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Implementing a Temperament-Based Parenting Education Program For Pierce County Families

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Abstract

A group-based temperament education workshop series was researched, developed and implemented for Pierce County parents, professionals and other caretakers of children in response to numerous requests for information and skills needed to help manage children with more challenging behaviors. Post-session survey evaluation data was collected and compiled for the past five years (2001-2006). A follow-up survey was conducted to determine long-term behavior changes in positive parenting practices and child behavior. As a result of the program, participants increased their understanding of how individual differences in temperament can affect the nature of interactions among family members. Participants reported being more patient and responding more effectively to their child's challenging behavior. In addition, a majority of the participants practiced new skills and made positive behavior changes to help reduce conflicts that resulted in improved child behavior creating stronger ties among family members.

Situation Statement

Parent education curriculum developed and taught through University of Wisconsin-Extension has typically been based on standard child and adolescent development and behavior models. In Pierce County, and across the state, UW-Extension educators are getting more questions and requests for information and workshops geared toward managing children with more challenging personalities and behaviors. During a parenting session where I was teaching participants how to engage cooperation from the typically developing child, a distraught parent proclaimed, "You don't understand, my child isn't like that!" In response to the numerous comments and requests, this faculty member developed a temperament-based parenting curriculum that teaches practical skills and strategies for managing children with more difficult or challenging behaviors.

Temperament is the unique style of behavior a child is born with. It is their own natural style of interacting with or reacting to people, places and things. Temperament research began in the late 1950s with the work of Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess who documented nine temperamental traits present early in life that continue to influence a child's development

throughout life. Since that time, numerous scientific studies have confirmed that children's health and development are influenced by their temperament style.

Research shows that parents who understand their child's temperament have a more positive attitude toward their child and have an easier time managing challenging behaviors (Chess & Thomas, 1984; Turecki, 1985). Sheeber and Johnson (1994) found that parents who participated in a group temperament program reported a decrease in their child's behavior problems as well as an improvement in family functioning. Parents of children with difficult temperaments felt more competent and connected to their children. A family impact analysis of a web-based temperament program, that provides individualized advice to parents based on their child's temperament, suggests that it "enhances parents' feelings of competence in handling child-rearing responsibilities" (Ostergren, 2003, p. 4).

Individual differences in temperament or behavioral styles are important in family life because they affect the nature of the interactions among family members. Children grow best when there is a "good fit" between their temperament and the demands of their environment (e.g. parental expectations) (Chess & Thomas, 1996). While parents cannot change their child's temperament, they can often control the experiences he has and the environment to which he is exposed. They can accept the individual child's style of behavior; learn to anticipate their child's reaction to his environment; and teach life-long skills that will help him meet the demands of his environment.

Objectives

The purpose of the program is to help parents learn effective ways of parenting that meet the needs of their own and their child's temperament styles in order to reduce conflict, prevent behavior problems and create stronger ties among family members.

Objectives for the program are as follows:

1. Parents will increase their understanding of their child's temperament style and how it relates to their child's behavior.
2. Parents will increase their understanding of their own temperament style and how it affects their reactions to their child's behavior.
3. Parents will be better able to anticipate their child's reaction while putting their child's temperament and behavior into perspective.
4. Parents will increase their use of effective strategies for managing their child's challenging behaviors that may result from their temperament style.
5. Child behavior will improve as a result of parents' use of more effective child management strategies.

Methodology

This faculty member researched, developed and taught a seven-lesson temperament-based parent education program to 150 parents and other caretakers of children during 13 workshops between October 2001 and April 2006. Much of the curriculum was adapted from the work of Mary Sheedy Kurcinka (former director in one of Minnesota's largest Early Childhood Family

Education programs) in her book, *Raising Your Spirited Child: A Guide for Parents Whose Child is More Intense, Sensitive, Perceptive, Persistent and Energetic* (1991).

The program was typically delivered in four, two-hour sessions while some were offered in six, 1 ½ hour sessions. The seven lessons included:

- What Makes Kids Spirited
- Intensity
- Persistence
- Sensitivity
- Perceptiveness/Distractibility
- Adaptability
- Regularity, Energy, First Reaction, Disposition/Mood

The workshop series was taught using various teaching techniques including temperament assessment activities, small and large group discussions, group activities, case studies and demonstrations. Individuals were sent off at the end of each class with “homework” that was discussed at the beginning of the next session (e.g. pay attention to the cues that lead up to your child’s challenging behavior). Much of the discussion was learner-driven and responsive to the needs of the group as well as the individual participant.

