

Temperament in the Classroom — Helping Each Child Find a Good Fit

It is the first week of school for third graders Timmy, Kevin, and Andrew. All three boys are bright and good learners, yet they are startlingly different in their personal styles or temperaments.

- **Timmy** is an outgoing, friendly child who gets along well with adults and other children. He loves new experiences, adapts well to classroom routines, and is rarely upset or angry; he can hardly wait to get started in his new classroom.
- **Kevin** is quiet and shy and needs time to feel comfortable when faced with new people, new places, and new experiences. The first days of school are uncomfortable, even scary for him. He is reluctant to start the new school year in a new classroom.
- **Andrew** is highly active, quick reacting, and intense. He has difficulty sitting still and paying attention in school and he often overreacts to his teachers and classmates. He remembers the stresses of the last school year and wishes he could just stay home.

These differences in temperament will contribute to the boys' adjustment and achievement in their new classroom, in some cases making for a happy and successful year, in others adding stress and problems.

What is Temperament?

Temperament describes individual styles or the "how" of behavior. These personal characteristics can be seen when children are playing with friends, doing their math assignment, or watching television. We all recognize children who are "always on the go," as compared to others who move at a slow and deliberate pace. We also know children who are overly intense, who have a "short fuse," and who are easily irritated and upset. Still other children are shy, uneasy in new situations and with new people. These individual differences in temperament are:

- biologically based
- apparent early in life
- characteristic of individuals over time and in different situations

As discussed in the first article in this series, differences in temperament affect how children get along with their families at home. They also affect how they get along in school. It is especially important to recognize individual differences in temperament when a child has learning or attention problems, because parents and teachers need to figure out the reasons for a child's behavior.

The Thomas and Chess Dimensions of Temperament

Psychiatrists Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess (1977) identified nine dimensions of temperament which contribute to the interactions between children and their parents. Eight of these dimensions are directly relevant to the interactions between students and teachers, and contribute to students' adjustment in school. The eight dimensions are:

Thomas and Chess Temperament Dimensions

- Sensory threshold
- Activity level
- Intensity
- Adaptability
- Mood
- Approach/Withdrawal
- Persistence
- Distractibility

Timmy, Kevin, and Andrew are examples of temperament types Thomas and Chess described as "Easy," "Slow-to-Warm-Up," and "Difficult." In temperament terms:

