

## No Wonder Positive Family Communication is So Hard!

In doing our Assets( Profiles of Student Life) survey, the Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth and Families found that only 27% of Arlington teens report having positive family communication. When the data is broken down by grade level, it's even more concerning. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 47% of young people report having positive family communication, but by 8<sup>th</sup> grade only 25% report having that asset.

This data is concerning and, as a community of parents we want to do anything we can to support positive family communication. But the truth is, it's not easy! When you think that each member of the family has his or her own unique temperament and personality and then you add to that gender differences and differences in developmental stages, it's no wonder we all have some trouble communicating!

One tool that may help with family communication is learning to understand your child's temperament and your own. Basically temperament is the natural style that guides how each of us interacts and reacts with the world around us –the people, the places and things. Most researchers agree that your temperament is something you are born with and that although there are some changes, it is a relatively stable factor in life.

There are ten traits that can help us figure out our children's and our own temperaments. All of these traits are on a continuum and many of us fall squarely in the middle of the continuum on many of the traits. But, in the end, they all combine in different ways to make each member of the family unique.

- **Activity** – Left to her own devices, would your child mostly be still, or mostly be active?
- **Adaptability** – Is your child more apt to “go with the flow” or dig in his heels when he's exposed to change or transitions. Does he adjust to change slowly or quickly?
- **Approach** – When faced with something new does your child eagerly reach for the experience or does she need time to get used to new ideas?
- **Distractibility** – How does your child handle distractions and interruptions? Does he get side tracked by other things that re going on? Does he get so focused he doesn't notice anything else that's happening.
- **Emotional Sensitivity** – How does your child react to upsetting things? Does she have empathy or sympathy for others who are expressing strong emotions?
- **Intensity** – Is it easy for you to figure out what your child is feeling inside? Intensity is not about how strongly a child feel things; it's about how they express those feelings.
- **Mood** – Does your child see the glass as half empty or half full? Is he or she generally optimistic or pessimistic?
- **Persistence** – Does your child give-up when an activity becomes difficult or boring?
- **Regularity** – Does your child have a regular, predictable biological clock? Does she get hungry or tired at pretty much the same time each day?

- **Sensory Awareness** – Does your child react strongly to smells, touch, bright lights or does he seem to be pretty much unaware of sensory stimulation?

So what do all these temperament traits have to do with family communication? Plenty! Think about this common family scenario. You have to pick-up your son at 4:00. Time gets away from you and suddenly it's 3:55! You run into the family room where your daughters are playing intently with their Legos and say; "Hurry! Go get your coats! We're going to be late!" If one daughter is more of the "slow-to-adapt" kind of child, her initial reaction is going to be anger at this interruption and if she's more intense than not, she will express her anger in a loud and forceful manner. But your other daughter may have a much milder reaction. If her temperament allows her to adapt more quickly to change and she is not as intense as her sister, she's apt to just get her coat. Neither of these children are being "bad" or "good". They're just being who they are. But it sure is tempting to make the less adaptable, more intense daughter into the "bad kid" and the more adaptable less intense daughter into the "good kid".

So what's a family to do?!?! The first thing parents can do is to take some time and really think about where your children and you fit in terms of temperament traits. If you know in advance how your child is apt to react to a situation, then you can try and adjust the situation. If a child is slow to adapt to interruptions and has trouble transitioning, try to keep transitions to a minimum and give as much warning as possible when there is a transition so she can begin to adapt before the actual interruption. You might say "In ten minutes, we have to pick-up your brother." and then come back and say "In just a few minutes, we have to pick-up your brother."

Of course, if you've simply lost track of time, as in the example above, then you can't give a warning. And temperament aside, you just have to get going! But you can let your child know that you do realize these "hurry-up situations" are very difficult for her and that you're sorry you couldn't give her any warning. Sometimes, just knowing that a parent understands how hard a situation is for a child, helps defuse their anger and frustration. And usually, understanding what's going on with a child makes it easier for parents to deal with their anger and frustration.

The important thing to remember about these temperament traits is that they are neither "bad" nor "good"; they simply are. You didn't get to choose your temperament, and neither do your children. But we all can help ourselves and our children learn to work with their own temperaments and the temperaments of those around them in ways that are caring and respectful and that emphasize strengths, not deficits.

For more information, I'd recommend [Understanding Temperament](#) by Lyndall Shick.