

# Understanding Your Child's Temperament

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## What is Temperament?

Children are born with their natural style of interacting with or reacting to people, places, and things—their temperament. In the late 1950s, temperament research began with the work of Alexander Thomas, Stella Chess, and associates. The New York Longitudinal Study identified nine temperament characteristics or traits. The researchers found that these nine traits were present at birth and continued to influence development in important ways throughout life. By observing a child's responses to everyday situations, the researchers could assess these temperaments. Temperament is stable and differs from personality, which is a combination of temperament and life experiences, although the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Since the 1950s, many scientific studies of temperament have continued to show that children's health and development are influenced by temperament. We all know children who are much more challenging to deal with than other children, starting at birth. The realization that many behavioral tendencies are inborn—and not the result of bad parenting—is perhaps one of the most important insights parents gain from learning more about temperament.

### Temperament Traits

The examination of a child's temperament generally occurs when the child's behavior is difficult. Clinicians use a series of interviews, observations, and questionnaires that measure the nine temperament traits using a spectrum (scale) indicating mild to intense responses or reactions. By understanding temperament, the parent can work with the child rather than trying to change his or her inborn traits. The nine temperament traits and an explanation of the dimensions are given below.

- **Activity:** Is the child always moving and doing something OR does he or she have a more relaxed style?
- **Rhythmicity:** Is the child regular in his or her eating and sleeping habits OR somewhat haphazard?
- **Approach/withdrawal:** Does he or she "never meet a stranger" OR tend to shy away from new people or things?
- **Adaptability:** Can the child adjust to changes in routines or plans easily or does he or she resist transitions?
- **Intensity:** Does he or she react strongly to situations, either positive or negative, OR does he or she react calmly and quietly?
- **Mood:** Does the child often express a negative outlook OR is he or she generally a positive person? Does his or her mood shift frequently OR is he or she usually even-tempered?
- **Persistence and attention span:** Does the child give up as soon as a problem arises

- with a task OR does he or she keep on trying? Can he or she stick with an activity a long time OR does his or her mind tend to wander?
- **Distractibility:** Is the child easily distracted from what he or she is doing OR can he or she shut out external distractions and stay with the current activity?
  - **Sensory threshold:** Is he or she bothered by external stimuli such as loud noises, bright lights, or food textures OR does he or she tend to ignore them?

### **Temperament Types**

These traits combine to form three basic types of temperaments. Approximately 65 percent of all children fit one of three patterns. Forty percent of children are generally regarded as "easy or flexible," 10 percent are regarded as "difficult, active, or feisty," and the final 15 percent are regarded as "slow to warm up or cautious." The other 35 percent of children are a combination of these patterns. By understanding these patterns, parents can tailor their parenting approach in such areas as expectations, encouragement, and discipline to suit the child's unique needs.

- **Easy or flexible** children are generally calm, happy, regular in sleeping and eating habits, adaptable, and not easily upset. Because of their easy style, parents need to set aside special times to talk about the child's frustrations and hurts because he or she won't demand or ask for it. This intentional communication will be necessary to strengthen your relationship and find out what your child is thinking and feeling.
- **Difficult, active, or feisty** children are often fussy, irregular in feeding and sleeping habits, fearful of new people and situations, easily upset by noise and commotion, high strung, and intense in their reactions. Providing areas for vigorous play to work off stored up energy and frustrations with some freedom of choice allow these children to be successful. Preparing these children for activity changes and using redirection will help these children transition (move or change) from one place to another.
- **Slow to warm up or cautious** children are relatively inactive and fussy, tend to withdraw or to react negatively to new situations, but their reactions gradually become more positive with continuous exposure. Sticking to a routine and your word, along with allowing ample time to establish relationships in new situations, are necessary to allow independence to unfold.

Most children have some level of intensity on several temperament traits, but one dimension will usually dominate. Refrain from using negative labels such as "cry baby," "worrywart," or "lazy." The child's abilities to develop and behave in acceptable ways are greatly determined by the adults in their lives trying to identify, recognize, and respond to his or her unique temperament. By doing so, the adults can alter or adjust their parenting methods to be a positive guide in their child's natural way of responding to the world.

## **Parenting with Temperament in Focus**

Parents also need to get a clear picture of their own temperament traits and pinpoint areas in which conflicts with their child arise due to temperament clashing. When there is temperament friction between parent and child, it is more reasonable to expect that the parent will make the first move to adapt. When a parent or caregiver understands the child's temperament, he or she can organize the environment so that "goodness of fit" happens.

Here are principles to keep in mind as you strive to achieve this fit.

- Be aware of your child's temperament and respect his or her uniqueness without comparing him or her to others or trying to change your child's basic temperament. Be aware of your own temperament and adjust your natural responses when they clash with your child's responses.
- Communicate. Explain decisions and motives. Listen to the child's points of view and encourage teamwork on generating solutions.
- Set limits to help your child develop self-control. Respect opinions but remain firm on important limits.
- Be a good role model because children learn by imitation.
- Enjoy the dance.

This match between the child's temperament and the demands or expectations of his or her environment (family, school, childcare setting) greatly improves relationships. Parents who are tuned into their child's temperament and who can recognize their child's strengths will find life more enjoyable. It will be a dynamic dance that will last a lifetime.