

# *bello* STRANGER

'S he's the spitting image of her father!' 'He's got his mother's eyes – but whose are those ears?' 'She looks just like Aunt Maisie when she's angry!' As soon as a baby's born, the guessing starts: who does he take after? What kind of person is he going to be?

That phrase 'going to be' is important here, as we do tend to assume newborn babies are born without a 'personality' and that character is something picked up later, along with other skills like walking and talking. But research into newborns is proving that babies come into the world already equipped with strong and widely differing personalities.

Some are born adventurous and outgoing; others are more retiring and quiet. Your first baby may be quite self-sufficient and easy-going from the beginning, while your second starts life being far more demanding and impatient. Some babies are able to amuse themselves almost from birth; others need mum or dad in constant attendance.

## Spot the difference

Dr Stella Acquarone, director of The Parent Infant Clinic in London – set up to help parents who are having problems with their babies – believes a baby's emotional make-up should receive much more attention than it does, as it's often the key to helping many 'difficult babies'.

A baby who is born able to put up with frustrations and comfort himself – for example, who can wait for a feed by sucking his thumb – will have a sunnier attitude to the world and relate to it more positively. He will also produce a similar response in those

**Babies aren't blank pages waiting to be written on, but definite little characters in their own right, says Laura Gascoigne**

around him, which will in turn encourage him to develop.

On the other hand, a baby who's naturally impatient and can't cope so well with life's little frustrations, and depends too much on other people for comfort, will have to learn to be more self-sufficient before he can show the sunny side of his character to the world. But many parents don't realise this and assume that some-

thing is wrong with either the baby or themselves – and so a vicious circle develops with you trying to find out what the problem is and the baby becoming more frustrated and impatient in return.

We also have a tendency to believe that a baby will like what we like, but of course a baby's tastes, needs and character may be very different from that of his parents – or even clash horribly!



One mother who brought her 9-month-old baby to The Parent Infant Clinic was desperate because of the child's crying. The little girl, Anna, slept badly at night, cried constantly and wouldn't leave the house. As soon as she tried to take her out to the park, supermarket or to a friend's house, Anna would scream non-stop until her mother was forced to bring her back home again.

At the introductory meeting, Dr Acquarone noticed that when the baby started crying her mother tried to soothe her by raising her voice, which produced the opposite effect. She also noticed that when they were both quiet, Anna seemed to relax and look around with interest. It emerged during the course of the treatment that Anna's mother was a radio addict, listening to music all day. She was

also a very spontaneous person who liked to do things without any planning or warning, and she fully expected her child to be like her: outgoing with plenty of get up and go. In fact her baby was the opposite: a quiet, contemplative type of person who hated noise and sudden activity and needed time to get used to new ideas. Her mother's way of life continually upset her.

But with many babies, being a crier is unfortunately part of their personality; it's the only way some newborns are able to vent their frustrations. So very often – and to the despair of parents – there isn't an immediate answer to the problem of a constant crier, just patience on the part of mum and dad, who are the best people to help an impatient baby come to terms with what's frustrating him. ►

## Discover your baby's personality

Interpreting a newborn baby's feelings is, like most things, a matter of trial and error; and, as a baby's signals can be hard to read, especially for first-time parents, it can often seem more a matter of error! But never lose heart: research with newborns is now showing that they're actually carefully programmed from birth to let us know their needs. So just relax, sit back and enjoy your baby and you'll soon understand what he's trying to tell you about himself.

■ Make time to quietly watch your baby and his reactions. This way you'll get to know his character. With adults we don't make instant assumptions – we expect to get to know them gradually – and the same is true of babies. But first we have to learn to speak their language. Whenever a newborn baby turns and brightens, and follows what you're doing with his eyes, he's telling you quite clearly: 'I like that. Yes. You can do that again. That interests me. That's just my type of thing.' And every time he turns away from you, or thrusts away with his arms and legs, he's probably saying: 'Now slow down a minute. I'm not so sure about that. Just give me time. Do it again... No. Definitely not. That sort of thing isn't for me at all.'

■ Whenever your baby is alert and ready, take time to talk or play with him. The more you talk to him, and he to you, the more fluent you'll be in each other's 'language'. And 'talking' isn't just verbal: communicating with a baby can be done via smiles, singing, rhymes, cuddling, tickling, making eye contact, even speaking in a high-pitched baby voice (even though you may feel a bit silly at first). You'll soon learn what your baby likes and dislikes from the responses you get back from him.

■ Your baby will be longing to communicate with you, so make sure it's a two-way thing by giving your baby a chance to respond to you. Mealtimes offer good opportunities to indulge in some quiet communication, particularly since it's now thought that the 'burst-pause' pattern of feeding may have developed to offer babies short conversational breaks. So when baby takes a breather from breast or bottle, exchange a smile with him. He'll pause to take in what you're doing, and then return to his meal refreshed. And the more you 'talk' to your baby in this way, the more his personality will

start to shine through.

■ When it comes to play, be guided by your baby. Some adore games of gentle rough and tumble, and like lots of noise and activity around them. Others may become overstimulated by it, which makes their sensitive systems go into overdrive and the end result is the inconsolable crying we all know and dread.

■ Make sure dad's involved in getting to know his baby, too, as input from the two of you will help your baby's personality develop. Although a mother usually spends more time with a new baby, even at as young as 4 weeks a baby will already have a special relationship with his father. Studies have shown that children whose fathers were involved with them as infants have a greater sense of humour, longer attention spans and more eagerness to learn. Very young babies also react differently with each parent. With mothers, babies' movements tend to be softer and gentler, following a smooth, cyclical pattern; with fathers they are more excitable and jerky, as if expecting them to start playing. So each parent brings out individual features, and sees a different side of their baby.

■ Don't expect your baby to necessarily resemble you. Keep an open mind about his likes and dislikes, and don't be tempted to jump to conclusions. It's also important not to assume that your second baby will be like your first



– you have to start from scratch with each new child. As Dr Acquarone from The Parent Infant Clinic puts it: 'A parent develops a

new parenthood for each child.'

But don't worry if you can't spend as much time with later children as you did with your first: older children are there to fill your place and make up any attention the baby is missing. They'll soon bring out things in their new little brother or sister that their mother might never have done alone: for one, a healthy streak of competition which will help the baby develop all the faster!

Psychologist Daniel Stern compares the relationship between a mother and her baby to a natural, spontaneous, improvised dance. It may start with faltering steps, while the partners get used to one another, but gradually a grace and rhythm develops as each learns to predict the other's movements. Occasionally you'll tread on each other's toes, especially when you're mastering new routines. But if you get it wrong, there's no need to panic: the wrong response is better than no response at all.



For further information about The Parent Infant Clinic, contact them on 071-433 3112.