

TEMPERAMENT

OVERVIEW

Your nature, or temperament, is the set of characteristics you were born with. It relates to your natural inclinations, emotions, and behaviors.¹ Temperament describes *how* you respond and experience the world, not *why* you do so that way. It's not a judgment, just an observation of natural, biological inclinations. Temperament is not a choice.²

Temperament is different from character—the set of characteristics that emerge over time and are environmentally shaped. In other words, temperament is “nature,” character is “nurture.” Together, they make up personality.³

Temperament is made up of nine different components, each of which has a continuum:

ACTIVITY LEVEL	
MELLOW: Happily sits, prefers slower paced activities	ACTIVE: Wiggly, always moving
ADAPTABILITY	
ADAPTABLE: Transitions easily to new activities or situations	NOT ADAPTABLE: Has difficulty with transitions and changes to established order
APPROACH TO NEW THINGS	
EAGER: Eagerly approaches new situations	CAUTIOUS: Hesitant and reluctant with new situations, people, or things
DISTRACTIBILITY	
FOCUSED: High concentration, pays attention, stubborn when upset, must finish what's begun	DISTRACTIBLE: Easily distracted by outside stimuli, easy to distract when upset, easy to redirect, difficulty paying attention
FRUSTRATION REACTION	
PERSISTENT: Not easily frustrated, upset if unable to finish something	VOLATILE: Easily frustrated, moves easily to new tasks
INTENSITY	
EVEN-KEELED: Muted reactions—neither positive nor negative—to people and events	DRAMATIC: Intense positive and negative reactions to people and events
MOOD	
SUNNY: Positive mood—generally cheerful outlook on things	SOMBER: Negative mood—generally serious, apt to react negatively
REGULARITY	
PREDICTABLE BIOLOGY: Predictable appetite, naps/sleep, bathroom schedule	IRREGULAR BIOLOGY: Unpredictable appetite, naps/sleep, bathroom schedule
SENSORY THRESHOLD	
UNFAZED: Not sensitive to physical stimuli, tries food easily, unperturbed by noise	SENSITIVE: Sensitive to stimuli, picky eater, strongly affected by noise and new sounds, bothered by tags/tight clothes

¹ Keirsey.com. Temperament vs. Character. Retrieved from http://www.keirsey.com/temperament_vs_character.aspx. Accessed on 26 Oct. 2015.

² Lieberman, A.F. (1993). *The Emotional Life of the Toddler*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

³ Keirsey.com. Temperament vs. Character. Retrieved from http://www.keirsey.com/temperament_vs_character.aspx. Accessed on 26 Oct. 2015.

Temperament emerges over time, though you may observe qualities in your infant that persist throughout childhood. Temperamental qualities you may notice at first might relate to focus, levels of distress and/or frustration, mood, and approach to new things or environments. However, it is not until around 3 years of age do children really come into their temperaments and you begin to see how they respond in the full range of traits. In particular, you see how their “effortful control” characteristics are wired, which relate to self-control.⁴

The key reason to know your child’s temperament is to achieve “goodness-of-fit” of the environment, care provider, school, discipline system, etc. for her constellation of temperamental components. Knowing your child’s temperament helps you work *with* them instead of *against* them.

