, friends and co-workers have to look beyond their past experiences and resultant expectations. We want every child to develop a peaceful and positive sense of self and to grow to expect life to offer them fair opportunities to use their abilities. In large measure, that’s up to us adults to insure. Show me contented children who become good friends and put consistent effort into reaching their goals and I will show you caring adults who read their cues objectively, hail their strengths, guide them to settings that complement their nature and help them develop effective

coping strategies when seas get choppy. Which reminds me, when you gather your family for dinner, play Scrabble.