Results and Findings

Post-series evaluation results

Ninety-nine of 150 participants completed a post-series evaluation of the program using a survey instrument (Appendix A) with open-ended questions to assess knowledge gain, planned and actual behavior change and a retrospective component to document increased understanding. In order to ensure confidentiality, only classes with ten or more participants were evaluated.

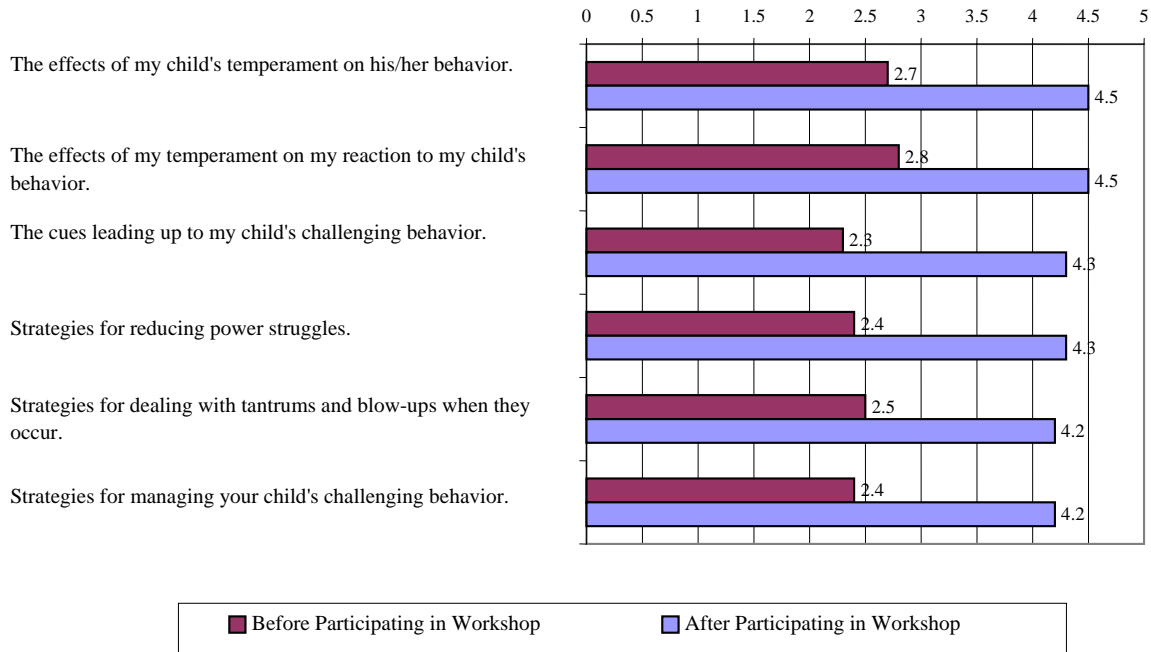
On a scale of one to five (with one being “no understanding” and 5 being “a great deal of understanding”) the following increase in understanding was reported (Figure 1):

- Participants understanding of the effects of their child’s temperament on his/her behavior increased by 1.8.
- Participants understanding of the effects of their own temperament on their reaction to their child’s behavior increased by 1.7.
- Participants understanding of the cues leading up to their child’s challenging behavior increased by 2.0.
- Participants understanding of strategies they could use for reducing power struggles increased by 1.7.
- Participants understanding of strategies they could use when dealing with tantrums and blow-ups when they did occur increased by 1.8.

Figure 2 illustrates select responses to open-ended questions reflecting learning, intended and actual behavior change as a result of participating in the Spirited Child workshop series.

Figure 1
Raising Your Spirited Child Post-Series Evaluation
Gain in Understanding

October 2001 - April 2006
n=99



Note: 1 = no understanding
 2 = little understanding
 3 = moderate understanding
 4 = quite a bit of understanding
 5 = great deal of understanding

Figure 2

Responses to open-ended questions documenting learning, intent and behavior change

What is the most important thing you learned about your child during the course of these classes?

- What a unique individual she is – that by having a better understanding of this uniqueness, I will not become as angry.
- I learned that my child will listen if they believe they are being listened to, and that what they feel is just as important.
- I thought I could change these behaviors by telling him what he's doing wrong. Now I know I can help him understand himself and maybe go about things a different way.
- To notice cues ahead of time and help your child through their struggle.
- That she really is sensitive, she's not just trying to bug me.

