

Getting to Know Your Child

Your Child Is Unique

Every child has their own unique nature. Some children love to be cuddled. Some startle easily or cry and some fuss a lot. And some seem to be fine with anything. As children grow and mature, even more of these preferences emerge. For example, some children love to get messy and others want to be clean all the time. Some children prefer loose-fitting clothes, others like tight-fitting ones. And some children even prefer certain colors or shapes of food.

When a child is very young it can be difficult to figure out their preferences. For example, a child who only likes to eat foods in the shape of a circle (things like Cheerios and Ritz crackers) won't be able to tell you that until they learn the names of shapes. Even when a child is able to say they prefer circles, it may not be clear that they want all their foods to be round.

Parents often wonder if they will spoil their child if they accommodate their child's preferences. One way to think about this is to think about your own preferences. Do you like your coffee with a certain amount and kind of creamer? Do you cut the tags off your clothes? Do you prefer one brand of bread over another? If your child gets a balanced diet from eating things that are round, then work with it. It may be a bit unusual, but it isn't going to spoil your child. Instead, it shows that their needs matter.

Understanding Your Child's Temperament

There is no "right" temperament for children, but many people expect children to be light-hearted, fun-loving, and eager to do anything. Some children are carefree and relaxed, but others are more serious or reserved, even in familiar surroundings. When a child's temperament is different from what a parent expects, they may have difficulty relating to the child. When this happens, parents need to listen carefully and watch their child to learn how best to build a relationship (see box, "Natalie and Maria").

Recognizing Sensory Reactions

Nearly all children (and adults for that matter) have preferences. Some children are highly sensitive to sound, bright lights, or rough-and-tumble play, while others may need deep pressure, lots of spinning, and loud noises to wake up their senses. Some children (and adults!) prefer certain kinds of fabrics, avoid eating some foods because the texture is too crunchy or too soft, or need to have complete darkness to get restful sleep.

To learn about your child's sensitivities, watch for reactions and responses to different things. A child who covers their ears when they hear a siren and runs and hides when their baby sister cries may not be able to tolerate loud noises. Or if your child loves to swing the highest, spin fastest, or pound the loudest, they may be saying they need more sensory input. Pay attention to your child's reactions and do what you can to make their environment supportive (see box for more ideas).

Natalie and Maria

Maria loves having the radio and TV on all the time and enjoys having lots of friends around. Her daughter, Natalie, though, hates loud noises and chaotic situations.

Maria has noticed that when she takes Natalie to places where there is a lot of noise or activity, Natalie stays close and asks, "Can we leave soon?"

Maria has even noticed that when they play house, Natalie starts to cry or has a tantrum if Maria pretends to cry like a baby.

Maria knows that she and Natalie have different needs and knows that she must learn how to build a relationship with Natalie.

Now when they play house, Maria pretends to be a baby napping instead of a baby crying.

If Your Child Has Sensory Sensitivities

- Watch for signs of stress and help your child calm down if they are over-stimulated.
- Teach your child ways to self-soothe, like cuddling a soft toy or favorite blanket.
- Allow your child plenty of time to make choices; your child may not be able to make quick decisions.

