

Introversion & Extroversion: A Parent's Guide

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At least one in three children is an introvert. Being an introvert is NOT the same as being painfully shy, or withdrawn, or depressed, or slow, or lazy, or unmotivated. Just like hair, eye, or skin color, introversion and extroversion are genetically predetermined temperaments, though neither is immovable, and both are subject to modification based on environment, including the techniques of parenting.

Which is your child? An introvert or an extrovert? Which are you? If you don't know, you should, because the answers profoundly affect your relationship with your child, and their relationship with the world.

The Introvert-Extrovert Continuum

Our lives are shaped as profoundly by personality as by gender or race. And the single most important aspect of personality – the “north and south of temperament,” as one scientist puts it – is where we fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum.

Our place on this continuum influences our choice of friends and mates, and how we make conversation, resolve differences, thrive academically, seek socialness or solace, and show love. It affects the careers we choose and whether or not we succeed at them. It governs how likely we are to exercise, commit adultery, function well without sleep, learn from our mistakes, delay gratification, act impulsively, be a follower or a good leader, and to be thinkers or doers.

Whether we are an introvert or an extrovert is determined by our genes, and therefore reflected in our brain pathways, neurotransmitters, and the remote corners of our nervous system. When it comes to the “nature versus nurture” debate, while the answer is “both”, the more complete answer is “nature first and foremost, subject to some modification by nurture”. As a parent, you can no more transform an introverted child into an extrovert as you can transform a girl into a boy. They are who, and how, they are, and it's up to you to transform your parenting to *that* reality.

Introverts in America Today

It's difficult to be an introvert in America. Our media, our schools, even our historical vision of ourselves is based on some extrovert ideal. We're told that to be great is to be bold, to be happy is to be sociable, to be successful is to be driven, that the early bird gets the worm, that God helps those who help themselves (a quotation oft-mistaken to be from the Bible but actually uttered by Ben Franklin).

The ideal self is considered to be gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight. We see talkers as leaders, the faster talkers as the ones with the most (and best) ideas. In our business and in our politics, action is preferred to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, certainty to doubt. We don't truly value individuality...we value one *type* of individual, the kind who's comfortable “putting herself out there”, who favors quick decisions from the gut rather than considered decisions from the head.

Introversion – along with its cousins sensitivity, seriousness, and shyness – is now a second-class personality trait in America, somewhere between a disappointment and a pathology. Introverts living under the Extrovert Ideal are like women in a man's world, discounted because of a trait that goes to the core of who they are. Extroversion may be an appealing personality style, but we've turned it into an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform.

Contrary to our public myths, extroverts are NOT necessarily smarter than introverts, better at business (many studies suggest, in fact, that they're worse), more creative, better looking, more interesting, or more desirable as friends. Extroverts are just *different* from introverts – each temperament type has its strengths and weaknesses, its advantages and disadvantages. Many of history's most admired individuals (Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, Albert Einstein, to name but a very few) were introverts.

What Are the Adult Features of an Introvert?

Of course, there's no single profile of introversion or extroversion – both are a spectrum – but adult introverts have many of the following traits:

- Introverts feel “just right” with less stimulation, as when they sip wine with a close friend, solve a crossword puzzle, or read a book
- May have strong social skills and enjoy SMALL meetings and intimate dinner parties. Large meetings and parties make them wish they were at home in their pajamas.
- Tend to prefer one-on-one conversation to group activities
- While often finding it difficult to introduce himself or herself to strangers, the introvert often expresses their “real self” easily online
- Prefer to devote their social energies to close friends, colleagues, and family
- Tend to listen more than talk, and often feel as if they express themselves better in writing than in conversation
- Tend to have a horror of small talk, but enjoy deep, meaningful discussion
- Tend to avoid conflict
- Tend to avoid public speaking
- Tend to celebrate birthdays on a small scale, with only a few close friends and family
- Tend to work more slowly and deliberately, focusing on one task at a time, with mighty powers of concentration
- Tend to be relatively immune to the lures of wealth and fame
- Tend to prefer to work independently, and for the introvert solitude can be a catalyst to innovation
- Tend to prefer not to show or discuss their work or projects with others until finished
- Tend to need time throughout the day, or at the end of the day, of low stimulation for thinking and recharging
- Often highly “sensitive”, meaning more apt than the average person to be moved by (or pleasantly overwhelmed by) lyrics, a piece of art or music, a poem or story, or an act of extraordinary kindness.
- Also often quicker than others to feel sickened by violence and ugliness, and often less apt to want to watch horror movies, or movies with lots of violence.
- Tend to feel more connected to the joys and sorrows of the world, and in communion with writers and musicians they'll never meet in person
- Tend to have a very strong conscience, even from young childhood
- Tend to be thought of by others as more humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, and/or understated.

