

Every colony and pack has its share of spirited children. By spirited, we mean regular kids who have temperaments naturally more intense, sensitive, perceptive, or persistent than others. Rather than considering these children "difficult", "stubborn, or "bratty", we need to recognize that they are highly creative, keen, energetic, courageous individuals.

This combined Sharing/Paksak is the first of a two-part series on how to recognize, understand, and work with spirited children.

After consulting several resources, I found the best to be *Raising Your Spirited Child*, by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. The articles have been based on material in this book.

While spirited children, like all children, are unique individuals, they have enough of the following characteristics to make them stand out in a group.

Intensity: Spirited children have a powerful inner drive for whatever they do. They can be loud and noisy, their volume set permanently on 10. They can also be intensely quiet and observant. They look over every new situation and plan their approach with cat-like stealth. Their energy, reactions, and emotions are powerfully focused.

Persistence: For spirited children, an activity worth doing is worth doing all the way. They are highly committed to their task and goal-oriented. They are not willing to give up and do not easily change their minds once they lock in on a job. And they aren't afraid to assert themselves and to state their opinion about you or the world.

Sensitive: Spirited children are quick to respond and react to the slightest shifts in light, colour, smell, noise, texture. or space. (The tag in the back of their shirt can drive them crazy.) They can become easily overwhelmed when too much activity floods their senses. These kids can also pick up on moods and quickly absorb and internalize your feelings.

Perception: Instead of chopped celery, spirited children see little green rainbows. They notice everything, and life is one big, wonderful treasure hunt. Because they need to stop and look at everything, they take forever to do what they set out to do, if they can remember what it was.

Adaptability: No matter how warm it is, spirited children would rather wear their winter jackets in May than have to switch jackets. Change is extremely hard for them. They hate surprises or spur-of-the moment routine shifts. If you say it's time to leave the tree nursery and then decide to take the group to see a last-minute bush, you can end up with a child who stands firm and says, "No, I don't want to see it. I want to go, now!" Ending a game or craft is equally tough, because it requires a change from one activity to another.

Labels

Let's say you've identified a child in your group whom you think is spirited. How do you manage things to keep order, save the child's feelings, and maintain your sanity? First, realize that these children do not behave the way they do to make your life miserable. It's simply who they are; their socks really do fit wrong, the glue on their fingers really is unbearable, and there's no changing it. Accepting their temperament is the first step in accepting them as unique individuals.

The second step is to reorient our own perceptions of spirited children. When we label someone as "picky", for example, we cast negative overtones on the child. Such labels can severely damage budding self esteem and self-image. Labels also set up an immediate barrier to our objectivity and ability to help a spirited child solve a problem.

To illustrate, let's look at the list of labels in the box below to see if they give us a different perspective on spirited children.

I find the positive label list interesting, because it reflects what most parents hope their children become. We want our children to be able to solve problems in new and creative ways, an ability that drives every successful business venture. Scouting's promise, law, and motto commit children to holding high standards for themselves. And

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B.-P. would tell you that, to survive in the jungle - whether bush or concrete - you'd better be perceptive about your surroundings.

All leaders would like meetings to go exactly as planned, every child delighted with every craft and game and every child's face calm and lit by a big appreciative smile. Spirited children bring us back to reality very quickly. Unless we can see the strengths they bring to the group, their talents and abilities will consistently be overshadowed by our own bias based on the negative labels we have stuck on them.

Once we can see spirited children as highly intense individuals and not leader killers, we can begin to look at where they get their energy. In many cases, understanding how spirited children refuel or fizzle out can help us develop discipline tactics.

Extroverts & Introverts

Some psychology experts say people fall into two basic personality types. While all of us have both extrovert and introvert tendencies, it is useful to explore the strongest tendency in you and your spirited children. Mary Kurcinka lists these traits for spirited children.

