

How to Understand Your Child's Temperament

How can I better understand my child's temperament?

Some children are "easy." They are predictable, calm, and approach most new experiences in a positive way. Other children are more difficult, not able to manage their emotional experiences and expression with ease. When a child's personality doesn't quite fit or match that of other family members, it can be a challenge for everyone. Of course no child is one way all the time, but each has his own usual type.



The ease with which a child adjusts to his environment is strongly influenced by his temperament - adaptability and emotional style. For the most part, temperament is an innate quality of the child, one with which he is born. It is somewhat modified (particularly in the early years of life) by his experiences and interactions with other people, with his environment and by his health.

By the time a child has reached the school years, his temperament is well defined and quite apparent to those who know him. It is not something that is likely to change much in the future. These innate characteristics have nothing to do with your own parenting skills. Nevertheless, the behavioral adjustment of a school-age child depends a lot upon the interaction between his temperament and yours, and how others respond to him - how comfortably he fits in with his environment and with the people around him.

Characteristics of temperament

By being aware of some of the characteristics of temperament, you can better understand your child, appreciate his uniqueness, and deal with problems of poor "fit" that may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

There are at least nine major characteristics that make up temperament.

- **Activity level:** the level of physical activity, motion, restlessness or fidgety behavior that a child demonstrates in daily activities (and which also may affect sleep).
Rhythmicity or regularity: the presence or absence of a regular pattern for basic physical functions such as appetite, sleep and bowel habits.
- **Approach and withdrawal:** the way a child initially responds to a new stimulus (rapid and bold or slow and hesitant), whether it be people, situations, places, foods, changes in routines or other transitions.
- **Adaptability:** the degree of ease or difficulty with which a child adjusts to change or a new situation, and how well the youngster can modify his reaction.
- **Intensity:** the energy level with which a child responds to a situation, whether positive or negative.
- **Mood:** the mood, positive or negative, or degree of pleasantness or unfriendliness in a child's words and behaviors.
- **Attention span:** the ability to concentrate or stay with a task, with or without distraction.
- **Distractibility:** the ease with which a child can be distracted from a task by environmental (usually visual or auditory) stimuli.
- **Sensory threshold:** the amount of stimulation required for a child to respond. Some children respond to the slightest stimulation, and others require intense amounts.



How temperament affects children and their parents

Every child has a different pattern of the nine temperament characteristics. Many, but not all, children tend to fall into one of three broad and somewhat loosely defined categories: easy, slow to warm up or shy, or difficult or challenging. These labels are a useful shorthand, but none offers a complete picture of a child. Many parents find it more useful to think about their child in terms of the nine temperament traits.

The easy child responds to the world around him in an easy manner. His mood is positive, and he is mildly to moderately intense. He adapts easily to new schools and people. When encountering a frustrating situation, he usually does so with relatively little anxiety. His parents probably describe him as a "joy to be around." About 40 percent of children fall into this category.

Another temperamental profile may reveal a somewhat slow-to-warm-up or shy child who tends to have moods of mild intensity, usually, but not always negative. He adapts slowly to unfamiliar surroundings and people, is hesitant and shy when making new friends, and tends to withdraw when encountering new people and circumstances. Upon confronting a new situation, he is more likely to have problems with anxiety, physical symptoms or separation. Over time, however, he will become more accepting of new people and situations once he becomes more familiar with them.

The difficult or challenging child tends to react to the world negatively and intensely. As an infant he may have been categorized as a fussy baby. As a young child he may have been prone to temper tantrums or was hard to please. He may still occasionally be explosive, stubborn, and intense, and he may adapt poorly to new situations. Some children with difficult temperaments may have trouble adjusting at school, and their teachers may complain of problems in the classroom or on the playground. When children have difficult temperaments, they usually have more behavioral problems and cause more strain on the mother and family.

It is important to distinguish a difficult temperament from other problems. For instance, recurrent or chronic illnesses, or emotional and physical stresses, can cause behavioral difficulties that are really not a problem with temperament at all

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