

## The Train Wreck

### Understanding Your Child's Temperament

How many four year-olds does it take to derail a train? This question may sound like a joke you have heard in the past. Yet, what I observed at a local preschool was both funnier and more interesting than any imaginary story. Five young children chose to play with a toy train set in a corner partitioned off from the large open classroom by shelves on three of its four sides. Gus and Emma jointly controlled the main action and contributed most of the volume coming from the small area. At times appearing to be joined at the hip, the two laid down new track and connected plastic train cars at a feverish pace. Each child added onto his or her own end of the track and train under construction. So long as neither felt compelled to connect the two ends and close the circle of track, they talked and sang harmoniously. Each let the other build in whatever direction he or she fancied.

Eventually, they decided they had built enough of a course to push the train set through. That's when the fun began. There was no obvious engine to lead or caboose to follow. Instead, Gus and Emma alternated giving and receiving orders as to where the train was to move. The goals changed constantly along with the engineer in charge. Still, somehow, the two continued to play peacefully at cross purposes.

Until Wally added a wrinkle to the scene. Wally had been watching his playmates erect this fascinating set. He marveled silently at the great construction project that Emma and Gus were creating. And he wanted desperately to join in their fun. Wally, I suspect, is not one who jumps right into a social opportunity. More likely, he holds himself back, observing until he grows increasingly comfortable and eager. Finally, when he either receives an invitation or can no longer contain his desire to participate, Wally makes his move. Today, I became aware of Wally when he stood up and peered down at Gus and Emma who were too busy to notice his interest in their activity. As he watched, Wally clutched the all-important bright blue train locomotive like a football, in the crook of his left arm. With a sudden thrust of his arm, he waved the locomotive and offered his help. "Need an engine?" along with a third player, he hoped. Emma and Gus both leaped up to grab the gift and assert his or her ultimate control over the train's direction. A wrestling match began, as the two yelled, pushed and pulled in a rapidly escalating primeval competition. The centrifugal force of their tussle spun Wally completely out of the ring and knocked all the train cars off the track.

Amazingly, the two other children in the train corner maintained their equilibrium, concentrating on their solitary play. Molly, crouched over her few pieces of train and track, remained completely undistracted by the mayhem taking place at her feet. At first, Edward also appeared not to notice the human tornado spinning out of control right next to him. At some point, he must have sensed that he was about to get swept up in the force of Gus's and Emma's intensifying fury. At that point, Edward faced them calmly and announced: "We can call the teacher." Just as suddenly, the combatants ceased

fire and packed away all the toys as the teacher, with her implicit sense of timing, called all the children back for story time.

I loved the lessons I learned from observing the children during those few minutes. Certainly, I was impressed to see how well they had internalized the benefit and risk of attracting an adult's attention. These kids evidently experienced some form of consistent responsiveness at home and at school. They believed in the moral authority of parent figures and relied on their external conscience to keep the peace and maintain security. I also witnessed the fascinating array of individual differences among human beings. Each of us is born with a set of temperamental characteristics that guide our behavior as much as they contribute to our personality. Emma and Gus were both active, intense children who jump into action without hesitation. Wally is more cautious, or slow to warm up, before he feels comfortable enough to get involved socially. Molly is very undistractable and has a long attention span. Edward, less intense than his peers, displayed a long persistence at task together with a more distractible nature. Caregivers who know these children well could have probably predicted and handled the excitement that I observed. Indeed, the nature of the children, not the toys, kept the train from arriving at the station on schedule.

The temperamental match between all children and their parents, siblings, teachers or peers graces these relationships with smooth sailing or frequent storms. By understanding the way a child consistently reacts to situations, we can learn to distinguish a behavior from its intention. Children express feelings in very different ways, intensities and times. Some are always a lot more demonstrative than others, whether they are communicating pleasure, pain or sadness. Wiser for knowing the "how" our children act and communicate as well as the "what" and "why," we can then encourage them to learn how to adapt comfortably and succeed socially. After all, our life course is determined less by either nature or nurture acting alone than by the goodness of fit between who we are and the characteristics of the physical and social environments in which we live and work. Attention to the influence of temperament, our own and that of people with whom we interact, can help us cope with challenging circumstances and bring out the best in others.