

Your Child's Style

By Susan Baum and Henry Nicols

Have you ever wondered why your children are different from each other and different from you? Personality theory tells us that we have unique personality profiles that underlie who we are, our learning preferences, and strengths and talents. These strengths help us deal with the demands of the environment but can also get us into trouble if our style is in conflict with our partners, friends, or children. Consider the scenario below. Jane, at 11, is a creative dreamer. Rarely are things completed in a timely manner. According to her mother, she can't focus on the task at hand. Her mother, a highly organized professional who prides herself on running her home and family with precision, is frustrated by her daughter. For instance, Jane's job is to clear the dinner table and load the dishwasher—a task her Mom has estimated should take 10 minutes. For Jane, it usually takes three times the allocation. Why? Highly verbal Jane has turned this boring, predictable task into a creative opportunity by inventing a novel way to clear the table. She carefully varies the sequence according to innovative categories. One night she may remove all the dishes that contain vegetables first and then those that are perfectly clean. She may decide to collect the silverware by taking one spoon, two forks, three knives and then reverse the pattern. She carries on a lively discussion during this process as if she were teaching young children to categorize. Placing the dishes in the dishwasher offers more creative opportunities. Jane often pretends that she is acting in a commercial trying to sell the detergent, the dishes, or the dishwasher. This commercial may include jingles, dance, or rhyme. Jane's mom does not find this amusing and fails to enjoy Jane's creative talents. After all there is homework to be done and bedtime routines to be followed. Her mother wonders whether Jane may have ADHD, and if so, would medication help her to focus. It is apparent that Jane's mother values more how the task is accomplished rather than whether it is accomplished.

The truth is that Jane and her mother have two distinct ways of interacting with the world—two different personal styles. All of us possess different degrees of personality traits that make us unique. Some of us seem to prefer order and predictability. We feel

comfortable when we work on a schedule. A good day is when we can check everything off our “to do list,” while others of us are more spontaneous and become bored when things are too predictable. These distinctions help to explain the differences in Jane and her Mom. Is one better than the other? The answer, of course, is that “it depends” on the situation. In the best of all worlds, we would be able to spend the majority of our time in environments that allow us to produce in ways that align to our personal style. However, there will be times when we need to be flexible and accomplish tasks and adapt to the demands of the environment. The secret is balance. If Jane spends most of her time in an environment that requires a rigid schedule and strict adherence to rules and specific directions, she may act out or shut down. On the other hand, if she continues to disregard the times when she needs to be more focused and act in a timely manner, she may keep herself from accomplishing important goals.

In this article we will provide a brief overview of the *Personality Prototype Model* (Baum & Nicols 2004) that we have found highly useful in understanding human dynamics.

Personality Prototype Model

This model is comprised of four styles. Each of us possesses all of them but in different quantities giving us each a unique profile. We may be balanced across all four or have preferences in one or two. The categories are shown below.



Let's explore each of these styles and how they relate to our children.

Practical Managers

Students, who have strengths in the concrete sequential style can be seen as **Practical Managers**. They have a gift for organizing people and things. Their rooms or desks are neat, clothes are usually hung up, and possessions put away in an organized fashion. They appreciate and follow rules and make sure others do the same. Socially they are happier with one or two friends who share their interests and talents.

Life works well for these **Practical Managers** when they know what is expected and how they will be evaluated. The more events unfold as planned, the happier they are. Quiet, orderly environments help them learn. They enjoy having a plan and checking off tasks as they are completed.

Difficulties may occur when these students have minimum abilities in other styles to keep them balanced. For instance, although they are excellent with details, they may become overfocused on them at times. **Practical Managers** can appear obsessive compulsive and exhibit perfectionistic characteristics. They may become upset when things are out of place or when the routine changes. They can be overwhelmed and over-stimulated. Their finely honed senses may cause them to be over-sensitive to light, sound, and textures. They become stressed when they're not certain of the requirements of a task or situation, when there is too much chaos, or when no one seems in charge!



Practical Managers

| Gifts | Needs | Possible Problems |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Attention to details (love deadlines, timelines, punctuality)➤ Create to improve products or ideas➤ Finely tuned senses➤ Keep others on task | <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Orderly, predictable environment➤ Structure, clear expectations and detailed directions➤ Opportunities to elaborate and add detail | <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Perfectionism➤ Rigidity➤ See the world in black and white |

The Learned Experts

Learned Experts have a talent for scholarly pursuits. Strengths in this area often allow students to become class experts on complex and abstract topics. They love to hypothesize and synthesize. As one 8 year old explained. “I crave knowledge like a tiger stalks his prey.” These students crave knowledge and satiate this hunger by reading, watching documentaries, and listening to interesting and informed people. In fact, these **Learned Experts** often would rather read or hear about the adventure than experience it. They often possess advanced vocabularies and can express themselves eloquently. They usually earn good grades and enjoy discussions, debate, and writing papers. They are very logical and enjoy verbal debate –often arguing for the sake of the debate.

