

Center for Family Development

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How Temperament Affects Children and Parents **Arthur Becker-Weidman, Ph.D.**

Temperament is a largely genetically determined set of characteristics that remain unchanged from birth throughout life. Beginning as early as four months of age, a child's temperament can be determined. These temperamental traits are largely unchanged throughout life. Understanding temperament is important since these personality traits do not change. A parent needs to understand these dimensions so that the parent can adapt to the child.

Temperament refers to enduring traits of a person's approach to the world. These dimensions are found in all children across cultures. A child's temperament is a core element of the child's personality. Since it is unchangeable, understanding temperament is essential to knowing how to approach your child. What may appear to be a problem may actually be a mismatch between your temperament and that of your child.

1. **ACTIVITY LEVEL:** Physical motion during sleep, play, work, eating, and other daily activities. (High or Low; Active or Inactive).
2. **REGULARITY:** The predictable recurrence of a child's response to daily events. The rhythm of their body functions such as sleeping, eating, elimination. In school age children, regularity is observed as consistency, organization, or predictability. Is the child orderly with toys and possessions? Is the child's after-school routine the same each day? (Predictable or Unpredictable).
3. **INITIAL REACTION:** The child's reaction to new people, places, things, foods, and routines. For example, tries new foods, refuses, or looks it over, pokes it, and then tries a bite. (Bold or Inhibited; Approaching or Cautious).
4. **ADAPTABILITY:** Like initial reaction, but refers to the child's long-term adjustment after the initial response. The ease or difficulty with which the child's first reaction can be changed. How quickly does the child make transitions or adapt to changes in routine? How quickly can the child make a choice? How does the child react to last minute changes? (Flexible or Rigid; Quick or Gradual).
5. **INTENSITY:** How much energy the child puts into a response. Is the child loud? How does the child respond to disappointments, praise, failure, surprise, or frustration? (Intense or mild).

6. MOOD: What is the child's dominant mood or overall pattern? Is the child generally positive, negative, or in between?
(Positive or Negative).
7. DISTRACTIBILITY: Is the child able to tune out surrounding sights, sounds, or people and continue without interruption or is the child distracted by outside stimuli? This is not the same as persistence. A child can be easily distracted yet return immediately to the task at hand and stick with it until it is completed. How quickly can a baby be soothed?
(Rarely or Often)
8. PERSISTENCY AND ATTENTION SPAN: Persistency is the child's tendency to stick with an activity despite interruptions or outside distractions. Attention span is demonstrated by how long a child sticks with an activity when there are no interruptions.
(Often or Rarely; Persistent or not; Short or long).
9. SENSITIVITY: Sensory threshold or the amount of stimulation required to get a response. Watch all five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste).
(Nonreactive or Sensitive)

Temperament Checklist

Temperament is composed of nine dimensions. Temperament is easily determined at birth and does not change; it appears to be genetically determined. Temperament can be thought of as one of the basic elements of personality that is not changeable. It is not right or wrong, it just is; although temperaments different than one's own can seem to be "wrong," they are not. At the Center we use the Carey Temperament Scales to measure a child's temperament and provide parents with a report detailing their child's temperament and the potential strengths and pitfalls that the parent and child may experience. The traits on each continuum are neither good nor bad. However, mismatches between a parent's and child's temperament can create discord and problems. The following check list is not meant to replace a professional assessment or to substitute for a reliable and valid test such as the Carey. However, this check list can help you identify areas of match and mismatch between your temperament and that of your child.

The fact that you have temperament traits on the other side of a scale item from your child, or spouse for that matter, does not mean that a problem exists. It merely means that you and your child have different temperaments on that dimension. It does mean that as a parent you do need to be particularly sensitive to that dimension since your proclivities and those of your child are different. However, as a parent it is your responsibility to adapt to these differences and accommodate your child. Knowing that you and your child differ on a dimension of temperament, which is not a changeable dimension of personality, allows the parent to know that he or she must adapt to the child. This also can help a parent realize that when a child is "pushing" your buttons, that it is your issue and not something that your child should be expected to change. When there are significant differences in parent-child temperament, the parent will need to take extra steps to be sure that he or she adapts to the child.

On each scale below place a mark to indicate your estimate of where your child, you, and your partner are on that scale. Child = ✓, you = X, and your partner = |.

| | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------|-------------------|
| <u>ACTIVITY LEVEL</u> | HIGH/ACTIVE _____ | <i>mid-point</i> ↓ | _____ | LOW/INACTIVE |
| <u>REGULARITY</u> | PREDICTABLE _____ | | | UNPREDICTABLE |
| <u>INITIAL REACTION</u> | BOLD/APPROACHES _____ | | | CAUTIOUS |
| <u>ADAPTABILITY</u> | QUICK _____ | | | GRADUAL |
| <u>INTENSITY</u> | MILD _____ | | | INTENSE |
| <u>MOOD</u> | SUNNY/CHEERFUL _____ | | | STORMY |
| <u>DISTRACTIBILITY</u> | RARLY _____ | | | EASILY |
| <u>PERSISTENCE & ATTENTION SPAN</u> | PERSISTENT/LONG _____ | | | INTERMITENT/SHORT |
| <u>SENSITIVITY</u> | NONREACTIVE _____ | | | SENSITIVE |

If you find more than two mis-matches, there is the potential for conflict and parent-child difficulties.

