

## 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:

- **Easy children**, like Timmy, are adaptable, positive in mood, and interested in new experiences; they get along well with others and are outgoing and friendly.
- **Slow-to-Warm-Up children**, like Kevin, are characteristically withdrawn and negative when faced with new situations and new people; they are initially slow to adapt to change but, given time they adapt well.
- **Difficult children**, like Andrew, tend to be intense, low in adaptability, and negative in mood, as well as negative in their response to newness.

### How Temperament Can Affect a Child's School Experience

Achievement in school is obviously related to a child's ability, to his motivation, to his experiences, and to the quality of instruction he receives. Achievement is also related to temperament. Consider how a child must adapt to a reading or math assignment, especially if the assignment is long and demanding. The child must "settle down," focus energy and attention, adapt to new directions, resist distraction, and persist, even when the task may be boring or difficult. In our research at UCLA we identified temperament dimensions and factors that affected a child's academic success in school (Keogh, 2003). Most important was task orientation, which is related to temperament dimensions of activity level, distractibility, and persistence.

Our findings, like those of other researchers, confirmed that a child who achieves is able to moderate physical activity appropriately, minimize distractions and focus on task, and persist. Teachers like students with these temperament characteristics and find them easy to teach. Children with less positive temperaments are often viewed by teachers as lower in "teachability," requiring more teacher time, management, and instruction.

It is important to note that a teacher, like each of her students, brings her own temperament to the classroom. Some teachers are active, quick responding, and intense. Others are deliberate, low key, and reflective. These differences play out in the classroom. Classrooms differ in the pace of instruction, in the nature of personal interactions, and in the emotional tone in the room.

Fortunately, in many cases the fit between the student and teacher is a good one, so that both are comfortable and life in the classroom is positive. In some cases, however, the fit between teacher and child temperaments is not so positive, and both student and teacher are frustrated and unhappy. Imagine Kevin, a Slow-to-Warm-Up boy, in a fast-paced, frequently changing classroom where the high-energy teacher is quick, intense, and expects fast responses from students. Imagine Andrew in a slow-paced classroom where the teacher stresses order and quiet, and assignments are long. Andrew's high activity, distractibility, and low persistence increase the likelihood of problems.

### How Can Understanding Temperament Help Your Child in School?

When children are of school age they spend many waking hours in an environment away from home and parents. In school they must adapt to new demands, to new adults, and to many different children. They must learn to follow complex rules in the classroom and on the playground, and they must learn that their personal wishes and needs are not always a priority. For some children the move from home to school is easy, and they flourish. For others the transition is not simple, and they have a difficult time adjusting. For a Slow-to-Warm-Up child like Kevin, the first weeks are frequently filled with anxiety, and he may seem withdrawn and unmotivated. For Andrew, the new demands may lead him to overreact, increasing his intensity and his activity.

### What about Temperament and Children with Learning Disabilities?

Like all children, a child with LD can have a temperament that is Easy, Difficult, or Slow-to-Warm-Up. The important thing is to sort out which behaviors are related to temperament and which behaviors are indications of a learning disability or attention problem. Because the **reasons** for each child's behavior may be different — LD, AD/HD, or temperament — the **response** to each child's behavior must be different. When a problem with learning is caused by a learning disability such as dyslexia, it requires specialized and intense teaching strategies over time. However, many achievement and adjustment problems in school are the result of a poor "fit" between a child's temperament and his school situation, and such problems often respond to relatively simple changes in the instructional program and classroom. For example, a Slow-to-Warm-Up child may need extra time and help when beginning a new project. A high-activity child may need a regular routine to help him "cool down" after recess or lunch break.



Possible confusion can occur when trying to figure out whether problem behavior is a result of temperament or of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Characteristic behaviors in AD/HD are high activity, impulsiveness, and distractibility, the same behaviors which can be expressions of temperament. Clearly there can be overlaps between behaviors that reflect a child's temperament and behaviors resulting from AD/HD. If these behaviors are excessive and extreme and relatively unaffected by changes in the environment, then they are likely not temperament-based and may, therefore, need specific, more in-depth interventions. However, not all children with Difficult temperaments have AD/HD, and there are differences in temperament among children with AD/HD. Because the implications for treatment differ it is important to recognize the underlying basis of the behavior.

