

# 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. One way to understand and explore these differences is through the lens of Temperament. Temperament traits are the inborn, instinctive way that we respond to stimuli and environments. As parents, understanding our child's temperament helps us both to accommodate their needs – helping our day-to-day lives go more smoothly – 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 the child to move beyond that label to develop all the sides of her personality.

## 9 temperament traits

In the 50's, Chess and Thomas developed a theory of 9 inborn traits. Think about each of these, and where your child falls on the spectrum of that category.

**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, try new activities and meet new people? Or is she shy, clingy, hesitant to try something new, and only comfortable with something after many exposures / much repetition?

**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 by sudden sounds or disturbed by bright lights, uncomfortable clothing, 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 and 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? (Remember that for a toddler, a "long time" may not seem very long to us as adults!)

**Persistence:** Will your child pursue the same activity for a long time – even if he's frustrated by something, he'll keep on trying? Or does your child lose interest in things quickly, moving on right away if something starts to frustrate her?

After reading through this list, do you have a better sense of how your child reacts to his world?

Please remember: A child's temperament is neither good nor bad. For example, a persistent child can be exhausting as parents try to distract him from things like electrical cords, but that same child may someday excel in school, pushing through any difficulty until succeeding at an assignment.

Understanding your child can improve your interaction. For example, if you have a child with low adaptability, who struggles with transitions, and with a tendency to withdraw in new situations, then you adapt your parenting. For example, if next week you'll be going to a company picnic at a park your child has never seen, you could talk to your child about it in advance, bring along familiar toys to comfort her, give her space to retreat back to your reassuring arms, make sure she's well-rested and well-fed, and so on. You could even go to the park this week and get familiar with it without the added pressure for her of meeting several strangers at the same time. These steps accommodate her temperamental needs. But, you won't give up on taking your child new places! You'll need to gently challenge this child to grow and build the skills to be more adaptable and more adventurous over time, and give her the tools to calm the anxiety she naturally faces in these situations.

### Your temperament

Once you've examined your child's temperament, think about your own. (And your co-parent's temperament.) 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 incapable of good parenting.

The child’s ‘environment’ is composed both of the social rules and expectations of a particular setting, and the people around him, who all have their own temperaments which influence their interactions. If a child with a high activity level and high intensity level is on a trampoline with his high activity level parent, that’s a goodness of fit, and everyone has a good time with peals of laughter. But, put that same child at library story time, or pair that same child with a low activity level parent who has a high level of sensitivity and is easily overwhelmed by noise and activity, 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 to better match their needs 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 very distractible and gives up and moves on to a new activity whenever anything is challenging, you may find yourself frustrated in the moment, and also worrying 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 to you 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 as soon as it opens in the morning, leaving before it gets crowded and loud. Or go to the zoo on weekdays when there will be fewer people. Or take your child to the special “mom’s day at the movies” screenings – they turn the volume down lower than it is typically played. When going somewhere for the first time, you may need to accept that 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 in those situations, but you won’t try to do that on a day when he’s sick or tired or hungry!

Understanding the influence of temperament on how your child responds to his environment and how she reacts to the 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

## Recommended overviews

Tips for creating a “Goodness of Fit” between a child and his parents and environment:

<http://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/child-development/unique-child-equation/temperament/understanding-goodness-of-fit/>

Why Time-Out Doesn't Work for All Kids and Other Secrets From Temperament-Based Parenting at

[http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref\\_Why\\_Time\\_Out\\_Doesnt/](http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Why_Time_Out_Doesnt/)

Your baby's temperament, The parent-baby fit (A nice overview article)

<http://www.todaysparent.com/baby/baby-development/your-babys-temperament/>

## Recommended online quizzes

In this quiz ([www.readyforlife.org/temperament/quiz/start](http://www.readyforlife.org/temperament/quiz/start)) you mark your child's temperament traits, then it offers customized tips.

The Infant Toddler Temperament Tool (IT<sup>3</sup>) <http://www.ecmhc.org/temperament/index.html>. Scores both you and the toddler. Then gives you customized "Goodness of Fit" Recommendations.

## Other sources I used

Goodness of Fit Worksheet for Both Parents to complete:

[http://parents2parents.ca/files/pages/Goodness\\_of\\_Fit\\_Worksheet\\_P2P.pdf](http://parents2parents.ca/files/pages/Goodness_of_Fit_Worksheet_P2P.pdf)

Worksheet to determine your child's temperament:

[http://parents2parents.ca/files/pages/Temperament\\_Worksheet\\_P2P.pdf](http://parents2parents.ca/files/pages/Temperament_Worksheet_P2P.pdf)

Parentmaking. Rothenber, et al. 1995.

How to parent with different temperaments. <http://www.todaysparent.com/family/parenting/how-to-parent-with-different-temperaments/>

“Temperament and Goodness of Fit” -

<http://resources.childhealthcare.org/cocoon/dtw/temperament.html>

<http://www.healthyplace.com/parenting/challenge-of-difficult-children/goodness-of-fit-how-temperament-determines-need/>

Parenting your child's temperament: [http://www.babyzone.com/kids/discipline/child-temperament-part-one\\_73349?page=3](http://www.babyzone.com/kids/discipline/child-temperament-part-one_73349?page=3)

What kind of temperament does my baby have?

<http://resources.childhealthcare.org/details.do?sessionId=9E410BA3645AF819662AB5F47E8856EF?id=8121>

Is your child's temperament a good fit with yours? [www.deseretnews.com/article/765573111/Is-your-childs-temperament-a-good-fit-with-yours.html](http://www.deseretnews.com/article/765573111/Is-your-childs-temperament-a-good-fit-with-yours.html)

Early Childhood Temperament Sorter: <http://parentingbytemperament.com/earlychildsort.php>.

Note: this is a GREAT tool for parents of children age 4 – 8. It offers a quiz to determine your child's type and your own type, and then tips on how to manage both. Not really suited to a toddler.