

Appendix: the four temperaments

There is a certain blindness in human beings—which is to say, our blindness with regard to the feelings and attitudes of people different from ourselves.

A source of misunderstanding and conflict within families is the different temperaments of its members. A parent can have difficulty understanding—and reacting appropriately to—a child whose temperament varies significantly from his own.

Our temperament is our predisposition to react in certain ways—our “default setting”, if you will. Are we quick-tempered or easy-going? Are we easily distractible or intensely focused? Do we enjoy the company of people or prefer to be alone with our thoughts?

Over two thousand years ago, Hippocrates identified four temperaments: choleric, sanguine, melancholic, and phlegmatic. While these categories may initially strike some as antique, they are a useful way to understand ourselves and others. It is especially helpful for a parent to recognize the temperament of a child and understand how his own temperament may interact with it.

When one understands that a child is reacting within a normal range of his temperament, one no longer thinks that there may be something seriously wrong. A parent might jump to the conclusion that a child has ADHD, when in reality the child is a rather distractible, sociable, impulsive—in a word, *sanguine*. If the parent happens to be a *melancholic*—that is, quiet, reflective, and meticulous—he will need to recognize the fact and tailor an effective approach to a child with a very different outlook.

The four classic temperaments

The *choleric* is your classic “type A” personality. He or she loves to take charge and welcomes a challenge. The choleric child is strong-willed, determined, a quick learner and a natural leader. On the other hand, choleric children can be impatient, stubborn, quick-tempered, and sometimes lacking in empathy.

A defining feature of the choleric is that they love to argue. Try not to take it personally. Parents of all temperaments tend to be alarmed when faced with an argumentative child; they assume that the child is “disrespectful” of their authority. But this is not always the case. Debating comes naturally to them. Overbearing or controlling parenting is never optimal, but it is especially likely to provoke the choleric child to angry rebellion.

The *melancholic* child is introverted and serious. She is often content to be by herself. If you have a melancholic child, you are likely to be blessed with a sensitive, spiritual, and often artistic child—one who needs plenty of space, quiet, and solitude. She needs time and privacy to “regroup” after a busy day at school or playing with other children.

This child is slow to react, but the reaction will be intense and long-lasting when it comes. Parents should be cautious about throwing her into a loud, boisterous social setting and expecting her to “perform”. At the same time, we should not encourage a tendency to be overly isolated or self-involved. It is wise to ease the melancholic child toward the right balance of privacy and sociability.

The downside of the melancholic temperament is that the child can be moody, withdrawn, overly self-conscious and perfectionist. Critical of himself and others, he can also be fearful of initiating new things. He needs to be eased out of his comfort zone.

The *sanguine* child is eager, bright, sensitive, fun-loving and enthusiastic. He is a quick learner and swift to react. He rarely bears a grudge. He can also be overly talkative and distracted at school, maybe trying the teacher’s patience (especially if the teacher is a melancholic).

Sanguine children seek out simulation and fun, but they need structure, limits, and clear guidance, or their impulsive natures can lead them into trouble. They have bright, inquisitive minds but can tend to be superficial. Be sure to provide them with good moral and intellectual formation that makes clear the deeper realities. They need to be taught to reflect with a well-formed intellect before acting.

The *phlegmatic* child is peaceful, quiet, cooperative, reliable, and obedient. He never gets into fights at school and at home can entertain himself for hours without requiring attention. Count your blessings!

But the phlegmatic child can blend in so well with his surroundings that a parent may have no clue about what he really thinks or feels—what frustrates him, what he talks about with his best friend ... does he even have a best friend?

The phlegmatic is slow to react, but unlike the melancholic, his reactions are neither intense nor long-lived. He remains calm even under pressure. It takes a while for anger to build at, say, a persistently annoying sibling.

The flip side is that without proper encouragement phlegmatic children can become sluggish or unmotivated. They can be apathetic and too comfortable with the status quo. There can be too much fear of offending that can result in procrastination. Parents need to encourage phlegmatics to come outside of themselves and even take on leadership roles. It may be that many phlegmatics have never reached their potential due to lack of encouragement.

Parents need to examine their own dispositions when dealing with a child. For example, a melancholic father who has a tendency to be critical may constantly lecture a phlegmatic son about what he should and should not do. With his tendency toward perfectionism, he nags his slow-moving son to the point of where the latter ossifies into a stubborn, immovable object. The father will improve the situation by showing his love with praise and encouragement. He will offer many affirming comments for each critical one.

A choleric mother, baffled by her daughter's hesitancy and lack of initiative, may not realize that she herself is a large part of the problem: she is so overbearing that her child can't find a way to develop her own initiative.

If both parents are introverted, there is a danger that the children may not receive sufficient warmth, verbal acknowledgment, and motivation to excel. On the other hand, two extraverted parents might not take the time to draw out an introverted child and allow him to develop social skills in a more reflective and deliberate way.

Parents will find it easier to help their children flourish when they build on their children's natural inclinations. Parents can appreciate the choleric's natural leadership and independence, the melancholic's depth and nobility of purpose, the sanguine's generosity and gregariousness, the phlegmatic's docility and peacefulness.

(This appendix is a redaction of two papers by Art and Laraine Bennett)