

# Teaching to Temperaments

Tuning into babies' individual temperaments paves the way for smooth and successful school days

EVERY BABY EXPRESSES PERSONALITY TRAITS WE CALL *temperament*. How a child responds emotionally to objects, events, and people is a reflection of his individual temperament. Researchers Thomas, Chess, and Birch described nine different temperament categories. These include:

- Activity level
- Mood
- Threshold for distress
- Rhythmicity
- Intensity of response
- Approach-Withdrawal
- Distractibility
- Adaptability
- Persistence

To determine a child's temperament, make the following observations:

1. Notice the **activity level**. Some babies are placid or inactive. Other babies thrash about a lot and, as toddlers, are always on the move. At this stage, they must be watched carefully.
2. Observe the **mood**. Some babies are very smiley and cheerful. Although securely attached emotionally to their teachers, others have a low-

- key mood and look more solemn or unhappy.
3. Figure out a child's **threshold for distress**. Some babies are very sensitive. They become upset very easily when stressed. Other babies can more comfortably wait when they need a feeding or some attention.
4. Consider the **rhythmicity** of children. Some babies get hungry or sleepy on a fairly regular and predictable basis. Other babies sleep at varying times, urinate or have bowel movements at unpredictable times, and get hungry at different times. They are hard to put on a "schedule."
5. Notice the **intensity of response** in each baby. When a baby's threshold for distress has been reached, some babies act restless. Others act cranky or fret just a little. Still others cry with terrific intensity or howl with despair when they are stressed. They shriek with delight and respond with high energy when reacting to happy or challenging situations.
6. See how they **approach** new situations. Some infants are very cautious. They are wary and fearful of new teachers, being placed in a different crib, or being taken to visit a new setting. Other infants approach new persons, new activities, or new play possibilities with zest and enjoyment.
7. Notice how easily they are **distracted**. Some

children can concentrate on a toy regardless of surrounding bustle or noise in a room. Others are easily distracted.

8. Notice the **adaptability** of each child. Some children react to strange or difficult situations with distress, but recover fairly rapidly. Others adjust to new situations with difficulty or after a very long period.

9. Finally, observe each child's **attention span**. Some children have a long attention span. They continue with an activity for a fairly long time. Others flit from one activity to another.

These temperament traits cluster into several groups: easy; cautious/fearful; feisty/irritable/difficult; or a mixture of the nine traits. Tailor your approach to each child's cluster of temperament traits. As you tune into temperament, you are likely to become more successful in helping all children adjust to situations and persons in ways that promote their social ease and competence. ECT

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# Tune Into Baby's Personality Traits

### infants

Be sure to provide caresses, smiles, and loving greetings to an easy baby. They need your personalized attention just as much as the irritable baby. Be sure to "check in" with the easy baby frequently, even when you are busy trying to soothe or redirect a difficult baby.

Go slow. The slow-to-warm-up baby needs a lot of patience. This baby may have a low activity level and initially may withdraw from, or act scared of, new situations. Remember that this baby needs more time to adjust and adapt to changes.

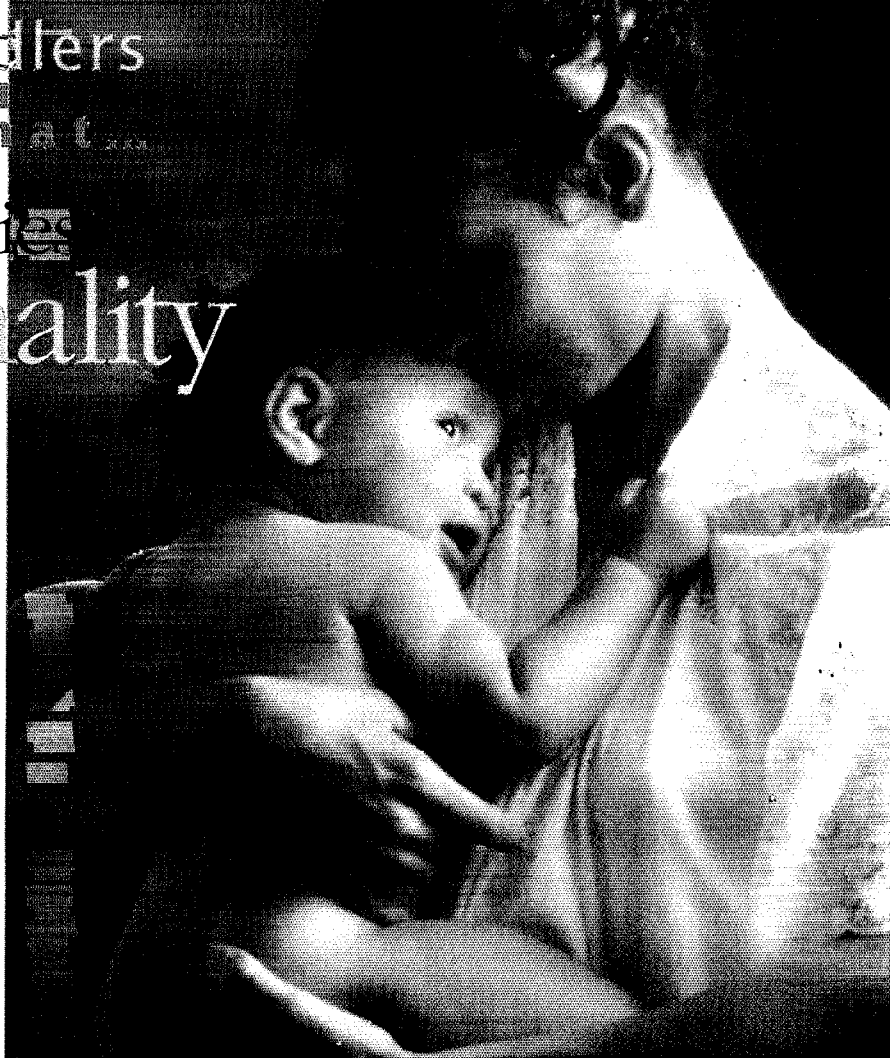
If necessary, use a kangaroo pouch to hold a young baby who is very slow to adapt to school on your body. Your rocking motion as you walk, along with your gentle voice tones, can soothe this baby into calmness and help him adapt to the new situation more easily. The irritable baby may need you to carry him around on your arm, draped on your shoulder, or across your tummy.

Massage with nonallergenic oils helps the tense baby to relax. Massage his limbs and tummy as a daily, leisurely experience.

### toddlers

"The fit" between you and the child is the key to helping toddlers with varying temperament traits. The intense toddler requires calm, loving handling. Lower your voice tones and speak more slowly when you need to redirect this child to a more appropriate activity.

Provide lots of individual snuggle time for



the intense toddler. Leaning against you as you share a familiar, well-loved picture book helps this toddler focus. Do advance planning to prevent outbursts or intense distress. Check in frequently. Rub his back and soothe him with long palm strokes.

Arrange opportunities for the high-activity toddler, such as bouncing back and forth energetically on a rocking horse or chasing after a large ball. The toddler who runs rather than walks needs lots of chances to use large muscles. Do not expect him to sit on a mat for a lengthy period.

Speak calmly when the irritable child is reacting with intense frustration. Agree that the toy she is so angry at is really hard to work and she may want to try it another time. Redirect the toddler to an activity in which you know she will have more success and enjoyment.

Be sure to allow more time to help the cautious toddler who may react negatively to

a new situation. Kneel down and talk softly about how the other children are enjoying an activity. Nod reassuringly and positively as you gently talk about the scene you watch together. When the toddler seems more relaxed, take his hand and walk with him over to the activity. Stay with him for a while as he settles into play. Step back as you see that he is getting absorbed in the play.

Try not to stress the cautious child by over-enthusiastically "talking up" a high-energy game in which other toddlers are running around. The cautious toddler may withdraw even more. Choose comfortable activities and move the child in gently. Stay until he is reassured and comfortable. Take the pressure off!

Encourage the inquisitiveness of the easy toddler. Provide new activities. Be creative in suggesting the use of materials together that the cautious child might find somewhat fear-inducing or bewildering. ECT

# a letter to families

NOTE TO TEACHERS: COPY THIS PAGE AND SEND HOME TO PARENTS.

**Children come with inborn personality traits. Learn your child's temperament style. Find the most comfortable ways to soothe and reassure the fearful child, calm and genuinely enjoy the intense child, and provide tuned-in attention for the curious, easy-going child who seems able to play on her own.**

**1. Become a careful "noticer" of your baby!** Does he take a long time to warm up when you introduce him to a bath, a stranger, or a bit of new food? Your little one may have cautious traits. He may be slow to warm up and need lots of quiet reassurance and patient time with you before feeling comfortable. Your sensitivity and quiet acceptance of his need for extra time in accepting new experiences will support his feeling that you understand his more cautious personality.

**2. Intense babies may squirm a lot during** dressing time and have unpredictable sleeping, feeding, and toileting routines. You may need ingenuity and dexterity to undress your baby for a bath. Try to stay cheerful and calm as you become expert at dressing your ever-on-the-move toddler who prefers to run rather than walk. This child adapts more slowly after a frustrating experience.

**3. Be sure to baby-proof your home environment** for a high-energy toddler. Rugs that slip or low tables with sharp corners at a toddler's eye level are a concern. The intense toddler can get into more situations where a

tumble or a bruise can occur. Stay calm, but think about potential dangers in your home environment really carefully in order to prevent mishaps.

**4. The irritable child presents more challenges.** This child may respond with intense elation and joy if you take him for a ride on your shoulders, or present him with an interesting new toy.

**5. Some babies are easygoing.** They accept new foods, and new experiences, such as a bath, or an unfamiliar adult, with curiosity and interest. They move toward, rather than away from, new experiences. They have low-intensity responses to discomfort and often adapt to new situations fairly rapidly. If this is true of your baby, you'll have an easier time predicting when he will perform daily routines, such as eating, sleeping, and toileting.

As a parent, you will find the task of noticing and responding in nurturing ways to your child's particular temperament traits exhilarating and challenging.

**Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D.**, a professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University, is the author of many books, including *Secure Relationships: Nurturing Infant-Toddler Attachments in Early Care Settings* (NAEYC, 2002; \$15) and, with H. Brophy, *Talking With Your Baby: Family as the First School* (Syracuse University Press, 1996; \$16.95).

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