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ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Temperament: Intensity of Reaction

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Discover parenting strategies that match a child's temperament, whether they are a "low reactor," or a "BIG reactor."

Low Reactors are children who seem less demanding than others. Low Reactors tend to:

- be quiet and rarely fuss;
- sleep more than average;
- show their emotions with only slight changes in facial expression, tone of voice, or body posture; and
- tolerate a lot of stimulation.

The fact that these children are less demanding, however, doesn't necessarily mean that they require less effort on the part of parents. On the contrary, you may have to work harder to attract and hold their attention.

At the other end of the spectrum are **Big Reactors** who tell the world how they feel in a voice that's loud and clear. Big Reactors tend to:

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- express their feelings with great intensity (for example, showing supreme happiness by squealing with delight and maybe expressing anger by shouting, throwing things, hitting, and biting); and
- react to physical stimulation intensely (for example, perhaps being unable to tolerate itchy tag on a T-shirt, the wrinkle in a sock, or an unpleasant smell).

For many children, intensity isn't an issue at all. Their reactions fall somewhere between Low and Big Reactors, and they tend to take things in stride. Their moods are fairly even. They smile when they're happy and complain, in a reasonable way, when they're not.

Thinking About Your Child

- How does my child react to sensory stimulation (sights, sounds, textures, smells, and tastes)?
- How much stimulation can my child handle? Does he react to the slightest bit of stimulation, does it take a lot to get him to respond, or are his reactions somewhere in between?
- Does my child express her feelings with high, moderate, or low intensity?
- How often do I find myself helping my child calm down?
- Is he a cuddly child or does he prefer protecting his physical space? What kinds of touch does he prefer or dislike? Does he react positively or negatively to specific clothing materials/fabrics, clothing tags, wrinkles in his socks?
- Is he a picky eater or will he eat anything? Will he only eat foods with certain textures or tastes? Does he seem sensitive to certain odors?
- What kinds of sounds does your child like? Is there particular music or tone of voice he prefers? Does he get easily distracted by, and perhaps startle or cry at sudden noises? Does he respond when you talk with him by making eye contact and vocalizing back?
- What does your child like to look at? Does he enjoy looking at lights, or do bright lights seem to upset him? Does he make eye contact when you are playing together?

Parenting Strategies for Low Reactors

- Tune things up to attract her attention. Watch your child's reactions to make sure she in engaged but not overexcited. Choose music with a dynamic beat. Engage your child in safe, rough-and-tumble play. Use a dramatic voice while reading. Be silly and creative.
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- Create interactive games. Try activities that involve taking turns so your child remains engaged, such as rolling a ball or passing a rattle back-and-forth.
- Get her body moving. Low-intensity children may be more responsive if they're physically engaged.
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- Find out what interests him. If your child sings, join in for a duet. If he dances, become his partner. Find out what interests him. If your child sings, join in for a duet. If he dances, become his partner. Create interactive games. Try activities that involve taking turns so your child remains engaged, such as rolling a ball or passing a rattle back-and-forth.
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Parenting Strategies for Big Reactors

- Tune things down. Music and lighting should be soft. Clothing should also be soft. And play should be fun, but not overstimulating.
- Offer physical comfort when your child is distressed. Hold her close, massage her back, rock her.
- Show that you understand him by validating his feelings. For example, use expressions such as I know it's hard for you to be in crowded, noisy places. Or, I know your feelings get so-o-o hurt.
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- Help your child problem-solve. Say: Tyler's birthday is probably going to be very noisy and crowded today. What can we do to make it more comfortable for you?
- Don't punish your child for who she is. Your child is not overreacting. Holding her close and validating her feelings can help your child calm down and feel safe and secure. When you have strong reactions, it is tough to learn how to manage them. But with your support, your child will learn good coping skills.
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