Temperate Positives and Negatives

| TRAIT | NEGATIVE ASPECTS | POSITIVE ASPECTS |
|------------------|--|---|
| ACTIVITY | <p><u>HIGH</u>: Social activities and task performance are easily interfered with. Behavior may be misled bold as "hyper active. " paper activity is usually disorganized, without purpose, and is not simply high activity.</p> | <p><u>HIGH</u>: Vigorous and energetic. The child explores surroundings and stays active even in dull environments.</p> |
| REGULARITY | <p><u>LOW</u>: Slow to perform tasks, may be labeled lazy.</p> <p><u>HIGH</u>: may become a problem if the needs are not met on a schedule.</p> <p><u>LOW</u>: unpredictable care requirements.</p> | <p><u>LOW</u>: less disruptive and cramped environments.</p> <p><u>HIGH</u>: few surprises for parents.</p> <p><u>LOW</u>: may not be bothered by irregularities in care giving and routines.</p> |
| INITIAL REACTION | <p><u>APPROACHING</u>: may accept negative influences too quickly.</p> <p><u>WITHDRAWING</u>: slow to accept change and may avoid useful experiences.</p> | <p><u>APPROACHING</u>: makes a rapid fit and favorable settings.</p> <p><u>WITHDRAWING</u>: cautious and threatening situations.</p> |
| ADAPTABILITY | <p><u>HIGH</u>: in danger of accepting negative influences such as anti-social values of peers.</p> <p><u>LOW</u>: may have difficulty adjusting to requirements of caregivers. Stress producing. May be labeled as difficult.</p> | <p><u>HIGH</u>: generally, at an advantage. Accepts positive influences more quickly, in general harmony with caregivers.</p> <p><u>LOW</u>: less likely to accept negative influences</p> |
| | | |

| TRAIT | NEGATIVE ASPECTS | POSITIVE ASPECTS |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| INTENSITY | <u>HIGH</u> : abrasive and annoying, may invoke counter intensity, may mislead parents or other caregivers regarding the seriousness of an issue or illness | <u>HIGH</u> : needs are certain to get attention. Caregivers welcomed the positive intensity. |
| | <u>LOW</u> : needs may not be expressed with enough force phone has to be recognized. | <u>LOW</u> : easier to live with. |
| MOOD | <u>POSITIVE</u> : may be too positive and upbeat about real problems. | <u>POSITIVE</u> : generally welcome. |
| | <u>NEGATIVE</u> : unpleasant for parents and other caregivers who may over estimate importance of an issue where physical compliant. | <u>NEGATIVE</u> : few advantages, however, may evoke more positive involvement from parents and other caregivers because of their concern. |
| PERSISTENCE & ATTENTION SPAN | <u>HIGH</u> : the new absorbed in work and play may make the child seen to ignore parents, teachers, and others. | <u>HIGH</u> : greater achievement likely at various tasks and in school Perrier |
| | <u>LOW</u> : less efficient at completing tasks, fails to perform as expected. This is not "attention deficit" if the child functions well, particularly in combination with compensatory factors such as high adaptability and intelligence. | <u>LOW</u> : may be more easily drawn out of activities or habits that are unacceptable to parents and others. |

| TRAIT | NEGATIVE ASPECTS | POSITIVE ASPECTS |
|-----------------|--|---|
| DISTRACTIBILITY | <u>HIGH</u> : easily diverted from tasks, performance is easily interfered with, needs reminders. | <u>HIGH</u> : easy to soothe as an infant. |
| | <u>LOW</u> : may be unaware of important signals such as warnings from parents. | <u>LOW</u> : can work efficiently in noisy places. |
| SENSITIVITY | <u>HIGH</u> : more perceptive of surrounding noises, smells, lights, textures, and internal sensations. As an infant more prone to collect and sleep disturbances. | <u>HIGH</u> : more aware of changes in environment and of existence and nuances of other people's thoughts and feelings |
| | <u>LOW</u> : may miss important cues from surroundings. | <u>LOW</u> : more shielded from too much environmental input. |

FROM *Coping with Children's Temperament: A Guide for Professionals*, by William B. Carey & Sean C. McDevitt, NY, Basic Books, 1995.

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