



Family Living Programs

Improving Parent Child Relationships: Thriving with Your Spirited Child

Situation

Parents are often uncertain about how to raise their children. Raising a child is a challenge, and if parents or caregivers have “spirited children” they face additional frustrations. These adults with spirited children often think they have wild, out of control children. They feel isolated, frustrated and angry. Often what is really going on is that the adults and the children have inadequate tools to deal with the child’s temperament. UW-Extension parent educators recognized the challenges parents and other care providers were facing with spirited children while teaching a variety of parenting education classes. “Thriving with Your Spirited Child” is a new UW-Extension curriculum based on the work of temperament theorists/educators such as Stella Chess and Thomas Alexander, Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, Linda Bud, and Stanley Turecki.

Spirited children are those who are either “more” intense, sensitive, perceptive, active, persistent or moody than their peers or siblings. These children can have very strong responses, and emotional outbreaks which can be triggered by what we perceive to be small things. These “more” children we call stubborn are really persistent and committed to their goals, or the bossy child may be a future manager. The curriculum helps parents learn to replace negative labels with positive ones to give their spirited child(ren) a strong sense of self.

UW-Extension’s Response

At the end of the program and the three-month follow-up, over 75 Oconto County participants reported that they learned techniques for building more successful relationships with children who have challenging temperaments.

Participants in “Thriving with Your Spirited Child” workshops gained greater understanding of nine temperament traits, were able to identify positive (instead of negative) labels for these temperaments and were able to apply effective strategies for positively influencing spirited children.

Outcomes

Participants indicated they were planning to use the following strategies with their spirited child(ren):

Accept the child: All children need to know they are accepted unconditionally. Accepting children as they are is the number one strategy for all temperament characteristics. We often think spirited kids do things just to get us. We need to look beyond that and accept them.

A parent from Abrams said: *“Once I learned to accept my son’s spiritedness and work on teaching him other (better) ways to handle things, the world changed at our home. It took lots of hard work and consistency, but I am here to tell you that it works”.*

Watch for triggers: Watch for environmental cues (triggers) that can initiate or escalate the child’s strong responses. As you notice triggers try new strategies or use strategies that work, to help slow down the unwanted emotional outbreak. The goal is to help the child rely on these learned strategies to calm themselves rather than become out of control with their strong feelings. Intervene early.

A parent from Oconto said: *“I’m very organized and wasn’t watching for the things that set off my son. We battled all the time. Now that I am more focused on what sets him off, I can help him solve the problem before it happens”.*

Use eye contact: Eye contact is a useful communication strategy for all children. When you get on a child’s level and make eye contact, you will know you have their attention and that they are tuning in. This is especially important for the child who can be easily distracted. In addition you are sending an equally important message that you are interested and really listening to them! That mutual respect does wonders when dealing with spirited kids.

A parent from Lena said: *“I shouted commands across the room at my daughter and got really mad when she did not respond. It was war! Then I tried to get at her level and make sure she was listening. Man, did that help. Thanks for offering this program”.*

Remind them of successes: “Catch your child being good!” We’ve all heard this before. Why is it that we are more likely to focus on the negative? No matter how small, remind your spirited child of his or her success on a regular basis.

A parent from Gillett said: *“This kid was driving me crazy and sucking up all my energy. It was all spent on telling her what she did wrong. After attending this program, I tried to tell her what she did right, even if it was so small you could hardly notice. Slowly things started to get better”.*

One Oconto Falls parent said, *“I am perhaps more ‘spirited’ than my son. Maybe that’s where some of our situations arose from”.*

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