



Supporting a Child Who Is Slow to Warm Up

Jordan takes his 18-month-old, Ruben, to another child's birthday party. Ruben resists going into the party room (but peeks in every once in a while). Jordan coaxes Ruben to enter, but Ruben refuses to play with the other children. He just wants to sit on dad's lap and watch.

If this story sounds familiar, you're not alone. There are many, many children who are shy or "slow to warm up," meaning they are uneasy or cautious in new situations or with unfamiliar people. As babies, they didn't like being held by just anyone; they wanted to be cuddled by only a few special, trusted people. As toddlers, they stay on the "sidelines" for a while, watching what others are doing until they feel comfortable enough to join in. They may have a difficult time with changes like a new child care provider, and protest when a relative they don't see often offers a big hug.

To Think About

No two children or families are alike. Thinking about the following questions can help you apply the information below to your own child and family.

- How would you describe your temperament? What's it like for you to meet new people or deal with a new situation?
- How are you similar to or different from your child in this way? How do these similarities or differences impact your relationship?

Temperament and the Slow-to-Warm-Up Child

Every child has his own way of approaching the world, which we call "temperament." Temperament is not something your child chooses, nor is it something that you created. There is not a "right" or "wrong" or "better" or "worse" temperament. Each temperamental characteristic has its own delights and challenges.

A child's approach to new situations and unfamiliar people is one very important temperament characteristic. The fact is that some children are naturally more comfortable in new situations and jump right in, whereas others are more cautious. They need time and support from caring adults to feel comfortable in unfamiliar situations. At the same time, these children are often very careful observers who learn a lot from what they see, and who may be more inclined to think through situations before they act—an important skill.

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What You Can Do

Let your child know that you love and accept her. Respect her needs, when you can. For example, keep her birthdays small with only a few close friends instead of that big bash with 15 kids and a clown.

Avoid labels. Saying “don’t be so shy” is like saying, “Don’t be yourself.”

Look for opportunities to build your child’s self-confidence. Notice your child’s interests, successes, skills, and milestones. Play together doing things your child enjoys.

Make time for your child to warm up to new caregivers. Your child may never be the kid who runs right into the babysitter’s arms as you are going out the door. So plan ahead to help your child get acquainted and comfortable with the caregiver.

Give notice about new people, events, and places. Let your child know that her Uncle Bob is coming to visit, her friend’s birthday is later that afternoon, or that she is moving to a new room at child care next week. Letting your child know what to expect gives her a sense of control, which can reduce her anxiety.

Put what you think your child is feeling into words: “You are watching Marco build the castle with blocks. Want to see if we can join in?”

Host friends and family at your home. Getting together with family and friends gives children an opportunity to practice social skills in a familiar, safe setting.

Read books about friendships. Some good books to share with babies and toddlers include: *Little Blue and Little Yellow* (Leo Lionni), *Gossie and Gertie* (Olivier Dunrea), *My Friends* (Taro Gomi), or *How Do Dinosaurs Play With Their Friends?* (Jane Yolen).

Be a role model. When you greet friends during a walk in the neighborhood, or chat with the nurse at the doctor’s office, you are helping your child learn how to feel comfortable and engage with new people.

Trust your instincts. If you are concerned about your child’s ability to engage in and enjoy social interaction, seek guidance from her health care provider or a child development specialist.

**For more information on slow-to-warm-up children,
visit:www.zerotothree.org/challenges**

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