



The Baby Psychologist

Where does your baby's personality come from?

PP's psychologist Dr Richard C Woolfson takes you inside your tot's mind

From the moment your baby was born, she started to show her personality. Maybe she suckled enthusiastically during her first feed or perhaps she seemed passive and fed slowly. And her personality will continue to grow and show itself. As a toddler, perhaps she's determined to get what she wants or she may just happen to be a child who gives up at the first hurdle. As she grows up, she might turn out to be aggressive or sensitive. But where does her personality actually come from?

Nature vs nurture

There's widespread scientific evidence that personality is partly biological; that your baby inherits some of her unique characteristics from you and her father.

Studies comparing identical and non-identical twins have found that there's greater similarity between the temperament of identical twins. This strongly suggests there's a genetic component. That's why your baby sometimes thinks, 'This is just the way I am, and everyone else had better fit in.' In her head it's as natural as having blue eyes or

blonde hair. It's not until later on in life that children realise they can modify their characteristics.

Yet there's no doubt that environment also plays a part. Experiments show that the more parents smile and show positive affection to their baby, the more likely she is to be socially responsive, happy and smiling herself. She thinks to herself, 'Mum and Dad are pleasant to me, so I'm going to be pleasant to them.'

What you do really does matter

Bear in mind, also, that a lot depends on the way you manage your child's personality. If she's shy, you may be tempted to protect her socially and keep her away from parties. While that certainly reduces the number of shy experiences, it also reinforces her lack of social confidence and doesn't improve it. She thinks, 'I'm right to worry about parties, because Mum and Dad keep me away from them.'

On the other hand, if you help her to have greater social confidence by encouraging her to make new friends, you may find that she gradually becomes more used to social situations. She thinks, 'I'm much happier now that Mum and Dad have shown me how to get on with others.'

The way forward

Your baby has her own unique personality. In a sense, it really doesn't matter whether these traits are inherited or environmental – all that's important is that you respond to her in a positive way. If you're a

loving, affectionate person with a relaxed manner, then stick to that approach even if your baby's fretful and hard to manage. As you get to know each other during her childhood, your personalities will mesh as you each form an emotional connection with the other.

Personality building blocks

1 Get involved There's an emotional dimension to your child's personality development. She loves attention from you at any time, and often responds best when it's unexpected. So when she's playing with toys, surprise her with a big hug. This boosts her self-confidence.

2 Encourage her natural interests Every child has her own taste when it comes to play activities. Try to identify the toys she particularly enjoys and encourage her to express herself.

3 Don't assume she'll stay the same Different traits show through at different stages. For instance, she may be more outgoing at 2 and more shy at 3. By the time she's 5 or 6, things are clearer, but in the early years there's everything to play for.

4 Play an active part Although some of your child's inherited characteristics are fixed, you can still influence the way they're expressed in her behaviour. So instead of thinking, 'I want to change her,' see how you can best help her to use her traits positively. For instance, you can develop her kind nature by teaching her how to share, and how to think more about others. **PP**



'Bet I know what Mum's thinking - that I'm gorgeous!'