- How his fear can be the source of misbehavior.
- I learned that a lot of the insecurities of him wanting to be held or sat by at bedtime, etc. are okay – and I take more time to understand him and hold him.
- That my daughter is an introvert and will talk when ready.
- That she is an extrovert. Makes a huge difference in our relationship.
- To be more patient and to look at things from his point of view.
- That when they act out is not just a behavioral issue. It could be just the way they are. Their make-up.
- The traits I find so challenging now will probably be assets for him when he grows up.
- She is not as unusual as I thought looking at her temperament, ways she naturally reacts to things is extremely important.
- That he is an extrovert (opposite of me). The he is a certain way – not that he behaves this way to anger me. That he is manageable!
- When they grow up their temperament, energy, persistence could make them very successful.
- He isn't trying to get on my last nerve every single day.

What is the most important thing you learned about yourself during the course of these classes?

- That my rigid “just set boundaries and be consistent” stance may not be the best strategy for all situations. There is value in this approach in some situations – but other strategies may be more effective for dealing with some behaviors.
- That I can interpret what my child is feeling, and that I can control how I react.
- That I'm a lot more like my kids than I thought.
- That I am not personally responsible for my child's behavior.
- I am not alone and it isn't my fault.
- How my reaction to her outbursts fuel her stormy tantrums.
- How I react influences the situation and results.
- Even though I have somewhat understood the spirited child, I have not handled many situations correctly – have been too strict in dealing with many situations.
- I have changed my parenting skills by realizing how different, and how alike my husband, my daughter and I are.
- That I am a lot like her i.e. slow to adapt, high intensity, highly perceptive.
- Learn to enjoy her “spiritedness” – it doesn't help to get angry – need to be more accepting and understanding.
- My introversion and more serious mood create many of the challenges in dealing with my extroverted children.
- I'm not an awful mom. I was just reacting, now I have better strategies and understanding.
- My behavior – or reaction makes the situation better or worse – sometimes its up to me to stop the fit or bring the tension down – I knew this before – but now I'm more aware of my behavior and reactions and how it affects her.
- I'm not the worst Mom in the world.

Name one new idea you plan to use for managing your child's challenging behavior as a result of attending this workshop.

- To do some calming activities with her.
- Don't rush bedtime.
- I like the idea of teaching the child how to cope with his behavior, rather than us trying to cope with him.
- Find positive outlets for his intensity – jumping, dancing, swinging, and exercise.
- Negotiation to avoid tantrums.
- Giving them choices instead of telling them to do one thing.
- I'm going to try humor with my kids when they're mad and upset about something.
- Don't force him to do things my way all the time.
- One word commands (works!). Work on teaching manners.

- Letting him know ahead of time – it has worked so well making limits clear.
- My plan is to be more positive. I was referring to his behavior so negatively as were others around me.
- Identifying their behavior and giving them words to try to use.
- Structuring his day so that it involves the activity/energy level he needs to be successful.
- Minimizing distractions and avoiding over stimulation.
- More physical contact – touch her when I want her attention – hold her – calm her down with a song – I think this would work for her in some cases.
- Relax a little more, not yell or raise voice too much unless a dangerous situation.
- Doing a better job of acknowledging his feelings and emotions.

Name one new idea you have already used to manage your child’s challenging behavior as a result of attending this workshop.

- Treat each child according to the situation – don’t try to play fair.
- Say stop instead of no.
- Using deep-breathing techniques to calm down when tension escalates.
- To be more flexible with day-to-day routines.
- Recognizing good behavior in her.
- We established some simple house rules and posted them on the refrigerator. We decreased allowed TV time and set a more definite bedtime.
- Identifying when a situation has the potential for melt down and identifying the source of the melt down through talking with my child and validating their feelings.
- Anticipating cues leading up to behavior. Use one word commands.
- I picked up on a cue and rubbed her back, held her when we went to church and there was loud music – I helped her calm down.
- Being calm when he is intense.
- To use humor to diffuse a tense situation or avert a blow-up.
- Reminding them of their successes.
- Have stopped saying don’t so often.
- Be more sensitive to his sensitivities.
- I tune into the cues before a melt down. I’ve cut back on TV and we exercise more to decrease energy.
- Look at all children differently and individually
- Not yelling, using a calm voice and things are being done more. He listens more. It makes our household nicer to live in
- I really listen to how she is feeling. I am a lot more patient now after attending the class.
- Delegated one major responsibility that is hers, with responsibility comes privileges.
- I am teaching her to listen to her own body to learn cues about her behavior.

Long-term evaluation results

In January, 2004 an additional evaluation survey was mailed to 66 past participants of the temperament-based workshop series to assess long-term behavioral change as a result of attending the classes (Appendix B). Participants attending only one class were excluded from the survey. The time frame of past participation ranged from three months to two years after completion of the classes. Thirty of 66 individuals returned a completed survey representing a 45 percent response rate.

