



**Emotional Learning Styles:
A Guide for Parents, Clinicians, Educators, and Mentors
Stanley I. Greenspan M.D.*
and
Jacob C. Greenspan
The Floortime Center**

*Taken from a draft article by Dr. Greenspan

**Stanley I. Greenspan MD Inc. ©2012
All Rights Reserved**

**Emotional Learning Styles:
A Guide for Parents, Clinicians, Educators, and Mentors**

Too sensitive, too defiant, too self-absorbed, too rambunctious, too inattentive. Lots of kids fit these personality styles. The adults in their lives realize that many of these children face challenges in making friends, being involved with family members, and enjoying school. The following questionnaire will help identify five basic learning styles common among children. The succeeding section will provide practical suggestions for increasing learning opportunities that work with each style. Understanding these styles will help parents, clinicians, educators, and mentors tailor a child’s environment to improve learning and increase flexibility and positive interactions with the world.

The Questionnaire

Rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is the least and 5 is the most. Total the scores for each style. The maximum is 25. The closer the total is to 25, the more the style fits the individual child.

- 1- Not at all
- 2- Sometimes
- 3- A moderate amount of the time
- 4- A great deal of the time
- 5- All the time

The Sensitive Child

- Is very responsive to other individuals’ overtures; is tuned in Score_____
 - Is emotionally and physically reactive and therefore can become easily overloaded, especially in noisy, crowded places (such as a classroom) or while in emotional situations (e.g., during a family argument) or simply when the environment is filled with commotion. Score_____
 - Can be shy and cautious in general, or because of the tendency to be overloaded by transitions or when exposed to new sensory and emotional experiences. Score_____
 - Can be upset or overwhelmed by high-pitched or loud sounds, or motorized ones (vacuum cleaners, blenders, etc.). Score_____
 - May be sensitive to many sensations, including bright lights, cold or hot temperatures, movement in space, or different kinds of touches (light, tickly strokes, the rub of clothing labels, hair or teeth brushing). Score_____
- TOTAL SCORE _____

The Defiant Child

- Has strong opinions; can stake out clear positions. Can be quite original and systematic in his approach. Score_____
- Likes to have his own way and therefore tends to argue and get into Score_____

debates and power struggles.

- Can have a very sensitive underlying nature and therefore likes to control most aspects of life (clothing, temperature, types of activities, food, schedules, etc.). Score_____
- Tends to be negative, especially with new experiences. “No!”, “I don’t want to” and “I don’t like that” are favorite expressions. Score_____
- Likes to win and dominate and gets upset if he can’t. Score_____

TOTAL SCORE _____

The Self-Absorbed Child

- Tends to prefer to figure things out on her own. Enjoys, for example, creating elaborate fantasies or pondering weighty questions. Score_____
- Can enjoy playing by herself (for example, a younger child Involved in pretend play, or an older child absorbed in reading). Score_____
- Doesn’t register sounds or sights easily, due to a general under-reaction to external stimuli. May appear to tune others out and become especially absorbed in such activities as playing computer games or watching TV. Score_____
- Tends to use these kinds of self-absorbed activities, or avoidance, as a way of escaping from difficult challenges. These challenges can be emotional (feelings of disappointment, frustration, or anger, for example) or can arise from certain types of difficult physical or intellectual activities. Score_____
- Tends to have low muscle tone (looser rather than tighter muscle structure) and difficulty with complex, multi-step physical activities that require stamina and persistence, as well as with planning. Score_____

TOTAL SCORE _____

The Active, Explorative, Craving Child

- Is adventuresome and seeks out sensory experiences by touching, running, jumping, exploring, and the like. Score_____
- Tends to be very active. Score_____

- Has difficulty modulating activity—for example, switching from fast to medium speed, then to slow and back to medium again; or adjusting an activity level to the particular situation at hand. Often neither sufficiently careful nor cautious. Score _____
- Tends to be fearless. Score _____
- Tends to be insensitive to pain and other sensory experiences. Score _____

TOTAL SCORE _____

The Inattentive Child

- Has difficulty completing multi-step, complex tasks on his own, such as homework, directions on tests or assignments, or completing complicated, multi-part chores. Score _____
- Has difficulty with planning ahead, such as organizing a day when homework, play, and family time are all part of the mix. Score _____
- Has difficulty with figuring out consequences of actions, and using such understanding to make subtle judgments. Score _____
- Has difficulty in copying shapes or complex designs, such as triangles, squares, diamonds, or combinations of these. Likewise, has difficulty imitating or copying complex actions. May have difficulty with negotiating physical space—hovering too close to people, for example. Score _____
- Has difficulty concentrating and persisting unless motivation is exceedingly high. He may daydream in class, or easily get distracted from doing homework. Score _____

TOTAL SCORE _____

The Child with Mixed Styles

There is no predominant trend. The child seems to have some combination of the sensitive, defiant, self-absorbed, craving, or inattentive styles. Sometimes one style may be dominant, although others may predictably arise on certain occasions. For example, a child may typically be sensitive and tuned-in, but sometimes use defiance and self-absorption. Or she may be active and craving and also be over-sensitive to certain kinds of sounds.

