



# Family Issues Facts

A FACT SHEET FOR FAMILIES AND PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH FAMILIES

## Temperament

Bulletin #4358

Temperament can be defined as a set of behavioral characteristics that seem to be inborn and generally persist throughout life. Being able to recognize temperament traits in ourselves, our friends and coworkers, and in our children is an important tool to understand behavior and meet people's needs. It also helps parents to guide their children in ways that respect a child's individual differences. By understanding temperament, we can work with others rather than trying to change them. It also helps to put a child's behavior in perspective, and anticipate and understand the child's reactions.



*Understanding temperament helps to put a child's behavior into perspective.*

Research has identified nine traits of temperament: activity level, rhythmicity or regularity, approach or withdrawal (adaptability to new situations), adaptability (in general), sensory threshold, quality of mood, intensity of reaction or response,

distractability, and persistence or attention span.

Behaviorally, these temperament traits seem to consistently group themselves into three different patterns or constellations: the "easy" child, the "difficult" child, and the "slow to warm up" child. Although not all children can be placed into one of these groups, approximately 65 percent of children fit one of the patterns. Of this 65 percent, 40 percent of children are generally regarded as

*easy*, 10 percent as *difficult*, and 15 percent as *slow to warm up*.

These categories have different names, depending on the authors — such as *flexible* instead of *easy*, *active* or *feisty* instead of *difficult*, and *cautious* instead of *slow to warm up*.

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# Nine Areas of Temperament

**1. Sensitivity** refers to the amount of stimulation necessary to evoke a response in a child. An infant or a young child may respond strongly to moderate changes in such things as noise, room temperature, pain, odors, colors, and textures. Or she may not be affected.

**2. Intensity of Reaction or Response** refers to the energy level of a response — whether it is positive or negative. An infant may express his displeasure by mild fussing, or by loud wails. As a preschooler, a child may smile quietly with pleasure or jump around and yell.

**3. Activity Level** refers to motor activity and focuses on the proportion of active and inactive periods in the child's day. For example, an infant may kick and squirm a lot or may be very quiet. As a preschooler, a child may prefer using his gross motor skills predominately, such as in running, or use his fine motor skills predominately, such as in doing puzzles.

**4. Adaptability** is the long-term reaction or adjustment to change in such areas as foods, moving, or going to a new school. Babies and children may take a long time to adjust to changes or may seem to take nearly no time at all.

**5. Approach or Withdrawal — Adaptability to New Situations** refers to a child's response to new people, new toys, new settings; it may be positive or negative. For example, an infant may smile at strangers and like new foods, or he may have a more sober reaction to novelty. As a preschooler, he may join right in or may be initially shy.

**6. Persistence and Attention Span** refers to the child's ability to continue an activity despite frustration and the length of time spent on the activity without interruption. An infant may give up easily or may continue trying to reach something for a long time. A preschooler may lose interest quickly in toys or games or dressing himself, or may continue trying to make a toy do what he wants or trying to pull on his sock.

**7. Rhythmicity or Regularity** refers to the degree of predictability of the timing of the child's biological functions such as hunger, sleep-wake cycles, and elimination. As an infant, a child may have a bowel movement every day after breakfast or only a few times a week. As a preschooler, she may prefer a big meal at lunch each day or there may be no predicting when she will be hungry.

**8. Quality of Mood** refers to the child's mood — pleasant and friendly versus unpleasant, unhappy, and crying. An infant may generally smile and coo, or may be irritable and cry. As a preschooler, the child may tend to be generally content or discontent about many issues and people.

**9. Distractibility** refers to how easily outside stimuli interfere with a child's ongoing activity. An infant may not be able to suck while nursing if her mother talks to her. As a child, she may not be able to finish one thing before she starts or joins another activity.

Parentmaking Parent Educators Training 1999. Rothenberg, B. A. (1992). *Parentmaking Educators Training Program*. Menlo Park, CA: Banster Press, 273-274.



(Continued from page 1)

Regardless of the name, it is important to recognize that each category has its strengths and weaknesses; no category is superior to another in its desirability from a parenting point of view or in its potential for healthy personality development.

### **The Easy Child**

The *easy* or *flexible* child is characterized by:

- regularity of bodily functions
- a positive approach to most new situations and people
- easy adaptability to change
- a mild or moderately intense mood that is predominately positive

As infants, these children quickly develop regular sleep and feeding schedules, take to new foods easily, and smile at strangers. In early childhood they adapt easily to new schools and activities and accept minor frustrations with little fuss.

However, since easy children show their needs in a quiet way, they may not be given as much attention as a child who is more demonstrative in his demands. An easy child's needs may be just as great as a more demonstrative child, but his signal will be quieter.

### **The Difficult Child**

The *difficult* or *feisty* child is at the other end of the spectrum from the easy child. She is characterized by:

- irregularity in biological functions
- a negative withdrawal

reaction to many new situations and people

- a high activity level
- intense mood expressions that are often negative
- a low sensory threshold  
As infants, these children

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typically have irregular sleep and feeding schedules, are slow to accept most new foods, and require long periods to adjust to new situations. In early childhood, they express both their triumphs and disappointments with noisy vigor and may respond to frustration with temper tantrums. Their energy may appear boundless!

### **The Slow to Warm Up Child**

*Slow to warm up, cautious, or fearful* children respond negatively to new situations and people and adapt to them slowly. Unlike difficult children, they demonstrate mild rather than intense reactions and have less of a tendency toward irregular sleep and eating patterns. When they're frustrated or upset, these children are likely to withdraw from the situation, either quietly or with mild fussiness, rather than exploding like the difficult child. Once this child becomes accustomed to a new situation, however, she feels comfortable and demonstrates more positive and outgoing behavior.

### **“Goodness of Fit”**

One of the later additions to the temperament theory was called “Goodness of Fit” — the match between a child's temperament and the demands of his or her environment (family, school, child care setting). This has proven to

be one of the most important elements of the theory. Goodness of fit exists when the demands and expectations of the family members and others in an individual's life are compatible with one's temperament, abilities, and characteristics.

#### **Sources:**

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