

Temperament – What is it?

Temperament is a child's emotional and behavioral style of responding to the world. A child displays her temperament style from birth.

Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess, researchers, found that temperament is influenced by nine temperament traits: *activity, regularity, initial reaction, adaptability, intensity, mood, distractibility, persistence-*

attention span, and sensory threshold. Each trait has a range of levels, and temperament reactions will vary depending upon the strength of each trait. These traits combine to create a child's unique temperament, and a child's temperament influences how others interact with her, how she responds emotionally, and how she reacts to

new situations. By knowing a child's temperament, you can gauge how the child may act and can plan more purposefully for activities that provide a constructive situation for the child. Observe each child and rate levels for all nine temperament traits so you can recognize and understand each child's style.

Ideas for responding to temperaments

- **Activity** – Allow children time for movement throughout the day and give children choices. Let an active child step away from circle time if she has the wiggles. Have a place in your play yard for children to sit and do table activities outside.
- **Regularity** – Have consistent times for routine activities in your schedule, but add some flexibility within routines. For snack, instead of a group snack at one time, set out snack foods for an extended period and let the children eat at any point during the snack period.
- **Initial reaction** – Prepare children for meeting new people and trying new things. Join with or stay near hesitant children to lend a sense of security.
- **Adaptability** – Let children know about upcoming changes and discuss what will happen. Be prepared to address children's reluctance and to give children extra time to make transitions.
- **Intensity** – If a child is boisterous, create spaces and activities that let the child be boisterous. Set up the spaces and activities to avoid interfering or overrunning quieter activities and areas.
- **Mood** – Get to know what children like. For children who tend to be negative, use their likes to turn around or lighten their mood. If a child often complains about cleaning up, and you know the child loves dinosaurs, pretend to be dinosaurs while cleaning up. Or hide a favorite dinosaur toy that the child can hunt for while cleaning up.
- **Distractibility** – Limit distractions in the environment by looking at where and when you set up activities. Instead of doing manipulative activities when school-agers come in from school, do the activities later with the preschoolers during the school-age homework time.
- **Persistence/attention span** – Offer activities that vary in length and complexity. For a more involved activity, try breaking it into two or three activities, if possible.
- **Sensory threshold** – Be aware of the intensity of sensory stimuli. Change the intensity by looking for alternative materials or by adapting materials. Use warm water in the water table or let a child wear gloves to finger paint. For transition cues, use a rain stick instead of a bell or dim the lights instead of blinking the lights on and off.

Resources – Temperament rating scales:

- The Center for Early Childhood Mental Health (www.ecmhc.org/index.html) – “The Infant Toddler Temperament Tool”.
- The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu>) – “Temperament Continuum” (Work Brief #23).

Temperament traits

Trait	Definition	Range	Characteristics
Activity	Energy level and amount of movement.	energetic vs. sedentary	Active children prefer to be in motion and can have difficulty sitting for longer periods. Sedentary children prefer stationary activities and may be slow moving.
Regularity	Natural patterns and schedules for biological functions (ex. sleeping, elimination, eating).	predictable vs. variable	Children with regular patterns will develop predictable schedules. Children with irregular patterns do not develop schedules and may take longer to complete some developmental tasks, such as toilet learning.
Initial Reaction	Reaction to new people and situations.	open vs. hesitant	Children who respond openly will go to new people and explore new toys and environments. Children who are hesitant will shy away from new people and be uncomfortable in new environments.
Adaptability	Ability to adjust to changes.	accommodating vs. resistant	Highly adaptable children will accept changes in routines, activities, and the environment. Children who are not adaptable will resist changes and may become upset when faced with changes.
Intensity	Emotional response to events.	exuberant vs. lethargic	Intense children are emotional in their responses, positive and negative. Less intense children may not show much emotion or seem detached.
Mood	Typical emotional outlook.	positive vs. negative	Children with a positive outlook are easier to please and tend to be more even in their interactions with others. Children with a negative demeanor are harder to comfort or please and may tend to be disagreeable in interactions.
Distractibility	Ability to focus.	attentive vs. sidetracked	Children who can focus are better able to block out surrounding noise and activity. Children who can't focus well can be easily bothered by other noise and activity.
Persistence – Attention Span	Ability to stay with an activity.	immersed vs. disinterested	Persistent children will stay with an activity and can be attentive for extended periods. Children with short attention spans will have trouble staying with extended or multi-step activities.
Sensory Threshold	Reaction to sensory stimuli. (ex. texture, touch, brightness, volume, taste, aroma)	unaffected vs. irritated	Children with a high sensory threshold are more comfortable with sensory experiences and may not notice sensory stimuli. Children with a low sensory threshold are more likely to be bothered by sensory stimuli and may be agitated by sensory experiences.