The word “introvert”, however, is *not* a synonym for hermit or misanthrope. Nor are introverts necessarily shy. Shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation, while introversion is a preference for environments that are not over-stimulating. Shyness is inherently painful, while introversion is not. Of course, one can be both shy and an introvert.

And even if you have every one of these traits, that doesn't mean your behavior is predictable across all circumstances. Most introverts can pose as extroverts for brief periods if called upon, especially if doing so furthers the work or cause important to the introvert.

What Are the Features of a Child Introvert?

Likewise, no single profile applies to child introverts. They may have many of the same traits as the adult introvert, and MAY also be:

- Thought of as shy, having just one or a few close friends
- Thought of as “needing to come out of their shell”, that noxious expression which fails to appreciate that some animals naturally carry shelter everywhere they go, and that some humans are just the same
- Thought of as being socially “awkward”, or “behind” their peers, or unable to “fit in”
- Possibly, and harshly, thought of as lazy, slow, boring, eccentric, and/or lacking motivation

Child introverts were usually “highly-reactive” as infants and toddlers, more likely colicky, or easily startled, or easily upset by new sensations or surroundings. In other words, even as very young children, they “felt” the world more deeply.

What Are the Features of an Adult Extrovert?

- Extroverts enjoy that extra bang that comes from activities such as meeting new people, partying with large groups of people, and cranking up the stereo
- Tend to be energized rather than exhausted by large or lengthy social gatherings
- Tend to tackle assignments quickly (though not necessarily thoroughly, or with due consideration)
- Tend to make fast (and sometimes rash) decisions, and are comfortable multi-tasking and risk-taking
- Tend to think out loud and on their feet; they prefer talking to listening, and rarely find themselves at a loss for words (though that may mean often blurting out things they never meant to say)
- Tend to enjoy the “thrill of the chase” for rewards like money and status
- Tend to be the persons who add life to the party, and who laugh generously at your jokes
- Tend to be assertive, dominant, and in great need of company
- Tend to be comfortable with conflict, but not with solitude
- Tend to be thought of by others as chatty, outspoken, leader-material, overtly expressive, spellbinding, life-loving, energetic

So What Is The Biologic Basis For Introversion & Extroversion?

Again, **temperament** (inborn, biologically based behavioral and emotional patterns that are observable in infancy and early childhood) is genetically pre-determined, whereas **personality** (the complex brew that emerges after cultural influence and personal experience are thrown into the mix) is not.

Decades of research and imaging studies have revealed that temperament resides in the potent organ in the brain known as the **amygdala**. The amygdala is located deep in the limbic system, an ancient brain network found even in primitive animals. This network – sometimes called the “emotional brain” – underlies many of the basic instincts we share with these animals, such as sex drive, appetite, and fear.

The amygdala serves as the brain's emotional switchboard, receiving information from the senses and then signaling the rest of the brain and nervous system how to respond. One of its functions is to instantly detect new or threatening things in the environment, and trigger the fight-or-flight response.

In introverts, the amygdala is "excitable", whereas in extroverts the amygdala is less moved by novelty. The more reactive a child's amygdala, the higher his heart rate is likely to be, the more widely dilated his eyes, the tighter his vocal cords, the more cortisol (a stress hormone) in his saliva, and the more jangled he's likely to feel when he confronts something new and, to him, over-stimulating: an amusement park, a crowded birthday party, the first day of school, a speech in front of the class.

High-reactive kids pay more "alert attention" to people and things. They process things a little more deeply, and are more likely to compare choices before making a decision. They often concentrate with unusual intensity, feel more intense guilt and sorrow, and are more concerned about fairness and justice in social situations.

Of course, temperament, behavior, and personality are all very complex, and cannot be reduced to simple causes and explanations. But if parents could understand and accept that their child's introversion has a biologic basis, they'd be more likely to adapt their own responses to the child's behavior...a win-win for everyone.

For more about this fascinating topic, we urge that you read the wonderfully researched and presented book *Quiet*, by Susan Cain, available at bookstores everywhere.