



THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 6: Understanding Your Child's Temperament

Guest: Minerva Holmes

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Each child has his or her own temperament, and each parent does, too. In this episode, we explore different temperaments and how this knowledge can help parents best respond to their children.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.

Maureen *Welcome back to The Growing Brain. I'm so excited about our guest today, Minerva Holmes. Minerva is a parent educator on our team at Momentous. She leads parent workshops all throughout the community to a variety of audiences, parenting audiences, and Minerva is here today to talk to us about temperament, which is something I'm so excited to dive into. When I heard, uh, um, your parenting classes, this one really stood out to me as something so interesting that I hadn't really thought much about before. So I'm so excited to talk about this today. So thank you for joining us.*

Minerva *Well, thank you for having me, Maureen. Um, yeah, temperament is a topic that not many parents are familiar with.*

Maureen *All right. So, um, let's, let's dive in. What is temperament?*

Minerva *So temperament refers to the way a person, a person acts. Temperaments are not the same as moods. Moods can change depending on the situation. So, for example, if a child is tired or grumpy, um, that's, that's a mood, right? Or a child who is, has had a lot of sugar and is just acting really silly, right? That can be also mood. Different temperaments are not good or bad. They just are who the person is. Temperament is even developed in utero. Uh, a child who is active in utero will more than likely be active, well, you know, when they are born and when during their developmental years, Uh, temperament is how a person reacts to their environment.*

Maureen *Okay. That makes sense. So what, so what are some temperaments?*

Minerva When we talk about temperament, there are eight dimensions, uh, or eight characteristics. And I can go through each one. So the first would be, refers to the level of motor activity. This we call this temperament activity level. So for example, some children can sit still for a minute and there's some children that are just moving, you know, constantly. Others play quietly with their toys while some kiddos will prefer jumping on the sofa, running all over the place. And, uh, so that's the activity level. That's the temperament. Then we have approach or withdrawal. And this kind of has to deal with first reactions, right? At first it refers to how easily a child responds to new things, such as new foods or people or places, you know, clothes, going into the school for the first time. Those are some examples. Um, and we have those kids that are plungers. They'll go for it. You know, the first day of school they're going to go in there and they're going to be excited. Uh, and then you have those that are clinging onto us. Right. And so, you know, is that good or bad? No, it's not. It really isn't, it's just part of their temperament.

Maureen *I have one of each of those.*

Minerva Okay. Yeah. I have grandchildren that are the same, both we, that we have both. OK so then we have adaptability, right? And this applies to more long-term responses to new or change situations. In other words, children can adapt easily or they start having difficulty with things like routines throughout the day, you know, uh, there's children that, you know, if you wake them up at seven o'clock in the morning, they will be okay with that. But there's those children that if you wake them up at seven o'clock in the morning, and they're not used to that, you know, they'll probably have a little bit of a problem with it. Again, it's part of the temperament because it takes them a little bit longer to adapt to the situation.

And then we have, uh, something that we call threshold of responsiveness. Which has to do really with sensory. And these are the kiddos who, um, uh, respond different to stimuli, like flavors or texture and temperature, those kinds of things, you know, bright lights, noise...

Maureen *crowds....*

Minerva Yeah. So this is, these are the children that a lot of times they want you to remove their tags from their shirts. That's a sensory trait. And then we have intensity of reaction. And I really enjoy explaining this one because this refers to the level of response that a person has, how they're responding to a certain stimuli. So for instance, you know, there could be somebody that says a joke or a child that is doing something funny and for some, it might just be hilarious and they just break out, cracking up laughing hysterically, where another one might just kind of just observe and laugh, but it's not with that intensity. Right. So I always enjoy explaining that one because I see myself with my other friend, that's very quiet and you know, I'm usually the one that's very intense...

