

Understanding Temperament

Temperament is a behavioral style that is present at birth and affects the way we behave toward other people and things in our environment. There are nine temperamental traits that all children have to varying degrees, and each trait has positive and negative aspects. The majority of children fall somewhere between the positive and negative extremes.

The nine traits are activity level, adaptability, intensity, mood, perceptiveness, persistence, regularity, sensitivity, and first reactions to new situations. To get a better sense of each trait, we'll look at the extremes that can challenge a caregiver and offer some guidance on how to handle each.

Activity level—necessity for movement

- A highly active child is in constant motion. Give her opportunities for active play, and when the group is doing a quiet activity let her move around from time to time.
- A child with a low activity level plays quietly for long periods of time and usually moves more slowly. Give him extra time to get things done.

Adaptability—ability to adapt to changes and transitions

- A highly adaptable child adjusts easily. He may give in too easily to unreasonable changes, such as a peer changing rules to her own advantage, and may need to be encouraged to stand up for himself.
- A child who does not adapt well is cautious and does not like surprises. Stick to routines and give her advance notice before changing activities, such as, "Fifteen more minutes, Julie." Be patient.

Intensity—strength of emotional reactions

- A highly intense child responds strongly to everything with constant emotional ups and downs. Be patient—although a situation may seem trivial to you, it is not to him. Figure out what calms him down and then talk to him about ways he can calm himself.
- A child with low intensity reacts mildly to situations and works through problems with little frustration. She may be hard to read, so pay careful attention so you are able to detect strong feelings that may surface.

Mood—overall disposition

- A child with a positive disposition is usually happy and content.
- A child with a more serious and analytical disposition will tend to focus on flaws and may cry or whine easily. Respond to her in a positive and cheerful manner, and help her see the strengths or benefits of a situation.

Perceptiveness—observation of environment

- A highly perceptive child notices things most people miss. She tends to become distracted easily and can be forgetful. Help her stay on track with verbal reminders or by using pictures to show the steps she needs to take to complete a task.
- A child who is less perceptive is able to stay on task, tune things out, and easily remember and follow multiple directions.

Persistence—determination to achieve goals

- A highly persistent child has a hard time letting go of an idea or activity and doesn't take no for an answer. Give him a heads up as the time to change an activity approaches, and don't allow him to get engaged in an activity if he won't have time to complete it.
- A child with a low level of persistence can be redirected easily and accepts no for an answer. She will not stick with a task that is difficult or requires a long period of concentration.

Regularity—predictability of bodily functions

- A highly regular child needs a predictable schedule for eating, sleeping, and elimination.
- An irregular child follows no schedule or routine. He fares better when the adults who care for him allow some flexibility with his meals and sleep schedule.

Sensitivity—physical reaction to senses

- A highly sensitive child needs quiet to sleep, gags easily from smells, is bothered by bright lights and tags in clothes, and reacts to your stress. Ensure that her environment meets her needs and don't try to change her personality.
- A child with low sensitivity isn't bothered by how things feel or smell or by loud noises. She will have difficulty noticing others' feelings and should be taught to pay attention to facial expressions and nonverbal clues.

First reaction—reaction to new situations, ideas, activities, places, or people

- A child who rejects things at first is cautious, prefers to watch before joining in, and is distressed by new activities or things. Be patient and offer small repeated exposures to the unfamiliar. Do not pressure or push.
- A child who is open to new activities jumps right in, adjusts quickly, and learns by doing. You will need to supervise her closely so she does not get into dangerous situations.

For more information on temperament, read *Raising Your Spirited Child: A Guide for Parents Whose Child Is More Intense, Sensitive, Perceptive, Persistent, Energetic* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. New York: Harper, 2006.