Participants were asked six questions directly related to the projected outcomes of the program. As a result of participating in the Spirited Child class, 100% (30 of 30) agreed that:

- My understanding of my own temperament has allowed me to be more patient when dealing with my child’s challenging behavior,

- My understanding of my child's temperament helps me to understand my child's behavior and respond more effectively, and
- Positive changes in my response to my spirited child have resulted in better behavior by my child.

97% (29 of 30) agreed that:

- I am better able to identify the cues that lead up to my child's challenging behaviors and respond in a more helpful manner, and
- My child has fewer tantrums and blow-ups.

Lastly, 90% (27 of 30) reported having fewer power struggles with their spirited child.

Additional comments included, but were not limited to:

- Great class! Your willingness to apply the principles to our individual children's behavior/situation was very helpful.
- This class helped me understand that children don't always fit into one or two categories. Each child should be, if possible, able to grow on their own track and not fit into what others might say is where they should be.
- My spirited daughter and I have increased awareness, compassion and understanding in other's temperaments as a result of this spirited child class/book.
- I truly enjoyed your class. I've told lots of people about it and how beneficial it was to us.

Implications and Recommendations

Chess and Thomas (1987, p. 36) state that, "A child's temperament can actively influence the attitudes and behavior of her parents, other family members, playmates and teachers and in turn help to shape their effect on her behavioral development." It is important for parents, professionals and other caretakers of children to recognize individual differences in a child's temperament and to help him understand the impact of his temperament on other family members and people in his environment.

For Parents and Other Caretakers of Children

Understanding a child's temperament can improve parent-child relationships by helping parents reframe how they interpret their child's behavior and the way they think about the reasons for that behavior (Keogh, 2003). A parent's reaction (positive or negative) is affected by how they interpret their child's behavior. For example, if a parent feels their child's challenging behavior is purposeful and aimed at making them angry, they will most likely respond with negativity or even punishment. If, on the other hand, they understand that their child's behavior is a result of his temperament style, they are more likely to react with a helpful response.

Parents should not excuse unacceptable behavior due to their child's temperament, but rather, use it as a guide to help provide direction for responding appropriately to what their child needs. Rather than making excuses and ignoring a child's "wild" behavior, they can set up regular times for exercise and consistent safety rules for play. They need to set rules and limits to help their child develop self-control.

By understanding their child's temperamental tendencies, parents can learn to pick up cues and anticipate when challenging behaviors might occur. If they recognize that their child gets bossy

and uncooperative before she has a full-fledged temper tantrum, they can intervene with calming activities before she reaches the melt-down stage. When a child refuses their command to come and eat, they may need to forewarn her and invite her to participate in the mealtime routine.

Some parents feel that making adjustments for their child's temperament style is being too permissive and fear that they might lose parental control. In reality, children are more likely to cooperate when parents understand their child's temperament style and know when to be demanding and when to accommodate.

It is also crucial that parents recognize their own unique temperament and how their behavioral style affects all relationships in their family. By understanding temperament, parents can influence or adapt their child's environment to improve the "goodness of fit" by the ways they manage their own responses and approaches they use with their child.

For Professionals

Educators can help parents understand that temperament is neither good nor bad and that many behavioral tendencies are inborn and not the result of bad parenting. This realization helps parents get beyond the blame and guilt and start to recognize their child's strengths. The parent can work with the child rather than trying to change his inborn traits.

Educators can teach parents how to incorporate temperament knowledge into their parenting styles and goals. Understanding the concept of temperament often helps parents change their outlook or attitude toward their child, but they need practical skills and techniques in order to implement new approaches and behaviors.

In addition to developing a positive attitude towards their child and learning new skills to handle their child's challenging behaviors; parents need to learn how to teach their children useful, lifelong skills to deal with their own temperament. Educators need to offer parents specific ways to help their children develop and practice needed skills.

Although this temperament-based parenting program was offered in a group setting, the curriculum could also be utilized in one-on-one parent education settings. There is great value in hearing the experiences of other families struggling with similar issues, but some parents are more comfortable and learn better with a more individualized approach.

A number of participants completing the Spirited Child workshop series called or stopped in to consult with the instructor when new situations arose in their family. It is important to offer follow-up consultation to these families to help them learn new skills and instill the confidence they need to continue providing a positive environment for their child.

Temperament theory, especially the concept of "goodness of fit", could be easily integrated into parenting education materials and curriculum currently offered through UW-Extension. Since temperament traits are in-born and generally do not change throughout the lifespan, it should be considered throughout the chronological development of a child – infancy through young adulthood.