- Maureen *I have a six-year-old who thinks everything is the best thing ever in the whole world. And every day is the best day ever. So he would fall under that kind of intensity. I picked him up at school one time and I said, how was your day? He said, mom, you don't have to ask me that every day. You already know it's the best day ever.*
- Minerva Oh my goodness. Yes. So it's always fun to hear them and see it. Even when we have two different children, right. That you can see who's the intense one.
- And then we have quality of mood. Uh, this applies to the amount of, uh, you know, pleasure, joyful, friendly behavior, a child displays. You know, um, there's the kiddo that will constantly be crying or complaining, and then there's a child that will always be joyful, can interact with others, be playing, you know, um, again, this is just part of the temperament.
- Maureen *And what you're saying on that is that it's not moods that change throughout the day like all of us have, but these are sort of more pervasive, like who the child is as a person, correct?*
- Minerva Correct. Yes. And then we have the distractability. And this refers to how effective, uh, outside stimuli are interfering in, into our children's lives. So this is kind of, I like to explain it to parents by saying, this is, um, you know, the movie Up and it, and you know, there's always that *squirrel*, you know, so distractability, to me is that, you know, there's people that can, you know, there could be a child that can be learning something or in class, and there can be all kinds of noise going on and they're okay with that. You know, they're not distracted, but then there's those kiddos at any little thing that happens, a fly can pass by and he... *squirrel*, you know, so that that's distractability.
- And then we have, um, the attention span and persistence. And this was for this refers to the amount of time and activity, um, that they're able to stay on something. So we would see this in the child that is probably, you know, uh, doing a puzzle and this child, um, the one that is, you know, attention span is focused and is being persistent, they will finish the puzzle. And then we might have a child that says, okay, start the puzzle, but then won't finish it. You know, at the end, those are the characteristics that we see on a child when we talk about temperament.
- Maureen *Yeah. This is so interesting to me. And, and, you know, I have three kids and as I was listening, I was thinking each of my three kids falls in different ways on each of those temperaments. You know, some... and they all have their own different temperaments from each other and from me. Um, so I'm curious, what, how is this information helpful to parents besides just that ability to sort of place your kids on a, you know, on a spectrum.*
- Minerva So what I like to do with my parents is we like to do an activity where, as I'm talking about these different temperaments, we go ahead and identify, you

know, our own temperament as a parent. And what we do is we use it as a tool because for instance, my own child, you know, I can't go shopping with her because her, her temperament is, is more of a shy person... You know, she doesn't like to shop and I like to go aisle by aisle. So what I teach my parents to do is to use this tool to avoid conflict, right. To help them, to help them say, okay, this is not because he's having, uh, you know, he's reacting with a bad behavior, but this is because this is what his temperament is. And he doesn't like to be around people. So we that's how we, you know, that's how we use that tool for the parents.

Maureen *And that makes sense to me when I heard you first talking about this, a total light bulb went off for me in terms of this one, you talked about, um, approach and withdrawal, the idea of how quickly kids jump into new situations. And one of my kids is very slow to warm up to people and she just takes her sweet time. And, and when she knows adults and she's comfortable, she'll open up. But until then, she's, she, she'll hang back. She'll sit on my lap, she doesn't want anyone to talk to her or look at her, you know? And, and... I think had I not known this information, I probably would have pressured her to say hi to people and to talk to people because I am an extrovert and I like talking to people, but what you're saying makes total sense to me that my temperament and her temperament don't match there. And so for me to be able to identify, okay, my temperament is different from yours, but this is who you are instead of forcing my opinion onto her.*

Minerva *Exactly. And, um, also Maureen, you have to take into consideration culture. You know, a lot of times, um, in culture we have certain, you know, things or rituals that we expect our kids to do. And, um, again, going back to your own child, if she's a shy person, she's slow to warm... she and, and grandma comes and she only knows grandma through Skype or through, you know, uh, videos or pictures, you know, even though she's been seeing her in pictures, you know, I cannot force this child to go and kiss her or give her a hug or anything like that. And it's not because she doesn't like grandma or because she's being, you know, um, she's rebelling against not going to hug her, but it's more about, about, I don't know her yet. Let me get, you know, warm up to her a little bit and then I'll approach her and then I'll hug her. And then, you know, so, but a lot of times, culturally, we'll say that's rude. You need to hug them. You need to give them a hug, you know? So, um, that's why it's important to know these temperaments.*

Maureen *I can imagine a lot of conflicts coming up with culture. I'm thinking of sensory things. I was at a birthday party the other night that went until way later than my kids are normally up. There was loud music. There was the pinata and the sugar, all the sugar, and, you know, um, and so there's all there... I can think of, um, sensory things being in conflict with the way your family maybe celebrates things and, um, and sort of, uh, things like attention span and how long can you focus on things? And so I can see lots of times when maybe we put our kids into situations, especially situations influenced by our family's culture that that might clash with their temperament.*

Minerva Exactly. Um, my own daughter, she, she has birthday parties for my grandchildren like at 10 o'clock in the morning and culturally I'm Hispanic. I want the big pinatas, I want the big party and that kind of stuff. So, um, so you know, I got to tell you, you know, I do have reactions towards that, but understanding this, I understand where she's coming from. Right. I understand that, you know, uh, overstimulation for one of my grandchildren can be way too much and won't even enjoy the birthday party. So she, you know, pretty much, you know, focuses on the party on the actual child rather than on the adults. You know, understanding that, that child in this sense.

