



THE SPIRITED CHILD

By Judy Arnall

About 20% of all babies born have temperament traits of a fussy or high need or what we call a “spirited child”. Spirited children share many of the following characteristics. They require extra TLC (Tender Loving Care) from parents because their behaviour can be very challenging. Children generally do not change their temperament as they grow but temperament can change in intensity as they move through their developmental stages. Parents are not responsible for making a child “spirited”. They are born that way and grow up to be wonderful adults. Parents handling a spirited child need extra support, and need to be sure that their own needs are met: sleep, healthy food, healthy self-esteem, and personal time.

Spirited Child Characteristics:

Babies

- Want to be held all the time.
- Doesn't schedule well for eating, and toilet habits.
- Cries for no “apparent” reason.
- Reacts strongly against sleep training.
- Won't stay for long in carriers that are not attached to parents.
- Gets bored very easily.

Toddlers and Pre-schoolers

- Smart-won't play with toys, mostly real items.
- Every day is unpredictable.
- Mood swings occur in minutes.
- Wakes up generally unhappy most times from naps and night sleep.
- Experiences early night terrors and many night awakenings. They are restless sleepers.
- Severe separation anxiety occurs, often lasting from age one to age five.
- Goes through most daily requirements such as getting dressed, car-seat buckling, transitions, diaper changing, meals, bath, tooth-brushing, with difficulty and opposition.
- Clings in new situations and with strange people.

- Wants to do everything themselves. The child is very self-directed and is “The Boss”!
- Child is not easily distractible.
- Child has violent, intense tantrums that may last for at least an hour. Tantrums may include screaming, crying, head-banging, vomiting, hitting, and an almost catatonic state where the child can't hear, respond or listen to calming influences.
- Child is very active during play and sleep.
- Often a picky eater.
- The child still requires a lot of attention and physical contact during night-time and day.

School Aged

- Very structured and needs routines.
- Better-tempered if the child gets adequate sleep and food.
- Very determined in needs and wants. Still is very self-directed.
- May dislike clothing blends.
- Requires a lot of physical contact.
- May still have temper tantrums if goals thwarted.
- May still have periods of separation anxiety.
- Are highly resilient because they become masters at dealing with their own reactions.
- Coping skills improving.
- May still have temper tantrums if goals thwarted.
- May still have periods of separation anxiety.
- Has great sensitivity to others needs and feelings.
- Still desires to be close physically to those she loves so strongly

Teenagers

- Not easily swayed by peers. Again, still very self-directed.
- Requires a lot of physical contact.
- Determined and self directed. Child wants to make most decisions themselves.
- Child is very responsible, caring and empathetic.
- Can take own responsibility for ensuring sleep, and food intake is adequate.

These are general characteristics of the high need, fussy or spirited child. Some children are more or less of these. Most children respond well to an easy-going parenting style full of warmth, structure and democratic decision making.

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