

Parenting Kids With Slow-to-Warm-Up Temperament



by Karen Stephens

Within the first hours, days, and weeks of birth, a child's unique style of responding to the world is revealed by his or her behavior. That style, called temperament, is genetically influenced as well as affected by parents' and caregivers' guidance. Temperament is stable throughout life. How well children (and their parents) learn to cope with individual temperament can vary a lot.

For simplicity, researchers and educators group temperament characteristics into three descriptive categories: easy, difficult' and slow-to-warm-up. They aren't meant to label, just describe general tendencies. Each temperament has its own strengths and challenges; one isn't better than another. Working with temperament, rather than denying or ignoring it, is a constructive, respectful way to guide children's development. It helps kids navigate their expanding social world with their self esteem intact.

This column examines the characteristics of *slow-to-warm-up temperament*. Slow-to-warm-up children, about 20% of kids, are distinguished by their cautious nature and *wait and see* attitude. Given time to warm-up at their own pace, they gradually adjust to new circumstances or routines. When making decisions, they need more time as they pause and check out options. Slow-to-warm-up kids do adapt slower to newness and change, and they are less flexible adjusting to first encounters or new routines. But when well prepared for change, they do adapt.

These children tend to be very sensitive to external stimulation. In fact, research shows their brains literally take in more sensory information to process. And thus, they are more prone to becoming overwhelmed or over-stimulated by loud sounds, new textures, extreme temperatures, pain, and environments that are crowded, chaotic, disorganized.

Slow-to-warm-up children are very sensitive to their own emotions and the emotions of others. What they feel, they feel intensely. With wise guidance, they become people of great compassion and empathy. These traits help them establish close friendships with peers and adults. They prefer to establish a few loyal friendships, rather than many.

Early in life slow-to-warm-up children can be unflatteringly labeled as: shy, reserved, timid, fearful, picky, whiny, slow-poke, bashful, anxious, scaredy-cat, touchy, stubborn, delayed, babyish, or backward. These labels typecast children into stereotypes that mask and even stunt their true abilities. When attitudes behind labels change, children can be taught to adapt well.

Overall, slow-to-warm-up kids are usually only *shy* or disoriented at first, and they aren't as fearful as they are judicious. Slow-to-warm-up kids don't leap before they think things through; they stand back, look, and listen. Once they establish a rapport with people and trust in a situation's safety, they can be as outgoing, friendly, creative, and adventurous as the next child. That said, below are tips for being the affirming and responsive parent that slow-to-warm-up kids need as they mature to their full potential.

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Parenting Tips

- **Accept your slow-to-warm-up child for who they are.** Resist trying to change them. Build on their traits rather than wish them away. Avoid unflattering comparisons with siblings or peers.
- **Focus on the positive side of temperament.** A slow-to-warm-up child has many skills that can be nurtured; find and reinforce them.
- **Prepare children in steps for new experiences.** For instance, break down how to meet a new dog into manageable steps so your child experiences success. “Stand still with your hands down so the dog can see you mean no harm.” “Use a quiet voice.” Avoid unflattering comparisons, “Look, that girl isn’t afraid of the dog. You shouldn’t be either.”
- **Increase your patience.** Avoid teaching kids with *sink or swim* strategies. Pushing a child too fast makes kids more rigid and frightened rather than more confident and safe.
- **Interpret situations matter-of-factly.** Resist coddling and giving a child’s hesitance too much attention. Make simple statements such as, “You watch the children singing before you join in the circle. That’s your way of relaxing.”
- **Provide time for reflection and re-filling emotional reserves.** The author of *The Highly Sensitive Child* believes daily exposure to nature outdoors is also necessary for these children.

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- **Help children become in tune to their own body rhythms.** Schedule special activities that demand extra energy, such as going to the dentist or festival, during your child’s up times.
- **Give kids time to respond when adults try to talk to them.** Resist jumping in and answering for them in hopes of *hiding* a child’s slower approach to new people. Not giving children time to respond is a subtle way of saying you think they will fail if you don’t talk for them.
- **Translate your child’s behavior for new people.** This is very helpful for new teachers at child care or school. Tell them: “It takes John a little while to get used to a new place. It’s best if we don’t push him too fast.”
- **Stand up for your child if someone labels him or her.** If a teacher reports, “Tarah wouldn’t try her cottage cheese at lunch today. Is she that stubborn at home, too?” You can graciously respond that you don’t consider your child stubborn, just wary of the food texture. If someone calls your child “shy” you can counter with: “It will take a few days, but once she knows it’s safe, she’ll be building blocks with the other kids in no time.”
- **Believe kids when they feel more than you do.** Avoid discounting children’s feelings, including claims of pain.
- **Model coping skills.** Coach kids in prevention and problem-solving. A friend’s child took forever ordering at restaurants. Rather than face a predictable ordeal, she collected menus from their favorite spots and kept them in the car. While en route, her child got a head-start on ordering decisions.
- **Prepare kids for changes or new experiences.** Slow-to-warm-up kids need more time to process information. The bigger the change, the more questions a child will have. Spend more time preparing or even rehearsing for change. Playing with dolls or puppets is a great way for kids to work through their feelings.
- **Coach children on ways to join their friends’ play.** Example: “They’re pretending a house is on fire. You can ask if you can help spray water on it.”
- **Alert kids to predictable sensitivities.** “It’s going to be loud and crowded in the grocery store tonight. We’ll finish as soon as we can.”
- **Model calm expression of feelings.** Of course, this is especially important when you’re mad, frustrated, or tired.
- **Use positive discipline.** Guidance and coaching should be your first responses.

Helpful Parenting Books

- *The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them* by Elaine N. Aron. New York: Broadway Books, 2002.
- *The Shy Child: Helping Children Triumph over Shyness* by Ward K. Swallow. New York: Warner Books, 2000.

Reassuring Children's Books

- *Let's Talk About Being Shy* by Marianne Johnston. New York: Powerkids Press, 2003.
- *Leo the Late Bloomer* by Robert Kraus. New York: HarperCollins, 1971.
- *The Shy Little Girl* by Phyllis Krasilovsky. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.