

Your Child's Temperament

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From the day they're born, our children are individuals, with distinct preferences and unique ways of being in the world and interacting with others. Temperament traits are the inborn, instinctive ways that they respond to situations. Understanding our child's temperament helps us to accommodate their needs and also to gently challenge them to learn flexibility and other ways of responding. There are three steps to applying temperament to our parenting:

1. Learn about your child's temperament
2. Learn about your own temperament and about whether you and your child are naturally a "good fit" or whether you'll need to work harder to understand each other
3. Tailor your guidance and discipline methods to find a parenting style that suits your temperament *and* meets your child's needs

One caution before we get started: Avoid "labeling" your child. Distilling all the joys and challenges of your child's personality down to one label means missing part of the magic that makes them unique and special. Also, once a child is labeled as "difficult", or "shy", or "hyperactive" it tends to shape everyone's interactions with the child, and may make it harder for her to move beyond that label.

9 temperament traits. Think about these, and where your child falls on the spectrum of each trait.

Activity level: is your child always on the go, so full of energy that it's hard to keep up? Or is he more laid-back, likely to sit quietly, and move slowly?

Regularity / predictability: In terms of biological functions, does your child eat, sleep, and have bowel movements at the same times each day? Or is there little pattern or predictability?

Approach or withdrawal in new situations: Is your child bold and enthusiastic, always willing to explore? Or shy, clingy, hesitant to try anything new, and only comfortable after many exposures?

Adaptability: Does your child move easily from one activity to the next and adapt quickly to changes in his environment? Or does any transition in activity, or disruption to his daily routine, upset him?

Sensitivity / Threshold of Responsiveness: Is your child easily startled or bothered by noise, bright lights and unusual smells? Or is your child blissfully unaware of things that trouble others?

Intensity of Reaction: How strongly does your child react? Are all her reactions big – either ecstatic or miserable or outraged? Or is she pretty mellow and low-key – content or bummed or annoyed?

Quality of Mood: Is your child generally happy and optimistic, smiling, laughing easily, recovering quickly from disappointments? Or is your child moody, negative, serious, or difficult to please?

Distractibility: Is your child easily sidetracked, and easily distracted from what she's doing? Or does he tend to stay focused on one thing for a long time, ignoring what's happening around him?

Persistence: Will your child pursue the same activity for a long time – even if he's struggling with it? Or does she lose interest in things quickly, quitting right away if something starts to frustrate her?

Your temperament

Once you've examined your child's temperament, think about your own (and your co-parent's style). Look at the list of 9 traits again. Where are you similar to your child? Where are you different?

Goodness of Fit

Sometimes a child's temperament is a good match for his environment, which may make him seem like an "easy" child, and make it easy for parents to feel successful – this is "goodness of fit."

Sometimes a child's temperament is not compatible with the expectations of her environment, and this makes her seem like a "difficult" child and makes the parents feel overwhelmed and incompetent.

The child's 'environment' includes both the social rules of a particular setting, and the people around him, who all have their own temperaments. If a child with a high activity level and high intensity level is on a trampoline with his high activity parent, that's a goodness of fit, and everyone has a fabulous time. But, put that same child at library story time, or pair that same child on the trampoline with a low activity level parent who has a high level of sensitivity to noise, and nobody has a good time.

If you *often* feel like your child is hard to manage, or you're *often* frustrated by behavior that just doesn't make sense to you, it may be that you and your child have a temperament mis-match. Learning more about your own temperament and about hers, and thinking about how to adapt your usual approach may lead to less conflict. For example, if you really value your own persistence and enjoy focusing on one thing for a long time, but your child is distractible and gives up whenever anything is challenging, you may be frustrated in the moment, and also worry about long-term issues like success in school. Can you shift your expectations for how long your child will stick to one activity? Can you learn to appreciate what she gains by moving through a range of experiences? (And yes, over time, you will work with her to gently build her attention span and persistence.)

If, on the other hand, you *generally* feel like your child is easy to relate to, but *certain situations* really set him off, consider whether some aspect of his temperament is at play. For example, your child may be happy and easy-going most of the time, but whenever you go somewhere that is very loud and busy, he clings or tantrums or hits other children. This may be a child who tends toward withdrawal in new situations and is highly sensitive to his environment. You could reduce problems with some creativity: for example, you might go to a fair or the zoo on weekdays or as soon as it opens in the morning, leaving before it gets crowded and loud. Or take your child to the special "mom's day at the movies" screenings – they turn the volume down lower. When going somewhere for the first time, your child may only want to be there for a short time before he needs to retreat back to home territory. As your child gets older, you'll work to help him learn ways to cope with being over-stimulated, and how to calm himself, but you won't try that on a day when he's sick or tired.

Please remember: A child's temperament is neither good nor bad. For example, a persistent child can be exhausting as parents try to distract a toddler from things like electrical cords, but that same child may someday excel in school, pushing through any difficulty until succeeding at an assignment. Understanding the influence of temperament on how your child responds to his environment and how she reacts to people she encounters can help you smooth things over when needed, and guide you in understanding where your child most needs your help to develop skills that don't come naturally.

For more information and to see my sources: <http://gooddayswithkids.com/2013/10/05/more-on-temperament/>