Extrovert Children

- - outgoing and gregarious
- - enjoy being around people; energized rather than overwhelmed by being with people
- - want to tell you about their every experience and ideas immediately
- - think by talking (e.g. walk around saying, "I'm looking for the scissors" as they hunt for them). They need to talk in order to make decisions.
- - talk a lot; easily start conversations with people
- - hate being alone or feeling left out
- - can't imagine why you would want some privacy and always join you to "cheer you up"
- - let you know what they're thinking and feeling
- - need lots of verbal approval

Introvert Children

- - prefer to watch or listen before joining an activity

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- - enjoy doing things by themselves or with one or two special friends
- - become grouchy if around people too long, especially after school
- - find being with strangers more draining than being with family members or one close friend
- - refuse to discuss the days events until later, even days or weeks later
- - possess a strong sense of personal space; do not like people sitting too close or coming into their room
- - seem to enjoy sitting alone
- - may find it difficult to share their feelings with others
- - may talk a lot with family members but become quiet around outsiders

Extroverts get their energy from the outside. They need to be with, talk to, and hang around other people. Allowing them time to talk, air their feelings, and recount their experiences enables them to charge their batteries.

To maintain high energy levels, extroverts seek feedback and conversation. They want reassurance, response, and approval, not because they lack the self-esteem to make up their own minds, but to gather the energy they need to go on. Highly spirited extroverts will not notice they are talking out of turn or jabbering to their neighbour when they are supposed to be quiet.

On the other hand, introverts recharge themselves from the inside. They need time alone to be still. Too much chaos can send them into a tantrum. Physical space is very important they don't like being crowded and find too many people around draining. Introverts like to reflect on problems before talking about them. And they need uninterrupted time. Side distractions rob them of the energy they need to finish the task at hand.

So, what does all of this mean to you as a leader? First, when dealing with spirited children, you need to recognize your own tendency towards being an extrovert or introvert.

Let's say you're an introvert. It has been a hard day of nonstop phone calls, meetings,

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and demands. You'd like nothing better than to be alone with the paper and to tune out the world for a time. But you can't; it's Scout night. You put on your uniform, just relishing the thought of being locked in a room with 20 noisy people. When you arrive, the first person you meet is a spirited extrovert child who can't wait to tell you about what's happened to him over the past week, his new hobby, and some ideas he's thought up. You have no trouble understanding how astronauts cope with long periods of space travel.

Or let's assume you're an extrovert. You can't wait to get to Scouts where you can soak up all that youthful energy and sing a new song you've learned. You promised to sing a favourite song tonight, but your impulsive behaviour changed the rules and created a surprise, especially for the spirited child who came quite prepared to sing the old song you suggested. The situation that follows leaves you with a greater understanding of the satisfaction a boxer gets from a good go at the punching bag down at the gym.

Working With Them

Spirited children are very intense people who can provide either life or misery to your meeting, depending on how well you recognize their individual needs and abilities. Instead of attaching negative labels to them, look at their positive attributes and try to work them into your planning. Being accommodating does not mean "giving in" as an authority figure; it shows mature understanding and consideration.

Children can't help being who they are, and trying to force change or break their spirit will only create more disaster. Help them use words to explain their feelings and try to find ways to correct problems or find compromises.

Recognize that spirited children are not just "hyperactive". They are children who have a wider range and depth of feeling. You'll need great patience to avoid being sucked into the emotional whirlpool as you watch such a child fling off a rubber boot for the tenth time, screaming, "It doesn't feel right."

Finally, reflect on the personality type of your spirited children. Can you give the extroverts more jobs to do or have them help lead a

song? Can you spot when an introvert spirited child needs to be rescued from all the noise and confusion? How does your personality match with a particular spirited child? Maybe you need to send a talkative youngster over to an extrovert leader while you catch your breath after a hard day at work.

Next time we'll talk about how to deal with the individual character traits of spirited children and explore a process for coping with problems.

Resource: Raising Your Spirited Child, by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka: Harper Collins, 1991.

Negative Labels

- Demanding
- Unpredictable
- Loud
- Argumentative
- Stubborn
- Nosy
- Wild
- Oversensitive
- Anxious
- Explosive
- Whining
- Distractible

Esteem Building Labels

- Has high standards
- Creative problem solver
- Enthusiastic
- Committed
- Assertive, willing to achieve despite difficulties
- Curious
- Energetic
- Tenderhearted
- Cautious, careful
- Dramatic
- Analytical
- Perceptive