



Understanding Temperament

Temperament is an important feature of social and emotional health. Temperament describes the way we approach and react to the world. It is our own personal “style” that is present from birth. There are three general types of temperaments often referred to as easy-going, slow-to-warm, and active.

Easy-going children are generally happy, active children from birth and adjust easily to new situations and environments. Slow-to-warm children are generally observant, calm and may need extra time in adjusting to new situations. Children with active temperaments often have varied routines (e.g., eating, sleeping), and often approach life with zest. Children may fall into one of the three types of temperament, but often have varying behavior across the common temperament traits.

There are nine common traits that can help to describe a child’s temperament and the way they react to and experience the world. These traits include:

1. **Activity Level** – How active the child is generally.
2. **Distractibility** – The degree of concentration and attention the child shows when the child is not particularly interested in an activity.
3. **Intensity** – The energy level of a response, whether positive or negative.
4. **Regularity** – The predictability of biological functions like appetite and sleep.
5. **Sensory Threshold** – How sensitive a child is to physical stimuli.
6. **Approach/Withdrawal** – The child’s characteristic response to a new situation or strangers.
7. **Adaptability** – How easily the child adapts to transitions and changes.
8. **Persistence** – The length of time a child continues in activities in the face of obstacles.
9. **Mood** – The tendency to react to the world primarily in a positive or negative way.

Each caregiver and parent is also unique in his or her own temperament. The compatibility between adult-child temperaments can affect the quality of relationships. This compatibility is often referred to as “goodness of fit.” A goodness of fit happens when an adult’s expectations and methods of caregiving match the child’s personal style and abilities. What is most beneficial about the goodness of fit concept is that it does not require that adults and children have matching temperaments. The parent or caregiver does not have to change who they are naturally, they can simply alter or adjust their caregiving methods to be a positive support to their child’s natural way of responding to the world. For example, if a child is highly active, a caregiver may pack extra activities in the diaper bag for waiting times at visits to the doctor, grocery store lines, etc. For a child who needs some extra time in approaching new activities, a caregiver might stay close by, giving the child time to adjust and feel safe.

Some examples of dos and don’ts:

- Do not punish the child for temperament style.
- Instead of reprimanding a shy child for being hesitant toward a stranger, encourage her when she looks at or speaks to the stranger.
- Instead of criticizing an intense child for being loud when she feels upset, quietly teach her about her volume control. After all, you wouldn’t punish her for being loud when she is happy.
- An irregular child shouldn’t be punished for lack of hunger at a mealtime, or for not being ready to sleep at every bedtime. Be flexible. Instead of a hard and firm time to sleep, have a routine to follow such as quiet playing or looking at books in bed before going to sleep.
- Notice the times when things go well.
- Recognize and accept the way the child really is.
- Recognize your feelings toward the child’s specific temperament traits, and adjust what you do, to create less stress and conflict.
- Notice if/how your temperament differs from your child’s. Work to set aside judgments about what “ought to be” that is based on your temperament. All temperaments are “typical”.



Combined from works of Cynthia Pollich, PennState Extension, [A parenting secret: Understanding temperament](#) and [Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, Infant Toddler Temperament Tool \(IT3\), Introduction to Temperament.](#)