Strategies for Learning and Coping

Most of us need to find a way of succeeding at home, at school, or on the sports field that fits into our individual emotional learning style. The five types of children described above are no exception. In general, verbalizing feelings, anticipating challenging situations, and exploring options will enhance each child's ability to learn. If parents, teachers, clinicians, and mentors understand and respect each child's style and work with it, the child will become more flexible and will more readily adapt to various learning experiences.

The Sensitive Child learns best:

- in a soothing and organized atmosphere
- using small steps
- by experiencing a sense of success
- when being assertiveness and taking initiation

Many of the sensations and activities around this child are often too much for him to handle. He can get overloaded quickly. From the outset he needs an atmosphere of extra soothing and organization to keep all these moving parts from overwhelming him.

When overloaded, this child's easiest escape route is to shut down and avoid the load. The key to his learning is to start in small steps, whether the lesson is learning how to kick a soccer ball or how to read. The step should be small enough so that the child can master it without getting overwhelmed. His mastery will create the motivation to continue and not shut down. Speed of learning shouldn't be a factor. Small steps accomplished in a fun and caring atmosphere will build and create knowledge.

As the sensitive child feels more competent in an area, he can be more assertive about learning and about controlling situations that overload him. As he avoids less and engages with the world more, he will have opportunities to improve weaknesses while using his natural strengths.

In general, soothing helps with oversensitivity, small steps help with difficulty in transitions and motivation, and a sense of success and increased assertiveness modulate the child's tendency to become cautious and avoidant.

The Defiant Child learns best:

- by collaborating in the design of an activity
- when sharing power and decision-making
- when experiencing a high success rate
- by having options

Power struggles, winning, and dominating characterize the defiant child. These tactics help her avoid the dilemma of the oversensitive child—being overloaded—but they make it difficult for her to cooperate. What is the best way to work with her so she can learn? Her own coping strategies contain the solution.

The defiant child needs to be a partner in designing the learning task. If she has to write an essay, let her help to choose the topic. If she's learning how to dribble a basketball, let her choose among different techniques. To improve the child's learning, the emphasis is on sharing power and decision-making through creating options and choices.

Most importantly, this child, who keeps herself organized through winning and dominating, will need to 'win' more of the time during the early learning stages. Some children only need to succeed 60% of the time to be motivated to learn. This child needs to experience an 80 - 90% success rate. Consequently, the task has to be broken down into simple steps, so that with support and instruction, the child can achieve a high mastery rate.

Defiant children like to say "No." It is important not take the negativity at face value, or a power struggle will likely ensue. Instead, recognize it as a sign that the child is feeling overloaded by a new situation or fearful of humiliation. A better alternative is to empathize with her and to offer options. This type of child needs to collaborate on a design that leads to a high probability of success.

The Self-Absorbed Child learns best:

- in an engaging world
- by active, rather than passive, learning
- when wooed into showing more initiative
- by getting a sense of impact on the world

The self-absorbed child likes to escape into his own thoughts. The world around him needs to counter that tendency by enticing him with an energetic, engaging, and emotional presence. This child needs to be pulled in by a top sergeant-type coach of the warm-and-fuzzy variety. The coach should use a rich variety of vocal cadences and intonations and compelling physical activity. This approach would probably overwhelm the sensitive child and antagonize the defiant child, but the self-absorbed child will thrive by being drawn into a wider world.

Everyone learns best by doing, but this type of child needs to be involved in the *physical* act of doing almost all of the time. The passive learning mode doesn't work because it is the perfect setting for daydreaming and being self-absorbed. Active learning—drawing a picture of Washington crossing the Delaware rather than memorizing facts about the event, or using clay to shape numbers or letters rather than reciting them—will keep the self-absorbed child involved in school activities.

Winning isn't so important to the self-absorbed child. But seeing changes in the world as a consequence of his actions is. When he goes bowling, knocking down a few pins is important—not because of the score, but because he has just done something that has made the world more interesting to him.

Knocking down more pins is simply a bonus. For the same reason, feedback is critical. “Wow, look at the pins you knocked down!” keeps him alert and engaged with the world. This type of child must be encouraged to *initiate* actions and make things happen. Once the world is made more interesting to him, he’s more likely to welcome interaction.

The Active, Craving Child learns best:

- with modulation and regulation
- in warm, empathic relationships
- when reflecting on ideas and feelings

This type of child craves activity and lots of sensory input. To improve learning, she needs to turn her high-energy level into a more modulated one. Helping her to regulate her activity-seeking style is the key. Rather than always running full-tilt, she should be encouraged to change up the pace and the activity—from full speed to slow motion, medium speed, and slow speed. Playing copy-cat games that require modulation are good practice. Take a Simon Says game: “Simon Says walk slowly. ... Go fast. No, Simon didn’t say to go fast!” The child has to stop right away. To play the game, she has to control and modulate her motion.

