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By Dr. Edward Bailey
Chief of Pediatrics,
NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital



Children need time to develop their personalities

Rapidly changing patterns in behavior and development in the preschool years may be painful and anxiety provoking for parents. Parents understand that children develop cognitive and motor skills, such as walking and talking, at their own pace, but are frequently confused when confronting behaviors such as shyness, temper tantrums, and aggressiveness. Should parents view diversions in these behaviors as normal minor developmental variations, areas of concern, or as serious problems?

A child's behavior is the product of many factors, including developmental age, social skill level, family environment, and biological determinants such as temperament. Shyness with peers, temper tantrums, and aggressiveness are all normal characteristics of the early preschool years. By age 5 or 6, with good family support, most youngsters have mastered these challenges, reducing earlier struggles to fond memories. To enhance this growth, parents should become familiar with normal variations by reading and seeking counsel from professionals, when concerns arise.

Every child has his or her own unique temperament; some approach new experiences with a sense of wonder or excitement, while others recoil from anything new. Other behaviors, also felt to be biologically based and present at birth, include the infant's activity level, adaptability, distractibility, intensity of reaction, and persistence. As the child interacts with parents, family, and environment, personality and identity develop.

Understanding that behavior is the result of long-term interactions between inborn characteristics and the environment can prevent parents from feeling guilt when problems arise and can also provide insight regarding parenting strategies. Parents also have inborn characteristics, and the mixing of parent-child temperamental patterns results in either harmony or conflict.

Understanding Shyness

A child who is shy may, by nature, be less adaptable to transition, require more consistency, and approach new tasks apprehensively. Shyness can also be a normal attachment issue. During their first two years, children gain security and develop firm attachments to parents and caregivers. While some are ready to separate and move on to interactions with other adults and children, others require more time and support.

A child who generally warms slowly to new experiences may be viewed as shy. A child who has encountered a difficult separation experience that created a fearful situation often behaves in a similar manner. Parents need not be overprotective nor give up too early.

Children need to grow and learn to relate to other adults and peers. Even the most anxious child will, with patience and support, slowly warm to new social situations. Remaining nearby and providing a familiar, "comfort" object to ease the transition and affirm that the parent will return, often reduces anxiety. Celebrate improvement, as overcoming social fears is a huge developmental milestone.

Although shyness is a normal behavior, it may also be a coping mechanism for severe separation anxiety or attachment issues. If symptoms don't seem to resolve, try to determine the cause of the behavior and decide on whether to seek intervention. Approach your pediatrician if worried, as no concern is trivial. Reducing anxiety and stress frequently has a positive impact on family dynamics.

Dr. Edward Bailey is chairman of pediatrics at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, on staff at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children, and a father of three. He can be contacted at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Ave., Salem, MA 01907 or at ebailey@aap.org