COMPONENT-SPECIFIC PARENTING NOTES⁵

ACTIVITY LEVEL	
MELLOW	ACTIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gently encourage movement, but respect his slower pace Child may dawdle because he has less energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child gets bored easily once things are familiar; give lots of opportunities to explore but teach safety rules Child uses gross motor skills easily, fine motor skills (including talking) less—may have speech delay; practice talking, offer drinks through straws to develop mouth muscles Provide lots of opportunities to get energy out every day Curate environments for maximum safety and “yeses” Child likely gets hungry often but may resist sitting for meals; trust him to eat when he is hungry to avoid power struggles around food Child learns by doing Child plays well with older children who move at a similar pace Child may have trouble falling asleep because her body wants her to move around; may wake up frequently at the end of each sleep cycle Child may look for ways to bug people when he is overtired; find ways to productively channel his energy
ADAPTABILITY	
ADAPTABLE	NOT ADAPTABLE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child may get “lost in the crowd”; regularly check in to talk about feelings—may need to wait a bit for child to answer Child is not assertive; may need coaching on how to communicate boundaries to other children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expect difficulty with each transition; explain things ahead of time—the more she knows about it, the easier it is to do it Child needs time to “change the pictures in her head” and adapt to new ideas Child may resist new limits; talk about behavior + consequence as much as possible until she gets it Placing quick, sharp demands decreases flexibility (i.e., “digs in”) Child has limited energy to devote to change; likes things to little things stay the same so she has energy to navigate bigger changes Use “contracts” (“If you do ____, I will do ____”) Provide structure and predictable routines so she can relax into the rhythms of the day; use consistent sleep routines Recognize difference b/w “temperament tantrum”—releasing emotional tension vs. “manipulative tantrum”—trying to control others Adaptability is completely inaccessible when combined with high emotional intensity—conversely, flexibility increases when emotional drama decreases Child may develop avoidant behavior so as to not feel painful feelings of frustration; try to learn your child’s “I’m stuck” tells (e.g., dawdling, unrelated meltdowns, lying)

⁴ Rothbart, MK (2012). Temperament. Encyclopedia on Early Child Development. Retrieved from: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/temperament/synthesis>. Accessed 31 Oct. 2016.

⁵ Johnson, DC, Neville, H (1998). *Temperament Tools: Working with Your Child’s Inborn Traits*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press.

APPROACH TO NEW THINGS	
EAGER	CAUTIOUS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child gets bored easily once things are familiar; give lots of opportunities to explore but teach safety rules • Curate environments for maximum safety and “yesses” • Child may bolt from parents; practice stopping and going by playing games like “Red Light/Green Light” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child is “slow to warm” at first but over time gets comfortable; allow low-pressure opportunities to practice and “scaffold” new learning by doing the thing together, breaking it into smaller steps • Child will engage when ready—and not before—because of strong feelings of worry; allow him to go at his own pace—seeing the activity first w/o participating can help ease the transition • Child may resist new limits; talk about behavior + consequence as much as possible until she gets it • Child is whiny/clingy when learning new things; give extra cuddles around transitional times • Provide structure and predictable routines so she can relax into the rhythms of the day • Allow transition period for new caregivers and/or experiences; talk about what is going to happen well in advance • Child may resist new foods; keep offering—may take up to 20 times!
DISTRACTIBILITY	
FOCUSED	DISTRACTIBLE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distractibility is perhaps a less nuanced predictor of behavior and may be more accurately described by other components of temperament like frustration reaction, sensitivity, or approach to new things 	
FRUSTRATION REACTION	
PERSISTENT	VOLATILE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child will keep at it until she gets the thing/skill/etc.; prepare for negotiation and hold fast to the limits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child is easily discouraged and may dawdle or goof off to get parent to do the task for her • Provide frequent encouragement and coaching on how to break jobs into smaller, easier tasks • Let child get frustrated in small, surmountable amounts to grow her capacity • Teach how to ask for help and work <i>together</i> to solve a problem (don’t fix it for her!) • Expect complaints and meltdowns but don’t let them deter you from moving forward • Praise effort, not just results • Keep predictable routines to maximize child’s energy to be able to cope with frustration • Child may have trouble falling asleep, which creates self-perpetuating tension; may beg for company as she transitions to sleep • Placing quick, sharp demands on hard tasks decreases flexibility (i.e., “digs in”) • Child may not engage in independent play as easily because she needs/feels she needs help to play • Child may develop avoidant behavior so as to not feel painful feelings of frustration; try to learn your child’s “I’m stuck” tells (e.g., dawdling, unrelated meltdowns, lying)
INTENSITY	
EVEN-KEELED	DRAMATIC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child may get “lost in the crowd”; regularly check in to talk about feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child tends to have big feelings and expresses them frequently • Remember intensity fuels intensity and breeds stubbornness; try to match her intensity with calmness • Child does better in smaller, mellow groups

