
Questions Most Frequently Asked About The Highly Active Child

Q What are the characteristics of a “highly active” child?

A A highly active child has a seemingly endless supply of energy and a very active temperament. The animated behavior of these children tends to frustrate and confuse parents to the point that parents may fear that there is something “wrong” with their child. However, high levels of activity are typical of many children. Almost every child is very active in some circumstances, and others may fit this description more frequently.

Although many children appear to be very energetic, there is no clinical description of the “highly active” child. Parents may describe these children as “constantly active” and even “intense” or “uncontrollable.” Or, to reflect the positive side of their children’s personalities, parents might describe them as “spirited,” “adventuresome,” or “determined.”

Q This sounds like a hyperactive child. What’s the difference?

A The highly active child does not necessarily have the disorder commonly referred to as “hyperactivity,” or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It also is important to note that an inattentive child doesn’t necessarily have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), which is similar to ADHD but without hyperactivity.

“Highly active” is a description of a child’s temperament. In contrast, hyperactivity is a specific diagnosable syndrome recognized by professionals as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. It is a behavioral disorder characterized by chronic problems with attention, impulsiveness and/or hyperactivity or restlessness that are inappropriate for a child’s age. Under normal conditions a very energetic or “highly active” child has the ability to control his behavior, whereas the hyperactive child may be able only to modify, but not fully control, his behavior.

Q Are there any behavioral differences between highly active boys and highly active girls?

A Yes, there are gender differences. The average boy is more active than the average girl, but there is considerable overlap—some girls are just as active and even more so than their male counterparts. The culture tends to be more permissive of high activity levels in boys than in girls, but, as stereotypes break down, these differences are likely to shrink as well. Parents should be especially cautious before deciding that high activity levels are a problem in girls. Studies of child development suggest that rough and tumble play leads to exploration, new experiences and the overcoming of fears, creating a basis for growth of knowledge about the environment. Girls are often cheated in this area if they are expected to sit sedately and quietly.

Q What causes my highly active child to be more energetic and excitable than her friends and classmates? Did I do anything to cause her spirited behavior?

A It is important for parents of highly active children to know that their high levels of energy are not caused by a disorder, neurological or otherwise. A highly active child has an energetic temperament, just as others may have more sedentary temperaments. Temperament refers to a person’s natural disposition and how a person responds to different situations. Recent research indicates that your child began life with certain inherited personality traits. She was born with her unique temperament, just as she was born with blue or brown eyes. The genes you have passed on to your child provide boundaries for the development of her temperament. However, there are environmental factors, such as education, that can be controlled, and others, such as luck, which cannot be controlled. These factors also can influence your child’s temperament and personality development.

Q Can a child's diet cause him to become excited or unusually energetic?

A Folklore linking certain foods, such as sucrose or table sugar, with very active behavior in children began in the early 1970s, when Dr. Benjamin Feingold proposed the theory that diet may adversely affect children's behavior. Parents who perceived that their children tended to become more active after consuming particular foods furthered this theory. Since that time, considerable research has been devoted to the subject of whether diet affects children's behavior. In over 20 studies, including those supported by the Food and Drug Administration, science has been unable to support claims that sugar affects children's behavior.

The latest research, as reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, also shows that there is little likelihood that children are affected by sugar. Meals were provided for children whose parents believed they were affected by sugar. Parents and teachers monitored their behavior on the special diet for several weeks, unaware of when the children had consumed sugar or artificial sweeteners. No adverse effects from either were recorded. Some parents and teachers even found sugar to have a calming effect, but this may have been coincidental.

Q My child is visibly more excited and energetic after eating a candy bar, soda, or cookies. How can this be explained?

A Children do, indeed, tend to become excited at special occasions, such as birthdays and Halloween. However, studies have found no evidence that the cause of your child's excitement is sweeteners. This energetic behavior is believed, instead, to result from the excitement of the occasion and from children's anticipation that a high level of exuberant behavior will be tolerated under these special circumstances. Parents are urged to consider the possibility that the permissive situations in which such foods are consumed, rather than the foods themselves, may be the contributing factor to increased levels of activity. Even on an ordinary day, a child who normally is denied sweets will become excited about having a rare treat. This behavior is understandable and to be expected.

Q Some people tell me I'm just imagining that my child is unusual, and that their children act just the same as mine. Could I be imagining a difference?

A Sometimes parents perceive their children to be more active than they truly are. Fatigue reduces many parents' ability to cope with a highly active child. Demands of the workplace, especially for dual-income families, and increased social responsibilities and pressures leave many parents exhausted at the end of the day.

In addition, now that Americans are having children later in life, many find it difficult to keep up with the fast pace of a young child. Understandably, many older parents don't have the energy that they had in their early twenties. They may already have a great number of professional responsibilities competing for their energy reserve. It is no surprise that children, whether they are highly active or not, seem to wear out burdened adults very quickly.

Q Can I help my child use her energy more effectively?