UW-Extension educators, who do programming in the area of parenting or youth risk prevention education, should be encouraged to seek professional development in the area of temperament theory and practice. They could become resources for other professionals in their communities.

Conclusion

The Spirited Child temperament education program was implemented in Pierce County, Wisconsin, in response to requests from community parents and professionals needing information and skills for managing their child's difficult or challenging behaviors. Research to identify a best-practice approach for teaching temperament-based parent education included programs such as those implemented by Turecki in New York, Kurcinka in Minnesota, Levno in Oregon and the Kaiser Permanente Program in California where participants reported greater understanding and acceptance of their child. From 2001 to 2006 post-session evaluation surveys completed by the Spirited Child program participants measured short and long-term behavior changes in effective parenting practices and improvement in child behavior. Participants report that they are more patient when dealing with their child's challenging behavior and respond in a more effective manner. Positive responses to their child's behavior resulted in improved child conduct and overall family functioning.

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- Turecki, S. (1985). *The difficult child*. New York: Bantam Books.

Raising Your Spirited Child Evaluation

Please complete the following Spirited Child evaluation. The results of the evaluation will be used to improve program effectiveness. Your participation in this evaluation is voluntary and confidential to the extent allowed by law. If you have any questions, please contact Lori Zierl, UW-Extension, Pierce County Family Living Agent at 715-273-3531, extension 6663. Completion of this evaluation implies your consent to participate.

FIRST, read each of the statements in the **middle** of the table. Then in the **left** column, answer how you would describe your understanding today, now that you have completed the Spirited Child workshop series.

NEXT, think back to how you would have answered each of the statements a month ago, before you participated in the workshop. Put those responses in the **right** column.

Circle the appropriate number using the following key:										
					1 = no understanding 2 = little understanding 3 = moderate understanding 4 = quite a bit of understanding 5 = great deal of understanding					
Today, after participating in the workshop series:					My Understanding How would you describe your understanding of the following:	Last month, before participating in the workshop series:				
None	A Little	Moderate	Quite a bit	Great deal		None	A Little	Moderate	Quite a bit	Great deal
1	2	3	4	5	How my child’s temperament affects his/her behavior.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	How my temperament influences my reaction to my child’s behavior.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	The role of cues leading up to my child’s challenging behavior.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Strategies for reducing power struggles.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Strategies for dealing with tantrums and blow-ups when they occur.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Strategies for managing your child’s challenging behavior.	1	2	3	4	5

What is the most important thing you learned about **your child** during the course of these classes?

What is the most important thing you learned about **yourself** during the course of these classes?

Name one new idea you **plan** to use for managing your child's challenging behavior as a result of attending this workshop.

Name one new idea you **have already used** to manage your child's challenging behavior as a result of attending this workshop.

The University of Wisconsin Extension asks that you voluntarily respond to the questions below. The cumulative demographic information will be used to enhance our programming efforts.

Gender: Male Female

Race/Ethnicity:	Age
<input type="checkbox"/> Black (Not of Hispanic Origin)	<input type="checkbox"/> 18-34
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian or Pacific Islander	<input type="checkbox"/> 35-49
<input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaskan Native	<input type="checkbox"/> 50-64
<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic	<input type="checkbox"/> 65+
<input type="checkbox"/> White (Not of Hispanic Origin)	

Raising Your Spirited Child Evaluation

*Please complete the following Spirited Child evaluation. The results of the evaluation will be used to assess the long term effectiveness of the program. Your participation in this evaluation is **voluntary** and **confidential** to the extent allowed by law. If you have any questions, please contact Lori Zierl, UW-Extension Pierce County Family Living Agent, at 715-273-3531, extension 6663. Completion of this evaluation implies your consent to participate.*

As a result of participating in the Spirited Child Classes:

1. My understanding of my own temperament has allowed me to be more patient when dealing with my child's challenging behavior.

Agree Disagree
2. My understanding of my child's temperament helps me to understand my child's behavior and respond more effectively.

Agree Disagree
3. I am better able to identify the cues that lead up to my child's challenging behaviors and respond in a more helpful manner.

Agree Disagree
4. Positive changes in my response to my spirited child has resulted in better behavior by my child.

Agree Disagree
5. We have fewer power struggles.

Agree Disagree
6. My child has fewer tantrums and blow-ups.

Agree Disagree

Other comments:

THANK YOU FOR YOUR WILLINGNESS TO COMPLETE THIS EVALUATION!