Temperament in the Pediatric Visit

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Temperament lies behind mood; behind will, lies the fate of character. Then behind both, the influence of family the tyranny of culture; and finally the power of climate and environment; and we are free, only to the extent we rise above these.

―John Burroughs

Learning Objectives:
1. Define temperament and its theoretical components
2. Distinguish temperament from behavior
3. Learn to use discussions of temperament to engage parental concerns

Primary Reference:

CASE ONE:

Mia Crier is a 3-month-old girl who presents for a well child check. Her mother reports that she is constipated and gassy. On further questioning, you find that Mia has 2 soft stools daily that are normal in appearance, consistency, and amount. Her mother believes she is constipated because she cries “all the time.” During the rest of the history and physical exam, you determine that Mia is physically well with a benign abdominal exam.

1. What is temperament? What are thought to be the major components of temperament?
2. How does temperament influence parenting?
3. When faced with a problem relating to temperament, what further questions do you need to ask, or observations do you need to make, in order to clarify the problem? What tools can you use?

CASE continued:

On further questioning, you learn that Mia’s mother has a hard time with her crying, and states she gives extra bottles in between her regular feeds just to quiet her. Everything seems to upset Mia and make her cry. Her mother tearfully admits that she is overwhelmed and feels guilty that she is not a good parent.

4. Besides Mia’s temperament, what may be at play in the interaction between Mia and her mother?

5. How does temperament impact Mia’s relationships with her mother, herself, and the world?

6. What might you discuss with the mother to help the situation?
CASE TWO:

Mr. and Mrs. Wermup are concerned because when they bring their 3-year-old daughter Sloan to daycare, she holds onto their legs and pleads, “Please no daycare.” They have to peel her off and leave her crying with the teacher so that they can get to work on time. The teacher reports that five minutes after they leave, Sloan stops crying and sits on the ground watching the others play. Over the next ten minutes, she gradually integrates with the other children. She is generally fine throughout the day, but has some difficulty with transitions between activities. The parents are worried that they are somehow responsible for the way she behaves.

7. How would you describe her attachment to her parents? What can you say about her temperament? Are there any strategies you could offer the parents?

CASE THREE:

Tristan is an 8-year-old boy who is obese but otherwise growing and developing well. He presents to a visit with his father, who relates his concern that Tristan is “always afraid,” withdraws from social situations, and clams up instead of responding when spoken to. This frequently irritates his parents, who address this by engaging him in many extra-curricular activities, and spend a lot of time trying to teach him new things. In the room, Tristan is a quiet, shy boy who speaks in a low voice and keeps his eyes down. When his father leaves the room briefly to take a phone call, he initially looks startled, then again looks down. While alone, he endorses being bullied at school and states that he doesn’t like his after-school activities because the other kids say he is fat and he can’t keep up in sports. He tells you he sometimes wets the bed, but is afraid to tell his parents. He is not being hurt in any physical way. When the father re-enters the room, you discuss some of Tristan’s concerns with him and he immediately starts berating Tristan for not telling him. His voice gets louder and louder as Tristan turns brighter shades of red and you notice a tear is rolling down his cheek.

8. What is “goodness of fit” and how can it affect a child, caregiver and their relationship?
9. When is it appropriate to address temperament and how would you approach such a discussion?

Additional References:

Resources:
1. Links to AAP parenting articles on temperament.
   http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/How-to-Understand-Your-Childs-Temperament.aspx
   http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Your-Childs-Temperament.aspx
3. Carey Temperament Scales, for use by providers. www.temperament.com/ctsindex.html