

Ask Nurse Rona: Keeping up with Spirited Kids

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Q: My 5-year-old son as been referred to as “spirited.” He’s active and loves to play outside, and isn’t great at following directions. I’m not sure how to keep him occupied and out of trouble. With winter vacation around the corner, I’m already worn out just thinking about school being out.

A: Children come into the world with different temperaments. Some kids are on the go all of the time, while others are cautious and happy to sit and observe. Knowing your child’s behavioral style (and your own) can help you plan for each day, and for the holidays.

Spirited children are often high energy, intense, easily frustrated, and sometimes slow to adapt to transitions and changes. Their high energy can be fun but can also get them into trouble when adults expect them to be calm. High intensity can be seen as enthusiasm or over-reaction, and strong feelings can easily turn into tears or tantrums. Spirited kids challenge adults when limits are being set and transitions are required. Here are some ideas for living with and loving spirited kids.

Direct high energy into fun and creative activities:

- Set up an environment inside and outside, that allows your son to use his energy to build forts, work with clay, play ball, or dance around the house.
- High-energy kids sometimes love to help with chores like raking leaves or sweeping. If he wants to earn a little extra money for the holidays, you may even want to pay him to do some housework or help you clean the garage. Let him know how much you appreciate his help.
- Plan trips to places like the Bay Area Discovery Museum, regional parks, BART rides, or the ferry or cable cars. If you can’t get outdoors, put up a tent in the living room, or use sheets for building a fort. Making up stories and acting them out is something spirited kids often love to do.

Plan for transitions and changes:

- Be sure to give warnings when it’s getting close to the time you’ll have to leave the park, or a friend’s house. Don’t surprise your son with a sudden, “Time to go now!” Even when it’s been a great day, a spirited child might “melt down” when it’s time to stop and go home.
- Remind him that he has strong feelings and that you understand. Of course you still have to do what’s needed.

Sleep and healthy meals make a difference:

- Make sure your child gets enough sleep. When active children don’t sleep enough they tend to get irritable, which will have consequences for the entire family. Reduce stimulating activities as bedtime approaches, and a consistent bedtime routine really does help.
- Plan for a good breakfast, and frequent healthy snacks. Spirited kids are on the go and may not realize they’re hungry. Hunger can cause them to be grouchy.

Reaching out to others:

- If there’s an older neighborhood child who you like, see if she would like to be a “big sister” and come over and play with your son while you’re home and getting a little work done.
- Make plans ahead of time with other parents to trade off during the holidays. Spirited kids usually like to have other kids to play with, and they get bored easily when only adults are around.
- Arrange for a night out or a day away from your motherly duties. Take good care of yourself and don’t try and do too much during the holidays. Lower your expectations and have fun with your family.

Keep thinking about your child’s strengths, and help him find things he’s passionate about doing.

To learn more about your child’s temperament and do an assessment go to www.preventiveoz.org. Also check out the book, *Raising Your Spirited Child* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka.