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Your Child's Temperament: Some Basics

How often have you heard a child described as "easy" or "difficult" or "shy until you get to know her"? These casual labels all refer to characteristics of temperament, those traits that influence how your child reacts in various situations.

Researchers have described nine temperament traits which individually, or in combination, affect how well your child fits in at school, with peers, and even at home. Temperament influences how teachers, peers, and family relate to her, as well as how she relates to them. Your child's temperament directly affects how she approaches her school work and chores at home.

When a child's natural behavior doesn't fit with what is expected, social, family, or academic problems may arise. For a child with an identified learning disability (LD) or behavior issues, her particular temperament may help her achieve success more easily or it may compound her difficulties.

Behaviors for each temperament trait described below fall along a continuum. Responses toward either the high or low end — while still completely normal — may be cause for concern.

The Nine Temperament Traits*

Activity Level: amount of physical energy evident in typical daily activities and behavior.

Low Energy <-----> High Energy

At school, the more active child struggles to fit into an environment where suddenly she is expected to sit still for long periods of time. Her fidgeting and restlessness may disrupt the class and make it difficult for her to stay on task, but extra energy can be a benefit if channeled in a positive direction. In contrast, kids with low activity levels adapt well to a structured school day but may be viewed as unmotivated.

Sensitivity: sensory threshold, or how easily your child is bothered by changes in the environment.

Low sensitivity <-----> High Sensitivity

Kids who are highly sensitive are very aware of their environment and can be disrupted in countless ways: clothes may itch, noise may distract, the chair may be too hard. While these children often have a heightened awareness to others' thoughts and feelings, such a low sensory threshold may distract from studies and affect academic performance. Less sensitive kids are more tolerant of environmental sensations but may be slow to respond to warning signals, such as school bells and smoke detectors.

Regularity: rhythm or predictable recurrence of daily activities or routines (such as waking, hunger, becoming tired), a child's personal habits or patterns in after-school routines.

Low Predictability <-----> High Predictability

Children with high regularity enjoy a structured classroom but may have problems with changes in routine, such as a field trip. Kids with low regularity, on the other hand, may have difficulty following the school routine and cause disruptions in class, yet are less bothered when things don't go

according to the usual plan.

Approach/Withdrawal: initial reaction to new situations.

Withdraws <-----> Approaches

Bolder children approach new experiences with curiosity and openness but may jump in too quickly or react impulsively. Kids who are more hesitant prefer to hang back and watch for a while before engaging with a new person or activity, which may cause them to miss out on new experiences. A more cautious nature, though, does lower the risk of engaging in dangerous behaviors.

Adaptability: adjustment to new situations; length of time needed to accept changes in plan or routine. (This trait is different from Approach/Withdrawal in that it describes adjustment after the initial reaction to change.)

Slow to Adapt <-----> Adapts Easily

Adaptable children usually have an easier time; they tend to go with the flow. In school, this allows for ready adjustment to change but can also make the easy-going child more willing to adopt undesirable values or behaviors of peers. More rigid children, those slower to adapt, may be less susceptible to negative influences. However, they may find new situations stressful and difficult — a potential problem in school, where change is frequent and the number of transitions increase through the grades.

Mood: general tendency toward a happy or unhappy demeanor.

Negative <-----> Positive

While all children display a variety of emotions and reactions, from cheerful to glum, affectionate to grumpy, each child is predisposed toward a generally positive or negative mood. A more negative child may have difficulty being accepted by family, teachers, and peers, and it can be tough for caregivers to distinguish real problems from the child's typical mood. A child who always seems to be in a good mood fits in more easily but may not be dealing honestly with all the experiences in her life.

Intensity: amount of energy put into responses.

Less Responsive <-----> More Responsive

A very intense child laughs and cries loudly, loves things or hates them, and puts a great deal of emotion into her reactions, so it's easy to know where things stand. But a child who is overly responsive may drain a parent's or teacher's resources due to the child's intense feeling level. Kids who react mildly still feel all these emotions but do not exhibit such highs and lows in their responses. Low intensity is easier to deal with, but parents and teachers must be alert to more subtle signs of problems.

Persistence: ability to stick with a task in spite of distractions, interruptions, or frustration.

Low Persistence <-----> High Persistence

High persistence is strongly correlated with academic success. The child with excessive persistence, however, may be a perfectionist - unable to judge when a task is finished adequately or reluctant to turn in an assignment because she feels it's not good enough. The child with low persistence may have difficulty in school because of a tendency to become irritated or annoyed when interrupted or

when a task becomes difficult. Her inclination to give up easily or to ask for help, rather than try things independently, can lead to incomplete assignments or difficulty staying focused.

Distractibility: tendency to be sidetracked by outside noise or interruptions.

High Distractibility <-----> Low Distractibility

Distractibility is not the opposite of persistence — a child can be easily distracted and yet show high persistence by returning quickly to the task at hand. A distractible child notices everything going on around her and may even be diverted by her own thoughts and daydreams. The opposite behavior in a child means she can concentrate despite any interruption. However, she may also tune out signals when it's time to move on to something different.

*Based on *Temperament and Development*, by A. Thomas and S. Chess, published in 1977 by Brunner/Mazel, New York.)

How Temperament Affects on Your Child

Extremes on each continuum of traits are not likely to guarantee success or failure in all situations; somewhere in the middle gives your child flexibility to adjust to a variety of conditions and expectations at school, at home, and in the community.

Consider that some combinations of traits can be more troublesome or more beneficial in school than others. High persistence can help the distractible student stay on task, whereas high distractibility combined with high activity and low persistence are strongly correlated to academic problems and bear a striking resemblance to the characteristics of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD).

Understanding the behavior traits of your child with LD or AD/HD helps you predict how she is likely to react in various situations. Are those traits liable to enhance her performance or cause additional problems for her? For example, auditory processing difficulties may be aggravated by low sensitivity; memory problems may be intensified by high distractibility. High persistence and low distractibility, on the other hand, tend to benefit most kids — with or without LD or AD/HD.

Learn about Your Child's Temperament

Now, are you ready to apply these concepts to your own child? If so, print our [Temperament Scale](#) and rate your child.

When you have completed the scale, check out [Management Strategies for Problematic Traits of Temperament](#). Here you'll find some tips on how to help your child if he exhibits traits that may cause difficulty for her.

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Other Resources

Books

Understanding Your Child's Temperament

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0028628268/schwabfoundation/

By William B. Carey, M.D.

The Difficult Child

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0553380362/schwabfoundation/

By Stanley Turecki

Websites

Elaine Gibson, M.A.

The Challenge of Difficult Children

www.elainegibson.net/parenting/index.html