The active, craving child needs contact with her sensory environment (sights, sound, touch, smell, taste). Changing these inputs along with the pace, where she has to modulation her energy level and movement, will help keep her emotionally involved.

Because this child is so active, she can be impersonal. She will learn best when in a close relationship with lots of warmth, understanding, and empathy. But that should not deter adults from providing firm structure and setting limits, if needed. The limits, however, should be set with warmth and gentleness, just as a big teddy bear would do. They should not restrict her from letting out her energy.

Her preference for physical activity makes this type of child shy away from talking about her intentions and feelings. She needs practice explaining the logic of her actions. For example, she can practice by reflecting on and analyzing a new strategy for a soccer game. Or at school, she can explain why she weighed in on a particular side of a debate. It isn’t enough for her to simply do something well; to improve her ability to modulate and regulate, the active, craving child needs to learn to reflect on her own behavior in a learning environment.

The Inattentive Child learns best:

- when his emotional desire is tapped
- by practicing planning and doing
- when teaching someone else
- by increasing assertiveness

The inattentive child has trouble planning long sequences. This is the child who often forgets his homework assignment. If he manages to bring the assignment home, he forgets to hand it in. This

pattern seems to go on and on, regardless of interventions. Interestingly, though, he doesn't forget about the stops at two different grocery stores to buy the ingredients for a hot fudge sundae, his favorite dessert. What's the difference?

The difference is emotional desire. Parents and mentors have seen that when an inattentive child is highly motivated, he does better at planning and sequencing. Even for a child with poor planning skills, his pleasure in eating a hot fudge sundae will constantly bubble up as a compelling mental image. Without the ability to plan the action sequence, the desire sustains the motivation to complete the task. Homework doesn't create this kind of bubble. The inattentive child needs to rely on something else.

Most of us have an "automatic pilot" that keeps us on track for those tasks that don't fall under the compelling hot fudge sundae category. It's our ability to sequence and plan that simply carries us along. An unmotivated child with good sequential memory and planning abilities, as a matter of course, brings his homework assignment home, does it, and hands it in. It's not a matter of wanting to do it; it's a matter of remembering and just getting it done—operating on a kind of automatic pilot. On the other hand, the child who doesn't have solid sequencing skills and can't easily do multi-step tasks has to think through and be motivated to do each step along the way. This child might finish dinner and start to watch TV. When asked "Don't you have any homework?" he's likely—and truthfully—to respond with "Oh, I forgot." With inattentive children, it is a question of 'out of sight, out of mind'. There's no automatic pilot lit because the child has real difficulty in keeping an action plan in mind.

Very motivating teachers and coaches have the ability to do better with inattentive children because they are able to spark a child's energy and emotion, or desire. They create the equivalent of hot fudge sundaes that connect the steps in a complex plan to achieve a desire. Sometimes they use positive regard, sometimes firm-but-kind limits, or both.

The inattentive child needs to combine planning and doing. For him it isn't enough to hear instructions, he needs to see them in steps or a diagram, and then practice. This will create a mental image of the sequence of steps and consolidate the sequences in his mind. In doing math or writing an essay, for instance, the more the child associates a sense of mastery, excitement, and satisfaction with understanding each step, the more likely he is to remember these steps. *The best way to practice is for him to teach them to someone else.*

Once this child recognizes that he has a hard time remembering certain sequences, he can invent his own personal tools to keep on track. This knack deserves encouragement. An assertive, take-charge orientation will put the inattentive child on the path to active mastery.

The Child with Mixed Styles

The child whose learning style has mixed features may make use of many of the suggestions under each type discussed above. A high score in any one category, however, indicates that those traits are more important factors in the child's learning style. It is important to think about styles that appear

consistently, rather than those that are less frequent. In certain situations, such as great stress, many of us can exhibit a variety of emotional learning styles and could get a few points in each of these categories.

Assess an Underlying Problem by:

- thinking about your child's strengths and weaknesses

Many factors go into making us who we are and creating our unique personal styles. The same is true of learning styles. But, with learning styles, one factor predominates. That is, how we experience sensation and movement. We witness it every day. Mathematicians and artists and designers rely on a visual-spatial sense. They have an acute sensitivity to spatial relationships and direction. Athletes can execute complex footwork and body movement and get feedback from their bodies to feel every detail, our 'physical response sense.' Good writers, who integrate words and meaning creatively, excel at auditory processing.

Sound, visual-spatial, touch, taste, smell and movement are keys to learning styles. How they all fit together to affect our learning is still being discovered. No one quite understands why theoretical physicists are often excellent musicians. Somehow their brains integrate certain sensory experiences that produce abilities in seemingly unrelated areas.

In all of us, strengths are frequently balanced by weaknesses. At the root of the different learning styles described in this article are difficulties in processing sensations. The sensitive child gets overloaded with too much sensory input; the defiant child reacts before she gets overloaded; the self-absorbed child is underwhelmed by sensations; the active, craving child needs lots of sensory input; the inattentive child can't quite decipher the sensory information that comes in.

The recommendations for learning styles create a supportive sensory environment. Figuring out the sensory problem adds to this solution.