A Yes, you can make a difference! Because your child can control her energy output, you can help her channel it differently, rather than suppress her energy. You can adjust your parenting techniques to meet your child's temperamental needs. For example, if your child's level of activity rises during transitional periods, you should try not to surprise her with an unexpected change. Instead, prepare her in advance for a new situation or activity. Simple techniques can be highly effective. For example, give your child a 5-minute warning before it's time to switch to a new activity. Follow up with 3-minute and 1-minute warnings so your child has time to prepare herself for change.

You need to be aware of your child's personality and understand why she reacts to certain situations. Then do what you can to help her adapt.

Q My child becomes so disappointed when his expectations aren't met. How can I help him understand that things don't always turn out like we want them to?

A Highly active children tend to be very emotional and can be devastated when their expectations aren't met. Don't be dismissive of your child's feelings or act like his problem is silly. Rather, acknowledge your child's feelings of disappointment. "You're really disappointed that we couldn't go to the park today. I know it's really frustrating because you were counting on going." Then distract him by offering an alternate activity, and focus on doing the planned activity in the future. "Let's watch your video now, and try to

go to the park tomorrow.” Try to avoid making empty promises. When you break a promise to your child, there’s a good chance he will throw a temper tantrum.

Don’t become discouraged by your child’s insistence that his expectations be met. It can become an asset as an adult. Your child may be the one who always knows exactly what he wants and channels his high energy into attaining these goals.

Q I can’t avoid some situations in which my child must sit still. Is there anything I can do in advance to make these occasions more pleasant?

A Engage your child in physical activity before you leave for the doctor’s office or for a nice restaurant. Consider bringing coloring books or other appropriate materials to keep her occupied while confined to a seat. For example, when you fly to visit your child’s grandparents, plan, in advance, activities to be undertaken on the airplane. Tell your child how you’ll need her help to carry out some very important tasks. As soon as she is seated, you might want to make her responsible for coloring two pictures for grandma and grandpa. After lunch, you might need her to sort out a deck of playing cards according to shapes. Even very young children love to have important work to do, and it focuses their attention, helping them to sit still.

Q How can I help my highly active child get along better with his friends and classmates?

A Although all children are born with unique personalities, social skills are learned. Your child may need some extra attention to help him learn to interact with his peers. He might not be aware that his behavior sometimes bothers others. Teach him to notice the signals others give him when they are irritated by his actions, and to react accordingly. Teach him how to approach a group of children at an appropriate time, and not just to interrupt a game in actions. He can greet others with a simple “Hello,” or “Can I play with you?” At time of physical conflict, teach your child to calm down and talk things out with his peers.

If your child continues to have difficulty getting along with his peers, the clinical attention of a counselor or therapist who specializes in children may help him learn to interact more smoothly.

Q Will my child’s personality change as she grows older?

A Not necessarily, but your child’s behavior can become more manageable as she learns to channel her energy differently, which naturally happens as she grows older. While your child may become an adult with the same high level of energy, she can learn to adapt and direct her energy more maturely. She also will improve her social skills as she grows older and gains more experience interacting with others. Your child may be the one with the loud, infectious laugh in the movie theater or the high school student who participates in every extracurricular activity or stays up all night studying. As an adult, she has the potential to be an entrepreneurial go-getter, or she might put in an eleven-hour workday followed by a game of tennis.

She may find other adults who match her exuberant levels of energy and enjoy being in the company of such a live wire. As a mature adult, it will be her task to differentiate between situations in which her intense and energetic pace would be appropriate and those in which others would not appreciate it.

Q How can I help my highly active child be more successful in school?

A The first step in helping your child at school is to select a school that’s a good match for his temperament. Visit a school and talk to the principal about your child’s personality, and see if the school’s characteristics and style are compatible with it. See if children are required to sit for long periods of time, or if the emphasis is placed on working quietly. If so, that school probably is not a good match for your child. On the other hand, some classrooms might be too unstructured for your child. A balance of the two types of schools is best, with some structure so that your child learns to organize his activities and exert some self-control.

When problems arise, talk to your child’s instructor. Offer solutions that have worked for you or for other teachers in the past, and don’t be embarrassed to discuss the challenges with a school counselor.

Q Can my child use her high energy levels to her advantage?

A Yes! Your child doesn’t have a bad temperament, but, rather, a highly animated one. Like all other children, her personality has both positive and negative characteristics. By encouraging the development of your child’s more admirable qualities, you can help her be more successful in socializing, in

school, in her career—in all walks of life. Even more importantly, your child will be happier with herself.

Q How can I learn to live in harmony with my highly active child and most effectively meet the challenges he offers?

A In addition to helping your child modify his behavior, you can modify your response to him. You should learn to see your child in a positive light and focus on his strengths. Most importantly, you should let your child know what these positive traits are and encourage their development. You need to accept your child's personality for what it is, and put aside any unreasonable expectations you may have had for him. This will set the stage for a healthier relationship with your child.

In addition to understanding your child's temperament, you should also be aware of your own. While you help him moderate his behavior, you can adapt your own behavior to be more accepting and to present challenges that your child will be able to master.

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