Learned Experts are happiest when engaged in some sort of intellectual pursuit or interacting with others whose abilities they admire. They engage fully when allowed to

give their opinion and make their points of view known. **Learned Experts** tend to need little sleep and may be found with book and flash light in hand as they prepare for bed. These students are often stressed when curriculum is not complex or the lessons move along too slowly. They can be sarcastic and unaware of the image they project and thus can't understand why people may not like them.



Learned Experts

| Gifts | Needs | Possible Problems |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Very knowledgeable ➤ Can synthesize ideas and create theories and models ➤ Outstanding vocabulary ➤ Excellent debater | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Intellectually stimulating environment ➤ Games and activities that require strategizing ➤ Opportunities to research, discuss, and hypothesize | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Intolerance of others perceived as less smart ➤ Argumentative ➤ Sarcasm, opinionated |

Figure 3 Traits of Learned Experts (Nicols & Baum, 2003)

Learned Experts may enjoy the pursuit of knowledge to such an extent, that they may be unwilling to end the research aspect of a task. Learning environments that don't offer advanced explorations of topics and issues or limit the opportunities for these kinds of students to be with one another inadvertently obstruct the development of their bright minds often causing behavioral problems.

People Persons

People Persons have a talent for human relations and creating harmony. **People Persons** live in a world of feelings and can identify the emotional climate of the room as soon as they enter. These youngsters have many friends and enjoy social interaction. Because they operate from a feeling level, they are often talented in the visual or performing arts.

People Persons are happiest when allowed to connect meaningfully with others inside and outside of school. They perform well in group activities and can contribute to the process by helping others get along. Because they are eager to please, they like special jobs. Students with strengths in this style perform best when they feel appreciated and special.

People Persons become stressed when there is conflict. Personal relationships take priority over academic tasks. These students can be over sensitive, experience melt downs and over dramatize and exaggerate events. Because they want to belong, some of these students may keep their needs to themselves and defer to the group to maintain their connection with peers. They too can be disorganized and lost in the emotions of the moment.



People Persons

| Gifts | Needs | Possible Problems |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Creating harmony➤ Colorful, dramatic➤ Social skills➤ Attuned to feelings | <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Colorful, social environment➤ Opportunities to interact with others➤ Opportunities for creative expression | <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Disorganization lack of attention to details➤ Will repress own needs to keep the peace and avoid conflict➤ Over sensitive, over dramatic |

Some of these students may be emotionally sensitive to the reactions of others when they perceive that they are not included or accepted. If the learning environment is overly critical, and the students do not feel as though they belong, **People Persons** will shut down and not be emotionally available to learn.

Creative Problem Solvers

Students like Jane, introduced in the initial scenario, are best identified by their talent for innovation. They are the **Creative Problem Solvers** of the world, energetically leaping from one idea to another. Never satisfied with the status quo, they can always find a better way to do anything and, in fact, would much prefer to do it their way. Unlike the more sequential students, **Creative Problem Solvers** understand that rules can be bent and exceptions made for the good of the cause. They may appear impulsive as they leap first and then look. They tend to see the end result first, then identify the steps they need to get there. This group is always taking risks if there is a chance for fun and adventure.

Creative Problem Solvers are the happiest when they are given choices and when working on multiple projects at once. They prefer open-ended assignments and opportunities to be creative. They do best when allowed to pursue the assignments or tasks their own way with few but general guidelines.

Creative Problem Solvers can be disorganized. Often they do not listen to directions and can be confused about what is expected of them. They test rules and have a dislike for routine. These youngsters are often stressed by having to focus on sequential details that are required in many learning environments. They also have difficulty making commitments in and out of school.



Creative Problem Solvers

| Gifts | Needs | Possible Problems |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Divergent thinker, can generate many ideas ➤ Flair for adventure and spontaneity ➤ Empathetic ➤ Life of the party, fun | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Creative environment ➤ Options ➤ Opportunities for multiple projects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Disorganization ➤ lack of attention to details ➤ Difficulty following directions ➤ Own agenda, stubborn |

Creative Problem Solvers do well in learning environments that match these students needs include discovery learning, use of the teachable moments, mild competition, use of learning games and options in terms of topics, products, and schedule. Inflexible learning environments with many rules can cause these youngsters to become oppositional and defiant.

Final Thoughts

When we take time to understand our children in terms of their personality, we can relate better to each other and cope more easily with the demands of the environment. If Jane's mother better understood Jane as a **Creative Problem Solver**, her mother could then better appreciate and nurture Jane's rich imagination. Supporting Jane's need for choice, her mother could help Jane develop her own schedule for task completion. The following site, <http://internationalcenterfortalentdevelopment.com>, links to the **Baum & Nicols Personality Prototype Profiler**, which you can administer to students in fifth grade and up. There is also a scale for adults. Compare yourself to your family members and see if you can understand your family dynamics.

When we accept that we all have different personality profiles, we can begin to appreciate the unique contributions each style brings to family, school, and personal relationships. Lives work better if we can spend the majority of time in environments that align to our strengths. But there will be times when the demands of any task or situation will require the ability to use the skills from our less- preferred styles. Parents and teachers who use these profiles to plan are better able to arrange appropriate environments for youngsters and to provide necessary support when needed.

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