Tommy reads it in a book, “What’s your sign?” He tries the line on the fresh girl who sits next to him in science. “As if...” She dismisses him, wrinkling her nose.

Beyond astrology, Tommy gropes for the answer to “What’s this girl like?” Predictable? Intense? Active? Easy-going? Serious? Busy on Saturday? He tries to gauge their compatibility, as well as her approachability.

While astrology looks to the zodiac in interpreting human affairs, nursing and behavioral research offer something more earthly – temperament profiles.

Temperament is each person’s first and most natural way of responding to the world. It can offer an understanding of the personal characteristics and inborn behavior styles of just about everyone.

“It’s important to understand the difference between temperament, which is a behavioral style, and misbehavior,” says Nancy Melvin, professor of nursing at Arizona State University. Melvin heads the Temperament Intervention for Parents Study (TIPS).

For instance, Jessica’s parents can stop worrying about her shyness. The key is to understand how and when she acts shy, and how that behavior can become a positive aspect of her life. Being timid is a good trait for a girl meeting a stranger on the playground, but it may not garner an A-plus in a classroom discussion.

Or, picture a little boy with an abundance of energy, so much energy that he jumps on the couch, runs around the dinner table, and throws his toys. He’s been cooped up all day. His frustrated mother sends him to his room. However, a trip to the park where he could run, jump, and scream probably would have done more good, especially if this little boy had learned to tell his mother “I need to go to the park” before he acted up. Both mother and son could have discerned a temperament issue, a high activity level, from misbehavior and found a happy solution.

Misbehavior comes into play when, for example, a child throws a fit to get an adult into handing over a previously denied cookie. The outbreak becomes a temperament issue when it reflects irregular eating or sleeping patterns.

“One way to understand why a child disobeys is to think of behavior problems as a symptom of the ‘fit’ between a parenting approach and a child’s temperament,” Melvin says.

For instance, the energetic little boy mentioned earlier is being asked to do something that doesn’t fit his temperament. Highly active children can get especially restless and frustrated on days when they have to stay indoors, and they may act up before considering the consequences.

By listening to his statement, “I need to go to the park,” or suggesting the same, the mother matches her parenting strategy to the boy’s needs. He gets to work off some pent-up energy, and she can come back to a peaceful apartment.

Punishing the boy by sending him to his room could have started a vicious cycle. The son would have reacted negatively to being cooped up longer and in an even smaller space.

“The same type of behavior will soon happen again,” Melvin says. “Over time, punishment becomes less and less effective and a child can become more and more disobedient.”

Aligning parental strategies with a child’s temperament achieves what researchers label “goodness of fit.” Acknowledging a child’s temperament allows parents to circumvent recurring battles and focus on fundamentals that will carry a happier, healthier child into school and society at large.

The stakes are high. An understanding of temperament can enhance the parent-child relationship. This may prevent emotional disturbances that can take root during infancy and grow unchecked until a child encounters problems in school at age 6.

“All the things that kids fuss over or do well exhibit their temperaments,” says pediatric nurse practitioner Diana Jacobson. “Showing respect for a child’s individuality can be hard for parents, especially if they were raised in a different way, but it can create harmony in the household.”
The entire family was working in the front yard when pediatric nurse Shirley Rees-McGee drove up. A little boy—the subject of her visit—rode his bike round and round. “OK, the nurse is here,” called the mother. “We need to go inside and talk with her.” He was off his bike and into a tantrum in a flash. He even beat on the family car with a bat. “That is one of his challenging temperament traits I observed on the spot.” Rees-McGee worked among 15 pediatric nurses in the Temperament Intervention for Parents Study (tips). More than 600 Arizona families with preschool-age children volunteered for the research in less than two years. Some of the parents wanted help with their challenging or spirited youngsters. Others simply hungered for information. Across the board, parents said, “I wish I had known this before.” The first step was identifying their children’s temperaments, as well as their own. To create a temperament profile, they rated their children in the following 10 categories.

1. Sensory threshold: How sensitive a child is to each of the senses—touch, taste, smell, hearing and vision. For instance, a child with a low sensory threshold may refuse to wear certain clothes because they “feel funny.” In contrast, a child with a high sensory threshold will be able to wear almost anything, even tight-fitting clothes with itchy tags.

2. Activity: The amount of physical energy that tends to drive a child’s behavior. Highly active children get fidgety when asked to sit still, feel restless on days they have to stay inside and act impulsively. Children with low activity levels move at a slower pace and prefer inactive pastimes, such as coloring, playing quietly with toys or watching TV.

3. Intensity: How much energy and strength a child uses to express emotions. Some children are loud or dramatic, while others react quietly and respond with reserve.

4. Rhythmicity/Regularity: The predictability of sleep, hunger, and elimination patterns. A child with irregular patterns tends to get tired or hungry at different times each day. A highly regular child is predictable and can get onto schedules quickly.

5. Adaptability: How much time a child needs to adjust to people or circumstances. Children who adapt slowly can act stubborn, strong willed, or headstrong. Children who adapt fast tend to be followers, compliant, and cooperative.