### **How You Can Help Your Child in School**

As a parent you are the person who knows your child best. There are a number of ways you can help your child get along in school. Recognizing and helping your child understand his own temperament is a place to start. Over the years you have learned how your child responds to challenges, to new experiences, to routines, and to everyday interactions with others. You have also learned ways to respond to his individual behavioral style. Self-awareness is a first step toward modifying behavior, so use your experience to talk with your child about his temperament in the context of school. Help him see how the expectations for his behavior at school and home are alike and how they are different. Help him understand how his own temperament affects his feelings and behavior, as well as the impact this has on others.

Talk with your intense, active, and distractible child about the situations in school that in the past have led to problems. Did your high-activity child often get into shoving matches with other boys when standing in line to go to recess? Did he have problems settling down to work first thing in the morning or after coming in from the playground? Discuss other ways he could handle stressful or challenging situations. Identifying together when and where problems occur can help your child anticipate and avoid confrontations.

The first weeks of school can be especially stressful for Slow-to-Warm-Up children as they are faced with new people and new demands. You can help your child by making him familiar with the routines and expectations of classroom life. If possible, go with your child to visit the school before the first day in order to meet the teacher and see the classroom. It may help him or her to meet the teacher, see the room, visit the cafeteria, know how to find the restrooms, in other words, to get comfortable in this new situation. Check to see if your child has a friend who will be in the same class. Having a "buddy" has been shown to be very helpful when children start a new school or class.

### **Working with Your Child's Teacher**

Awareness of individual differences in children's temperaments is important for teachers in managing a classroom. Talk with the teacher about your child's temperament. Acknowledge honestly that that he is shy and Slow-to-Warm-Up, or is high-energy and intense and tends to overreact. Talk about how your child gets along in the family and what responses to his behavior have worked effectively. Make clear to the teacher that you are ready and willing to work with your child at home. Be involved in a cooperative way.

Both parents and teachers often mistakenly attribute a child's behavior to his motivation, and are understandably upset and angry when they see misbehavior as purposeful or as something that the child could change if "he would only try harder." When adults recognize that behavior reflects individual differences in temperament, not motivation, it helps them "reframe" the behavior, think about the "fit" between the child and the situation, and make necessary adjustments. For example, to avoid problems, high-energy children may need frequent opportunities for acceptable activity breaks such as running errands for the teacher or cleaning the blackboard. Intense children may need a reminder to talk in a normal voice rather than shout, or to "count to ten" before reacting to another child. Slow-to Warm-Up children may need time and help when starting a new assignment, and may need reminders when there will be changes in the daily schedule.

Awareness of individual differences in temperament leads to more careful consideration of the context or situation in which the misbehavior occur. Ask the teacher for her views of the problems, and ask her to identify what time of day problems occur, in what situations, for example during math lessons, on the playground, or in the cafeteria. Encourage the teacher to be specific in describing the problem behavior. Share the experiences you have with your child at home. The more objectively the behavior is described the more information is available to help your child get along in school.



When parents and teachers reframe their understanding of a child's behavior, it also provides a way to figure out how to respond to the behavior. For teachers this may mean changing the way the classroom is organized, modifying the instructional schedule and time, providing more activity breaks, and developing a daily routine that is familiar and consistent, yet allows for individual needs. For parents it may mean adjusting the daily routines of family life to ensure that your child is rested and ready for school; providing a quiet, regular space and time for your child to do school work; being available to help with school work; and helping your child to understand himself. Providing an environment that facilitates learning is important for every child, but is especially important for Difficult or Slow-to-Warm-Up temperament children.

Teachers often appreciate learning about what temperament is, and how to work with these individual differences in their classrooms. A common response is: "I just never thought of looking at a child's behavior that way." For both parents and teachers, understanding temperament provides a framework that can support each child's success in school.

© 2005 Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation Created: 12/09/2005



#### About the Contributors

**Barbara K. Keogh, Ph.D.**, is an Emerita Professor in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences, and a Professor in the Sociobehavioral Group in the UCLA Department of Psychiatry. A nationally known researcher, writer, and consultant, her primary interests are in children with developmental and learning problems and their families.

#### Other Resources

##### Books

Understanding Your Child's Temperament

[www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0028628268/schwabfoundation/](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0028628268/schwabfoundation/)  
By William B. Carey, M.D.

Know Your Child: An Authoritative Guide for Today's Parents

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0465037313/ref=nosim/schwabfoundation>  
By Stella Chess & Alexander Thomas

Raising Your Spirited Child

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0060923288/ref=nosim/schwabfoundation>  
By Mary Sheedy Kurcinka

Your Child's Unique Temperament: Insights and Strategies for Responsive Parenting

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0878224912/ref=nosim/schwabfoundation>  
By Sandee Graham McClowry