

Enjoying Life with a Spirited Child

By Melanie Bowden

On a recent episode of the CBS sitcom, "Everybody Loves Raymond," Debra and Ray, a married couple with three children, are entertaining their friends, Bernie and Linda. Bernie and Linda are parents of a toddler son, Stevie. When Debra asks how things are going with Stevie, Bernie replies, "Well, he really burns through the babysitters." Linda nervously adds, "Stevie's just very spirited," and Debra and Ray give each other a knowing look.

Sound familiar? You may have heard negative labels for a child who is spirited. Whiny, demanding, difficult, hyper-sensitive, confrontational. These are the children who the maternity ward nurses bring to the parents and say, "You need to keep this one in the room." Or who, as toddlers, scream for 30 minutes because you cut their toast into triangles, not rectangles.

A spirited child is simply more - more intense, more persistent, more energetic, more sensitive, more perceptive. Some spirited children have all of these traits. How do you live with such a child and help them to manage their emotions - let alone your feelings as their parent?

On September 19th, Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, author of, "Raising Your Spirited Child (HarperPerennial, 1998)," spoke to a packed audience at Veterans Memorial Theater in Davis on how to survive and enjoy life with a spirited child. Kurcinka knows of what she speaks since she jokingly calls her son—now an adult - the original spirited child. His behavior propelled her to research temperament and seek out ways for parents to maximize a spirited child's strengths and minimize their weaknesses. A licensed teacher and parent educator, Kurcinka is the founder of the Spirited Child workshops.

POSITIVE RELABELING

She asked the audience to relabel some of the negative terms applied to a spirited child. Instead of obstinate - how about persistent? Instead of anxious - how about cautious? Often times, characteristics that make a toddler or older child difficult, will be beneficial to them when they reach adulthood. By using more positive labels, parents of spirited children can appreciate their child's personality and learn to work with it. Kurcinka says that, "by changing your perspective, you can change your response." It feels good to be the parent of a child who is compelling and selective, rather than labeling them impatient and picky. Focusing on your child's strengths will build a positive talk environment which Kurcinka states has been shown to be more important

to a child's success than the parents' education or income.

TEMPERAMENTAL TRAITS

Kurcinka's book outlines nine different temperamental traits and ways to determine where your child falls on trait continuums. The traits are: intensity, persistence, sensitivity, perceptiveness, adaptability, regularity, energy, first reaction, and mood. By scoring your child on each temperament, and then adding up for the total, you can determine whether you are raising a spirited child or not. Kurcinka claims that between 10-15% of children will score in the spirited range.

It's also valuable for parents to score themselves on the nine temperaments. One mom cited in Kurcinka's book found that her husband and son scored high in energy, while she scored low. This led to problems at dinnertime because the mom wanted everyone to sit down to a quiet meal, but her son and husband couldn't stay still in their dining room chairs. The solution: New chairs that rock, roll, and swivel. The mom says, "Now Paul and Tyler move to their hearts' content, but they're still at the table and in their chairs. They're happy and so am I."

THE VOLCANO EXPERIMENT

Spirited children tend to get upset more easily and stay upset longer. Kurcinka says, "Spirited kids experience every emotion and sensation deeply and powerfully. Their hearts pound, the adrenaline flows through their bodies." But there are ways to teach your child how to manage their emotions.

Kurcinka suggests considering three questions along with a visual example to explore each question with your child. You'll need two glasses, vinegar, baking soda, and cotton balls.

Question #1: Can your child name his emotions?

Ask your child if they can tell you something that makes them happy, sad, irritated, or angry.

When Kurcinka works with a child, she tells them that some children when they are told no, keep asking over and over again until they've heard no numerous times. This is a spirited child behavior. Each no is represented by some vinegar being poured into one of the glasses. The other glass represents a child who can hear no only once

or twice and then drop the subject and move onto another activity. This second glass gets just a few squirts of vinegar. When you add a teaspoon of baking soda to each glass, a child can see that the spirited child's glass bubbles up like a volcano compared to the non-spirited child's. Kurcinka then asks the child if they ever feel like the volcano glass.

Question #2: Does your child recognize cues that are causing her distress?

She then teaches the child to recognize cues for when they are getting "bubbly" inside. Maybe it's when their body gets tense or their voice gets louder.

Question #3: Does your child know what soothes and calms him?

Kurcinka now puts some cotton balls in the volcano glass and the child can see that this makes the bubbles go down. She asks the child to think of things like the cotton balls that make them feel better and less bubbly. Maybe it's a bike ride, music, their special blanket, or playing a game.

Your child may not be able to name what soothes them at first, but you can work with them to find what their "cotton balls" are.

You can also put a picture of the volcano glass on the fridge and at times ask your child, "How full is your glass?" Kurcinka has worked with children as young as 19 months who understood the volcano concept and used it to manage their feelings.

CATCH EMOTIONS WHEN THEY ARE "LITTLE"

It's important to understand that anger in your child is a second emotion that is first triggered by something else like frustration, jealousy, disappointment, fear, surprise, or embarrassment. If we teach our children to stuff these early emotions, their glass will fill up and bubble over eventually. If, however, we can catch these emotions when they are "little," we have a much better chance to problem solve with our child and reduce the amount of conflict in our homes.

There are many techniques to try when a spirited child's emotional intensity is increasing. Take a pause in whatever activity you and your child are doing, give your child a bath, use repetitive motions like rocking, engage in physical exercise, or give your child some space. It can also help to teach your child how to ask for space when they need it. Another technique is to describe what you see your child doing and take a guess as to what would make them feel better. For example, "When you poke the baby, I think you need my attention."

When you do need to say no to your spirited child, Kurcinka says it helps to get up and move when you say it. After stating, "You cannot play with that toy anymore," pick up the toy and put it in an inaccessible place.

A second adult to confirm your rules can also get your point across. Children then understand that you have back-up and that this is not a rule to question.

MANAGING YOUR EMOTIONS

What do you do when it's your emotions that are "bubbly?" As a parent of a spirited child you need to set the example by learning to catch your emotions early and then finding what comforts you. Take a break and come back when you're calmer. After a rough day with your child be sure to do something to take care of yourself, like a walk or a bubble bath, to restore your energy.

If you do end up exploding at your child, you can reconnect with them with one of the following phrases: We can work together, I'm listening, or I didn't realize this was so important to you. Once the emotional intensity is brought down, the problem solving can begin.

PROBLEM SOLVING TIPS

When both you and your child are calm is the time to look for solutions that meet the interests of everyone.

Kurcinka provides some phrases for problem solving with your child: Give me three other things we could do, That's one idea, now give me two more, How can we make it better?, and What else could we do?

The goal is for your child to learn that your family is a problem solving family. With practice, you can predict your child's responses, and find ways to lower emotional intensity. This will give you more chances to problem solve together.

Kurcinka says, "With the right strategies, you can create a home where spirit thrives." You also might be able to hold onto some babysitters for awhile.

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