Maureen *I think there are times when we say this is my child's temperament and I should cater to that and make sure that they're safe and that they're comfortable. And then there may be times where saying that is sort of letting us off the hook of helping them develop certain skills that they may not have. So I think I can think of, for example, attention span. If my child does two minutes on a puzzle and then walks away every time, that seems like on one hand, you're not going to put them in a situation where they're forced to do something for 45 minutes. That's not developmentally appropriate and not appropriate for their temperament. On the other hand, I wouldn't want to say, well, they just have a short attention span. And so two minutes is his limit and that's all he does. So are there times when we should kind of push a little bit and how do, how do you recommend that parents do that in a way that takes into account their temperament?*

Minerva Absolutely. You, uh, would you, well, what I would focus in is, um, follow the child's intuition, you know, follow, recognize that temperament, right. And then of course, you're the mom, you know how, how far you can push them, right. And you encourage him. With the temperament, it's almost like a tree, like a, uh, you know, a tree you plant and you, you put all the little hooks, so the tree won't bend, totally, right. You want it to be able to, to be straight, you know, grow straight and you're not changing anything on the tree right on the growth. And you're just, um, setting that up to where it's going to follow a certain path. So temperaments, you cannot change. You, we understand that, but you can surely influence it, but by understanding what's going on here, how far can I push him? What can I do that can encourage him and also, you know, we always talk about - include play in it. You know, it doesn't always have to be, or you should be here in this developmental stage, so you should be staying focused in this puzzle. No, we can always just follow his lead and then we can encourage your child by being connected towards you.

Maureen *Hmm. I mentioned earlier in the example of my daughter, who's slower to warm up to things that I'm an extrovert and she's slower to warm up. And so that's sort of created... not a conflict, but it's something that I have to be conscious of that, oh, this isn't, this is a mismatch where my temperament doesn't match hers. And I assume that's probably true for every parent of every child, because none of us have the same personality or the same temperament. So I would say there's probably some process that parents should go through here to sort of*

identify their own temperament and then identify the temperaments of their children and kind of see where those match and don't match.

Have you seen, have you seen parents do that effectively and sort of, what advice would you give parents on that?

Minerva So if they're familiar with temperament, once it become familiar with temperament, right, that measurement, that really getting to know where you are with your temperament, right, and identifying it. Um, again, can help you understand the temperament of your child. And it's, it's kinda like a scale. You look at the scale, a scale, right? When we do the activity, there's a scale. And we say, my temperament from one to five is three. Let's say in, um, you know, being an extrovert, right. Being out there. And then let's say, um, my child is a one, well, I know where I stand and I know how far I can manage that behavior based on what, on the knowledge that I have.

So again, I think it's really important to understand what temperament is that way, you know, where you're at and where your child is at.

Maureen *So this is all super helpful. So I, when, when I first heard you talk about this, I kind of, uh, thought through each of these, these temperaments and kind of I guess evaluated myself on them. And then I did that same mental process for each of my kids. And it is totally shifted for me the way I connect with them, because I realize of course, every parent knows that their kids have different personalities, but doing this helped me articulate clearly. Uh, in what ways are my children different? Not just, you know, lumping them into, this is my extrovert child, and this is my introvert child, but it helped me really sort of break that down in a way that was really clear for me. So, uh, I would encourage anyone listening to sort of go through that mental process and you can find these on the American Academy of Pediatrics site, the list of the temperaments.*

Um, do you have any sort of closing thoughts about this and how do you, and how you talk about it with parents?

Minerva The first thing I tell parents is, remember, temperament is not good or bad, okay. That's, that's the number one thing that you have to remember. They're part of what makes the child unique, okay. And so when you understand the uniqueness of this child, okay, then you're able to relate with them and you're able to, like you said, you know, you kind of break it down and understand that they're not just not.... not all the, our children are the same. And so we start really focusing on each one of them in their uniqueness. And I think that's the beauty of that, that we that's where we recognize how unique they can be.

Maureen *Yeah. I love that. Well, thank you so much for sharing all that with us today, and I really appreciate you coming in and talking to us.*

Minerva Thank you so much.

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