6. Mood: The way a child generally views the world—the amount of pleasant, joyful, and friendly behavior as contrasted with unpleasant, crying, and unfriendly behavior. Negative-mood children see the world through realistic or pessimistic lenses. Positive-mood children note the favorable side of things, sometimes missing dangers.

7. Approach/Withdrawal: How a child responds to a new experience, such as meeting a person, tasting a food, or being in an unusual situation. Approaching children jump right in. Withdrawing children hold back cautiously until they feel comfortable.

8. Persistence: How a child responds when something becomes difficult. Low persistence children become frustrated, ask for help quickly or simply give up. High persistence children tend to keep trying even when a task goes beyond their skill level.

9. Distractibility: How easily a child’s attention is distracted by things happening around him or her. Highly distractible children have short attention spans and can get sidetracked easily. Low-distractibility children can focus on what they are doing and might not notice things around them.

10. Emotional sensitivity: How easily a child displays emotions, such as hurt, embarrassment, worry, sorrow, empathy, or fear. On a scale of one to five, most children will rate very high or very low on at least one, but no more than seven, of the temperament traits. The more extreme the ratings, the more challenging the child will be to raise. Identifying temperament traits allows parents to accommodate their children’s needs and channel inborn qualities in positive directions.

While it may seem difficult to find anything positive in a little boy beating on the family car with a bat, none of the temperament traits, high or low, is patently negative. The challenging little boy could have had his tantrum defused with a 15-minute warning, “We’re going to go inside to talk with nurse in 15 minutes.” ... likely will grow into teenagers who stick to their morals—stubborn and independent when pressured by peers. Incidentally, temperament information also can be useful in understanding the behavior of parents, spouses, co-workers, and other individuals.

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“One of the main things is to teach the parents to plan for success, and to anticipate what their child’s needs will be in any given situation.”—Diana Jacobson

“Emotional sensitivity: How easily a child displays emotions, such as hurt, embarrassment, worry, sorrow, empathy, or fear.”—Dr. John菠萝
However, temperament information isn’t just for parents. It offers nurses, teachers, pediatricians, counselors, psychologists, and others who work in education, health, or related professions a clearer picture of how children respond to their environments.

Casting the temperament net, as Melvin calls disseminating temperament education, can only gain importance as increasing numbers of children spend as much time in school and day care as they do with their parents.

“Pediatric nurses in the primary care and school settings are in a valuable position to identify and provide interventions to families,” Melvin says. “They are the health-care person most likely to hear about behavior problems in the early stages.”

Health maintenance organizations, such as Cigna in Phoenix and California’s Kaiser, have embraced nurse-based temperament counseling programs because they can reduce the number of pediatrician visits needed and cut health-care costs for children.

Mothers and fathers often look to nurses for instructions and counseling. But forget the big folks, kids can benefit from temperament information, too. Such information can empower them within their families, schools, and pediatricians’ clinics.

“I think it’s valuable for children to learn about their own temperament profiles so they can tell people what they need,” says Shirley Rees-McGee, project director.

Temperament doesn’t offer one-size-fits-all parenting. Even handling the same behavior issue with two siblings may require different parenting approaches. A cautious child may need only one warning about stranger danger, while an approaching, active child will require constant reminders.

Further, the parents’ temperaments enter the mix. A father might mesh well with an active, responsive son, but find a highly sensitive, less responsive boy frustrating.

“Many times parents have developed a strategy themselves without realizing why it works so well,” Jacobson says. “We reinforce these management strategies because parents know more about their children than anyone else.”

Jacobson and the 14 other pediatric nurses involved in the ASU temperament study nonetheless witnessed parents’ repeated “Ahaaaa” reactions. For some mothers and fathers, understanding their children’s temperaments relieved the guilt associated with embarrassing behaviors.

“TIPS project director.

She points to her daughter as an example. The girl is slow to adapt, and has learned to say, “Mommy, you are always rushing me. I need more time,” to her highly active mother.

“Temperament has helped me and my husband, too,” Rees-McGee says. “He’s like my little girl, and I used to get so angry with him. Now, he tries to move a little, and so do I.”

Temperament doesn’t hold the magic formula for living happily ever after, but Melvin’s research shows how it can prevent problems from escalating to crises.

“It explains how, not why, people respond to the 10 dimensions,” Jacobson says. Couch-potato parents began to understand their active, intense children, and vice versa.

For other parents, matching temperament information with their child proved doubly reassuring. They were not the only parents dealing with such spirited, challenging children. Comments included, “He wasn’t quite as intense as I thought he was.” Or, “Now, I’m not constantly wondering, ‘Are we on track?’”

The nurses intervened to help families achieve good

time. Common interventions addressed managing mealtimes and bedtimes, getting dressed, whining, and even keeping easy-going children from being overlooked.

“One of the main things is to teach the parents to plan for success, and to anticipate what their child’s needs will be in any given situation,” Jacobson says.

For example, taking a shy, cautious child to meet relatives for the first time can set up a child for failure, unless parents anticipate the situation and shield their child from being bombarded by too many people too rapidly.

“I would like to see temperament education used as part of routine well-child care,” Jacobson says. “It should be just like talking about developmental milestones and what foods to start throughout a child’s infancy.”