MOOD	
SUNNY	SOMBER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children have general dispositions, but their mood can be affected by other temperamental qualities, such as frustration reaction, intensity, adaptability, or cautious approach 	
REGULARITY	
PREDICTABLE BIOLOGY	IRREGULAR BIOLOGY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child gets hungry and tired at predictable times; try to cater to her rhythms to avoid predictable meltdowns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child gets hungry and tired at unpredictable times; keep snacks on hand, offer fruit/veg before mealtimes to stave off meltdowns
SENSORY THRESHOLD	
UNFAZED	SENSITIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child may be less emotionally aware of the feelings of others; may need extra teaching around emotions/"feelings" faces Child may be less aware of biological feelings like toileting needs or illness; may need reminders or coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child may react strongly to touch, taste, smell, etc.; try to figure out his sensory triggers and accommodate them (e.g., scratchy clothing tags, food texture)—a comfortable body = a calm mind Child may resist doing things for herself, wanting parents to do them; other caregivers can get them to do more Child may be more emotionally aware Child may have a hard time sleeping; use a comforting, consistent bedtime routine to help transition

The book *Temperament Tools*⁶ by Neville and Clark describes behavioral archetypes, where specific components of temperament are clustered together (it also provides archetype-specific parenting advice!):

- **Moderate—middle of the scale on all temperamental traits:** Typically eats, sleeps, and accepts limits fairly easily.
- **Low energy, highly adaptable:** Low energy, not assertive, looks for other amusement after a playmate snatches his toy.
- **Low energy, easily discouraged:** Low energy, dawdles and forgets, is shy and dependent, has trouble leaving parents.
- **Sensitive, intense, cautious:** High or low energy, refuses to join activities or eat new foods, has difficulty leaving parents.
- **Intense, slow-adapting:** High or low energy, strong-willed perfectionist who wants everything "just so," often too excited to get to sleep and wakes repeatedly, has trouble leaving parents, has long/loud/frequent temper tantrums.
- **Active, easily frustrated:** Fast-moving, won't sit still to eat, dashes away from parents, friendly, demands help and then refuses it, has temper tantrums, short attention span.
- **Active, slow adapting:** Active, doesn't like to cuddle or wear shoes/hat/bib, eats few foods, demands to feed self, talks too much/loudly, bossy, doesn't pay attention. Trips are terribly difficult.
- **Active, intense, easily frustrated, slow-adapting:** High energy, has many of the behaviors of the previous three.

YOUR TEMPERAMENT

Knowing your own temperament and how it matches with your child's can be helpful—awareness of where you fit and where you may be mismatched can help you find ways to make sure you're both comfortable.

⁶ Johnson, DC, Neville, H (1998). *Temperament Tools: Working with Your Child's Inborn Traits*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press.

TEMPERAMENT SCALE

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Activity	<i>Mellow</i>							<i>Active</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								
Adaptability	<i>Adaptable</i>							<i>Not adaptable</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								
Approach to new things	<i>Eager</i>							<i>Cautious</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								
Distractibility	<i>Focused</i>							<i>Distractible</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								
Frustration reaction	<i>Persistent</i>							<i>Volatile</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								
Intensity	<i>Even-keeled</i>							<i>Dramatic</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								
Mood	<i>Sunny</i>							<i>Somber</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								
Regularity	<i>Predictable biology</i>							<i>Irregular biology</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								
Sensitivity	<i>Unfazed</i>							<i>Sensitive</i>
You								
Child 1								
Child 2								
Child 3								
Spouse								